

Migrants' post-return wellbeing: A view from the Caucasus¹

Ine Lietaert (UNU-CRIS; Ghent University)²

Abstract

Despite the increasing attention in academic literature, it continues to be extremely challenging to capture the complexity of reintegration processes and post-return situations. This article argues that the concept of wellbeing, which captures contextual differences, self-chosen points of reference, and summarises a multitude of outcomes, has the potential to fill some of the gaps in current studies. This approach is translated into a longitudinal and qualitative research, applied to study the post-return situations of 65 (rejected) asylum applicants and undocumented migrants who return through an assisted return programme from Belgium to their country of origin Armenia or Georgia. The findings reveal particular accents, priorities and vulnerabilities linked to personal trajectories and pre- and post-return contexts and touches upon different connections, contrasts, and interactions between components of post-return wellbeing. Accordingly, the results highlight that the lens of wellbeing is a useful strategy to uncover the complexity and dynamics of post-return situations.

¹ The definitive version of this articles is published in International Migration, and available at wileyonlinelibrary.com

² Ine.Lietaert@UGent.be

INTRODUCTION

Over the last three decades, in both academia and policymaking, growing attention has been paid to migrants' situation after return or repatriation, and the processes of (re)integration or (re)adaptation that occur when someone returns to their country of origin (Kuschminder, 2017a). It is abundantly clear that the symbolic and instrumental positioning of return and reintegration within policymaking on migration has intensified academic interest in this topic, and has favoured particular research foci (Cassarino, 2008). Yet, extensive critique has also arisen on how reintegration had been conceptualised and studied in previous decades as a natural, easy and permanent homecoming (Malkki, 1995). Stimulated by research insights from studies on transnationalism, social networks and post-return realities, it is at present widely recognised as a multi-dimensional, challenging, long-lasting and highly contextualised process strongly diversified due to the impact of the characteristics of the returnee, the modes of return as well as the conditions in the host country and the country of return (Cassarino, 2008; Markowitz and Stefansson, 2004; Vathi and King, 2017).

This article focusses on the post-return situations of (rejected) asylum applicants and undocumented migrants who return from Belgium to their country of origin – Armenia or Georgia – through an assisted return programme. The main body of empirical research on the post-return realities of migrants who most often are targeted by assisted return schemes – refugees, asylum applicants, and undocumented migrants – endorses the multi-dimensional character of reintegration processes, by investigating the outcomes of, and substantial struggles inherent in, different life domains. The domains that are most often included are the material/economic (investigated through livelihood and housing), socio-cultural (investigated through access to social networks and socio-cultural organisations), psycho-social (investigated through returnees' mental health and their feelings of identity and belonging to the country of origin) and political/legal (investigated through feelings of safety and trust in government), although in various combinations and with differing operationalisations (Flahaux, 2013; Lietaert and Van Gorp, 2019). Moreover, research distinguishes a variety of factors (a.o., individual and socio-demographic characteristics, readiness and willingness to return, familial and cultural expectations, received assistance, migration experiences) which influence the reintegration processes within the different domains (Cassarino, 2008; Flahaux, 2013; Kuschminder, 2017a).

Notwithstanding the great value of these insights for our understanding of reintegration processes, several important challenges remain. Primarily, while the existence of a multiplicity of influences between the different domains, and also between the domains and the factors, is evident in literature (Ruben et al., 2009, Flahaux, 2013), it continues to be extremely challenging to capture this complexity and fully comprehend the underlying mechanism at play in reintegration processes. In line with this, a second crucial question remains how to bring together the often diverse results from people's

reintegration into different life domains (Flahaux, 2013). Calling for a holistic view on reintegration, authors have argued that all domains and both subjective and objective approaches are important, and optimal reintegration occurs when returnees reintegrate across all domains (Kuschminder, 2017a). However, some research discusses the conditions of returnees in each domain separately (Black et al., 2004; Fransen, 2017; Ruben et al., 2009), while others try to connect findings from different domains and discuss a returnee's overall reintegration (Kuschminder, 2017b). Third, it should be noted that most studies start from *a priori* determined domains that are considered important for reintegration in each domain and, when working towards an index or scores, inevitably make choices on when returnees can be considered as reintegrated. Hence, this entails the possibility of overlooking what migrants themselves identify as crucial domains or factors impacting on their post-return situation, and aspects that are unique to a specific return context. Finally, another struggle remains with whom to compare the conditions of returnees. Whether comparisons should be made with pre-migration conditions, with life in the host country, with those who remained in the host country, or some kind of combination of these conditions, continues to be a challenging issue without a clear answer (Black et al., 2004; Flahaux, 2013).

