

Welfare, Migration and the Life Course

With the increasing number of European migrants, voices of critics who fear for the welfare state have become louder. These critics warn that people from poorer countries can migrate freely to rich ones to claim welfare benefits there, posing a heavy economic burden on rich-country tax payers. Others however have been more optimistic, arguing that as long as migrants remain in the work force they will be net contributors to public finances. Clearly central to this debate is the question to what extent migration decisions really are influenced by the welfare state.

To date, the 'welfare magnet hypothesis' – the expectation that more generous welfare states attract more migrants– has been tested in different studies and in diverse contexts. Empirical evidence of these studies however has been rather mixed. In addition, these studies seem to neglect an important aspect related to welfare: the life course. Over a lifetime, people are generally a net burden on the state while they are in state-financed education, net-contributors while they are working, and once again a burden when they are retired or require very expensive medical services. I expect that welfare benefits are especially relevant for migration decisions when immigrants anticipate to make use of these benefits. For this reason a generous welfare state might for instance be less appealing to young migrants who come to work temporarily without their families than to migrants who migrate with family members and aim to settle permanently.

In my dissertation I aim to study the relation between migration, welfare states and the life course. In a first step I will map out recent intra-European migration patterns for the Dutch case as well as for the broader European context. Hereby I will describe migrant characteristics related to the life course for a diverse selection of countries. By revealing the nature of the current migration, a first assessment can be made of the influence of different welfare regimes in sending and receiving countries on migrant flows and life course related characteristics of migrants. In a next step I aim to develop a more comprehensive method to compare social programmes across countries than has been used so far. Rather than using rough measures -e.g., a broad welfare state typology or total government spending on social benefits- I will compare government expenditure of the EU member states on benefits grouped by the life stage to which these benefits correspond. This way, more subtle differences between welfare states can be captured, and the hypothesis that welfare benefits attract in particular those migrants that are most likely to make use of them can be tested. The quantitative part of the dissertation will be supplemented with a qualitative analysis of the role of welfare benefits in migration and remigration decisions, using interview data of migrants current living in the Netherlands.