This article argues that the concept of wellbeing – understood as people's multi-dimensional self-evaluation of their situation – captures contextual differences and self-chosen points of reference and summarises a multitude of outcomes, and therefore has the potential to fill some of these gaps. By approaching post-return situations through the lens of wellbeing, and as such, untangling the components that people consider important and exploring the dynamic interplay between different components relevant for these returnees, this empirical research contributes to the literature on reintegration processes and post-return situations. The data is collected in the context of assisted return, what generates particularities related to returnees' profiles and conditions of return. As such they return with strongly restricted agency in the return decision, very often with few resources and little capital, with restricted mobility rights and to post-return context with challenges economic conditions, hampered access to services and sometimes realistic security threats, making reintegrating *de facto* challenging (Cassarino, 2008; Lietaert et al., 2017a). However, since the article aims to explore the complexity of post-return wellbeing, which is highly influenced by the spatial and relational context in which it takes places, this context-sensitive investigation of this particular case might divulge additional insights that are relevant for other migrants returning under disadvantaged conditions outside any support scheme, and serve as a first step towards more systematic explorations of dynamic perspectives on reintegration (Alcock, 2004; Yin, 2009).

In what follows, this article elaborates on the particular characteristics of the concept of wellbeing and pertains it to the case of post-return wellbeing. By subsequently translating this approach into a

longitudinal and qualitative research and applying it to assisted return migration to Georgia and Armenia, the findings shed light on the meanings and outcomes of post-return wellbeing in the particular setting under scrutiny.

WELLBEING AS LENS TO UNDERSTAND POST-RETURN SITUATIONS

The concept of wellbeing was first introduced by the World Health Organization in 1948, in its broader and more holistic conceptualisation of health as a state of complete physical, mental and social wellbeing and, as such, limiting health no longer to the absence of disease or infirmity (Fleuret and Atkinson, 2007). It took some time before the concept found traction in other disciplines, but the focus on wellbeing – the search for understanding and enhancing human flourishing on the individual level, and societal wellbeing and development more broadly – seems omni-presented nowadays (Atkinson, 2013). It is widely used in economics, psychology, development studies, geography and sociology amongst others, and is at the heart of both policy-facing research, as well as theoretical developments in social sciences (Atkinson, 2013; Dodge et al., 2012). From both angles, the concept of wellbeing essentially incorporates a move away from limited medical and economic approaches towards human flourishing and explicitly highlights the relevance of holistic and intersectional analyses. Turning to the research on migration, Vathi (2017) highlights two changes in social sciences that paved the way for a focus on general wellbeing. First, there is the general recognition of the need for more holistic analyses of wellbeing, as pointed out above, but also of migration and development (King and Collyer, 2016). Here, we see that international organisations played an important role in this shift and stimulated a change of focus in the debates on migration and development, from economic measures to human wellbeing (King and Collyer, 2016). Secondly, from a theoretical angle there is a clear epistemological and analytical shift that calls for more attention for subjective-emotional spheres and migration experiences and its inevitable influence on outcomes of migration (Vathi and King, 2017).

However, the concept of wellbeing is not exempt from critique. It is criticised for being ill-defined and undertheorised, and as such being hard to distinguish from other terms such as quality of life, happiness, satisfaction, or subjective wellbeing (Dodge et al. 2012; Fleuret and Atkinson, 2007), which results in various interpretations and mobilisations of wellbeing for policy purposes (Atkinson, 2013). At the same time, it is precisely this characteristic of being an umbrella framework that is also valued for bringing together “ideas from across a range of disciplines into a common space or conceptual frame” (Wright, 2011; 1459). On the other hand, wellbeing is criticised for being overly individualistic, and as such symptomatic for current neo-liberal discourse (Fleuret and Atkinson, 2007). Again, this is

also a claim that is rejected by authors who illustrate its relational and situational character (Atkinson, 2013; Prilleltensky, 2008; Wright, 2011).

Following Wright (2011), who conceptualises human wellbeing as people's evaluation of, and satisfaction with, what they consider important needs and goals for 'living well', the concept indeed has potential to fill some gaps within reintegration studies. Firstly, studying a post-return situation from a wellbeing perspective goes beyond externally identified domains and factors by shifting the analytic attention to people's multi-dimensional self-assessment of their post-return wellbeing, as such revealing the components that they consider important (Wright, 2011). This requires in-depth qualitative explorations of these self-assessments, allowing for diverging perspectives on wellbeing and capturing the contextual differences inherent to return. The latter refers to the situational (time-space) and relational character of return experiences. Secondly, scholars indicate that answers regarding life satisfaction inherently rely on social comparison, and as such include a relative positioning and reflection on the degree to which expectations prior to the migration has been met (Gualda and Escriva, 2014; Sloan and Morrison, 2015; Atkinson, 2013). As such, evaluations of wellbeing incorporate people's self-chosen context of references. Thirdly, people's self-evaluation goes beyond a subjective or objective divide, or beyond uniting both through adding up or calculating means, as insights from psychology show that people's subject wellbeing results from the simultaneous and balanced satisfaction of material and psychological needs (Luhmann et al., 2012; Prilleltensky, 2008). Beier and Kronerberg (2013) argue that studying wellbeing measured through "satisfaction" with life as a whole, as indicated on a Likert scale, is a promising analytical strategy to study the outcome of complex phenomena in which a myriad of factors influence different life domains, given that the different country contexts are likely to alter the mechanisms involved. Using a subjective wellbeing score has the added value that "respondents themselves summarise the net effect of all these simultaneous events into a single assessment of the value of the change to them" (Sloan and Morrison, 2015: 112), and therefore it captures a multitude of outcomes (Beier and Kronerberg, 2013). Atkinson (2013), however, draws attention to the mediating role of wellbeing and its impact on other outcomes, such as health. She argues that wellbeing should also be positioned as part of a process towards other outcomes, rather than solely as an endpoint, which further adds to the complexity of studying wellbeing. It demands openness for changing positionalities between domains, factors, and outcomes in order for mutual constitutive dynamics and interrelations to be exposed.

In summary, human wellbeing can be considered as a token or reflection of simultaneous (reintegration) processes that are ongoing in different life domains, capturing and influencing outcomes in material, relational, and perceptual dimensions, rather than the counterpart of a more objective approach. Relying on these insights, this article translates the focus on post-return wellbeing

into explorative in-depth qualitative research with a twofold methodological approach. On the one hand, post-return wellbeing is scrutinised through general and open questions, inviting people to discuss their own assessment of their post-return wellbeing and the components that are playing a meaningful role, while on the other, a wellbeing score is used to investigate how returnees summarise their wellbeing. Rather than measuring their situation, the score is used as a gateway to explore the qualitative reasoning behind the respondent's evaluations. Moreover, the research applies a longitudinal approach, investigating how wellbeing changes between the first and the second year after return. This generates the possibility to reflect reasons or causes of changes in wellbeing, that support our aim to search for underlying mechanisms and dynamic interactions between the various components.

METHODS

This article builds on data collected from Armenian and Georgian migrants returning with the Belgian assisted return and reintegration programme, as part of a study on return experiences and post-return situations of assisted returnees. The respondents of this study were selected through purposive sampling (Neuman, 2006): all Armenian and Georgian migrants returning with the support from the Belgian NGO Caritas International, one of the reintegration providers in the Belgian return programme, within the research period (January 2010–May 2012) were invited to participate in the study at a meeting prior to their return. Through the programme, people received organisational (i.e., travel documents and flight ticket), financial (i.e., in-kind reintegration budget ranging from €700 to €2700 euro for a person returning single) and reintegration support (i.e., pre-return counselling and counselling on the use of the reintegration budget after return) (for more detailed information on the Belgian assisted return programme, see Lietaert et al., 2017b; Lietaert, 2019; Vandevordt, 2017). After being informed about the study's content, objectives, conditions of confidentiality, and the longitudinal design of the research (an interview within one year of return and a second one within the second year), eighty-five "return cases" (a single migrant, a couple or a family) agreed to participate and 65¹ cases were subsequently interviewed twice after return. In the case of couples or families, at least one adult member was interviewed, yet partners often also participated in the interview.

This respondent group consists of 31 men returning single, 11 women returning single, 7 couples, and 16 families (with 23 children less than 18 years and 8 adolescents over 18 years accompanying their parents), resulting in the age of the people returning ranging from 5 months to 72 years (average of 32.2 years). The request for asylum was still in process for 21 return units, in 38 cases the asylum request had been rejected, and there were 6 cases in which the returnees never requested asylum.

The majority of the respondents had arrived in Belgium between 2006 and 2011, and the average time they had lived there was 19 months (ranging from 1 to 132 months). At the end of their stay in Belgium, most respondents were best characterised as living in difficult housing and financial situations. Their motives to return varied widely, with mention made of difficult living conditions in Belgium, negative outcomes of the asylum procedure, family concerns, the cessation of personal problems in the country of origin, health issues, and the receipt of reintegration support. Their attitudes and feelings about returning also differed, yet for many, their post-return situation was expected to be challenging, and none of them had gained resources or skills during migration that could be useful after return; and as such this is a group that shows little willingness or readiness to return (Cassarino, 2008).

Given that the context of the country of return is crucial in the understanding of post-return wellbeing, a country-specific approach is required. Despite having structurally and institutionally different economies (Stefes, 2008; Gevorkyan, 2015), the social, economic, and institutional contexts of the neighbouring countries Armenia and Georgia have much in common. Armenia and Georgia share similar emigration patterns, with natural disasters, armed conflicts, and a socio-political crisis after the collapse of the Soviet Union all leading to mass emigration in the late 1990s; mainly to the Russian Federation, but also to Western Europe and elsewhere (ETF, 2013). Their current situation is characterised by a poor socioeconomic position, high unemployment rates, clientelism in the job market, a climate of corruption, strong barriers to small-scale businesses, unaffordable or unavailable health care, and unstable political conditions (Habibov and Afendi, 2009; Stefes, 2008). These factors constitute important reasons for emigration (ETF, 2013; Gevorkyan, 2015) and many of them were frequently mentioned by the study's respondents as reasons for migrating to Belgium. As few improvements appear to have taken place, these factors also clearly form important barriers in the reintegration processes. More so, both countries have no specific policy or support service for this particular group of returning nationals, thus the reintegration of these migrants is solely supported by international organizations and host countries (Lietaert, 2019). These similarities appeared to create comparable post-return experiences, as no remarkable difference could be found in the narratives of Armenian or Georgian returnees, and differences between the two nationals were not bigger than within the country groups. As such, the data of post-return situations in these two countries was merged in this research.

During the two interviews after return, general and open questions were used to invite the respondents to talk about their post-return wellbeing and to give their own perspectives on their situation. If needed, more directed questions were added to get their perspective on a range of topics, such as living conditions, family life, employment, health, social contacts, challenges and helpful elements and changes. Each respondent was also asked to indicate an overall evaluation of their post-

return wellbeing at the time (questioned as 'satisfaction with their lives in general'), on a scale from one (very bad) to five (very good). Some respondents found it easy to indicate a score and compare the scores they gave in the two interviews, what facilitated a discussion on what induced an increase or decrease in post-return wellbeing. Others found it difficult to indicate one overall score, yet, the discussion on what created this difficulty facilitated insights into the complexity of their post-return wellbeing. The interviews were held at a location chosen by the respondents, either in a public place or at their home. Some interviews (n=8) were conducted without an interpreter (in Dutch, French, or English), but in most interviews (n=122), respondents preferred the support of an interpreter (Armenian, Georgian, or Russian). All the interviews were audio recorded and transcribed.

In a first step, the interviews were analysed thematically (Howitt and Cramer, 2007) using NVivo 10 software, in order to reveal the components that emerged from the narratives of the respondents as influencing their post-return wellbeing, which were the components: (1) people's material situation, (2) their mental and physical health, (3) feelings of agency, (4) feelings of belonging, (5) social networks, (6) the context of the country of origin, (7) their migration experience and (4) the received reintegration support. In a second step, further in-depth content analyses were carried out exploring returnees' understandings and evaluations of these components. The wellbeing score was used to group the respondents into groups reporting an increase, decrease or status quo regarding post-return wellbeing, after which the qualitative data was analysed in search for reasons of these changes in wellbeing, the dynamic relation between the different components, and their relation with people's evaluation of their overall post-return wellbeing.

MULTI-DIMENSIONAL POST-RETURN SITUATIONS

The analyses of the respondents' narrative revealed that the components "material situation", "health", "feelings of agency" and "belonging" held very prominent places in their evaluations and even within the relatively short period of time, these components were influential for changes in wellbeing. "Social networks", "the country of origin" "the migration experience" and "reintegration support", were meaningful as well, but were mostly situated by the respondents as factors influencing these other four domains. Hence, in staying close to what the respondents considered important, the following result section explores returnees' understandings and evaluations of these four central components, the dynamic interplay between the different components, and how this ultimately relate to overall post-return wellbeing.

Material situation

Unsurprisingly, all the respondents mentioned their material situation, in particular income (sufficient to maintain the family) and housing (a stable and suitable place to live), as an extremely important and determining issue. In explaining their situation, people constantly referred to the challenging context in both countries of origin, where the socioeconomic context of low wages, high unemployment, unstable prices, the importance of political connections and the climate of corruption made it very hard to reach their objectives.

I need to earn enough money. This is not only a problem for me, but a problem for all Armenians. If you find a job here, you earn very little. I earn 200 Euros. I can pay for the apartment and the electricity with that, but that's it. It is finished (female, 34, 2).²

The importance of these factors was confirmed by the fact that the improvement in post-return wellbeing between one and two years after return was in many cases ascribed to an improvement in (or the stability of) the respondents' material situation. This mainly due to the starting-up, or progression of, an income-generating activity (IGA) created with the reintegration support, often combined with temporary or informal work. Many respondents showed huge creativity in being able to turn their situation around, pooling several economic resources through combining two or three jobs. Others solved the financial difficulties of the first year by working abroad and going back-and-forth between (in these particular cases) Russia or Italy and their home country. In a similar vein, a decline in post-return wellbeing was often induced by people's material situation, when for example the IGA failed or the income it generated was insufficient, which was mostly attributed to rising prices in the country (resulting in any type of materials becoming more expensive and the decline in people's buying power), medical problems, misfortune or insufficient reintegration budgets.

In starting and continuing the IGA, being able to rely on their social network was of great importance, as this could provide for additional resources (a place to live, being able to join an existing IGA). It appeared that through their migration experience – referring to their separation from their home country, their lives abroad, and their subsequent return – they did not acquire any capital or resources such as specialised knowledge, finances, or transnational social networks, that could improve their material situation. Moreover, both emigration and return seemed to have little impact on their social networks for the majority of the respondents.

Feelings of agency

The narratives also illustrated how people's material situation in relation to overall wellbeing appeared to be mediated by, and interacted with, feelings of agency; that is, their ability to take action and create change.

My financial situation is 2. But my attitude, my interest in increasing the income is 5. This because I like to do many things. Everything depends on money. Just now, I don't have enough money to increase the income, to enlarge the business, but when I have that money, everything will be ok. [...] I feel that I am able to do these things. (male; 33; 2)

For several respondents, the reintegration support was a meaningful factor in creating an opportunity to act in the first year post-return. It enabled them to start up a small IGA in a context where there are otherwise very few alternative possibilities. The availability of support gave a clear orientation; a concrete goal about what to do immediately after returning. Several respondents also stressed that being occupied with the IGA itself had a positive impact on their self-esteem and wellbeing (Wright, 2011). They pointed to the emotional benefit of being active, having the opportunity to do something or of being proud of their achievements, and their ability to care for themselves and their relatives: "I am helping my family now. I like to work and to have a job. I can't sit at home and do nothing" (female, 58, 2). "[The business] was important for my personal health as well. It was a place where I wanted to go, I had to walk there, I did not concentrate on my health problems but I was thinking about other things ... and that helped me to feel better, morally" (female, 62, 2). Further, when respondents reported a positive change in their feelings of agency, of being in control of their situation, of having the ability or seeing the opportunity to make progress, this had an important impact on their overall wellbeing, even when there were no substantial improvements in their material situation: "[I earn little but] it is better because I am managing in my own way" (female, 64, 2). This was equally true the other way around. Losing the feeling of agency had a tremendous impact on respondent's post-return wellbeing. One of the respondents (female; 30) described a difficult situation the first year after return. She and her family were living with her parents, lacking the money to rent a separate house. They had no income at that time but she explained that "through the support we can return to a normal way of living". She described her situation as "normal": "We are living average. Not bad and not so good, so average". Yet one year later, one of her purchased animals died and her feeling of agency disappeared, leading her to conclude that living on the streets in Belgium appeared more attractive than a post-return situation without any perspective.

Health

This brings up the topic of health, a recurrent theme throughout their stories as being a significant domain and inherently interwoven with others. The prominence of this domain needs to be understood in relation to the characteristics of the study's respondent group and the country context. For ten respondents (nine of them Armenians), health problems and the search for adequate treatment was their main motivation to migrate. Furthermore, 22 of the 65 respondents received "medical support", which is an additional budget that is allocated when a returnee (or one of the

accompanying family members) can prove a medical problem with an official certificate. Several returnees in this group had chronic medical problems (e.g., diabetes, hepatitis, or hypertonia) for which they needed medication or treatment that was either unavailable or expensive. For these respondents, there was a strong interrelation between various themes: bad health conditions were putting severe pressure on their financial situation and overall wellbeing, or on the contrary, when insufficient financial resources created stress or led to postponing needed medical treatment.

Inaccessible and unaffordable healthcare also led several respondents to mention feelings of anger with their government for their inaction. They questioned the value of their “citizenship” and expressed strong feelings of “non-belonging” to the country of origin, which will be further elaborated below. These respondents often explicitly compared their situation with their conditions and wellbeing before their return, where they felt that the Belgian healthcare system protected its citizens. As such, their migration experience played a vital role as to how their health conditions affected their overall wellbeing. For the respondents who did receive treatment and medication in Belgium, and no longer did so after returning, their return even created the embodied experiences of feeling physically worse, which heavily impacted their wellbeing.

Feelings of belonging

The fourth domain that strongly emerged from many post-return narratives was people’s feeling of belonging. Consistent with the distinction pointed out by Antonsich (2010), returnees’ narratives of belonging consisted of two inextricable dimensions: belonging in the sense of the very personal and intimate feeling of place attachment (the feeling of being “at home” in a place) and belonging as an official “formal structure” of membership, as for instance manifested in citizenship.

The first dimension, feeling at home, was mentioned by referring to the geographical scale of the “national homeland”. Although many returnees continued to search for a connection with their host country in some way (Lietaert et al., 2017a), nearly half of the respondent group – both Armenians and Georgians, young and old – explicitly mentioned feelings of belonging to the country of return. They talked about the benefit of “being at home” or of “being back home” when judging their post-return wellbeing. This feeling was mainly generated by autobiographical factors (“I grew up here”, “this is my birth place, of course it’s very familiar” and “here I have real friends from childhood”), cultural factors (“here we have close relationships with neighbours, we take care of each other”, “I felt like a stranger there, even the food was a problem for me” and “I can speak my language again”), and relational factors (being surrounded by “relatives”, “friends” and “neighbours”) (Antonsich, 2010). For several respondents, the migration experience changed their place attachment. For some the experience abroad led to a reinforcement of their feelings of belonging to the country: “we have found everything [back] here in Armenia ... when you get something back that you once lost, then you can value and

appreciate it more" (female, 54, 2). Some respondents felt physical and mentally "more free" after their return, because they were no longer a stranger, had a supportive social network around or no longer felt restricted. Yet for others, the migration experience weakened their attachment: "I learned a lot over there. The lifestyle is so different. People here are not living a good life. It is as though if a programme is not put inside the people here, they don't know how to live, they don't know what can be done" (male, 30, 1).

Although biographical factors such as childhood relationships had a certain overlap with relational factors in contributing to the returnees' feelings of belonging, the follow-up interviews revealed a difference in the permanence of these factors and their influence on post-return wellbeing. When returnees talked about the positive influence of reconnecting with auto-biographical and cultural factors they valued in their home country during the first interview, this remained a positive element for their wellbeing one year later. Yet relational factors, such as reconnection with family members for example, were more subject to change, and changes in family relationships (e.g., divorce) had a huge influence on feelings of belonging and post-return wellbeing.

The second dimension, belonging as citizenship, was recounted mainly in negative terms. When respondents expressed feelings of insecurity or being unsafe, this prominently induced feelings of no longer wanting to belong to their country and heavily affected their post-return wellbeing over time. These respondents were not lacking citizenship but were arguing that their citizenship did not provide any form of security. This lack of protection was linked by the respondents to material and legal factors, to a failing government and failing institutions, and thus to the politics of belonging:

We are living in a country without laws. I have been very anxious. Even though my husband says he likes his country, I am very, very disappointed in my country. In the authorities, in the laws, in the hardship we have here (female, 48, 1).

Even as a soldier in Afghanistan, psychologically, I was calmer than here. I was at ease, because I knew why I was there, what I had to do, and what to expect ... Even living on the streets in Belgium, you feel more protected. You know that the police are police, and that they will protect you (male, 37, 1).

POST-RETURN WELLBEING: CONTRASTS AND PRIORITIES

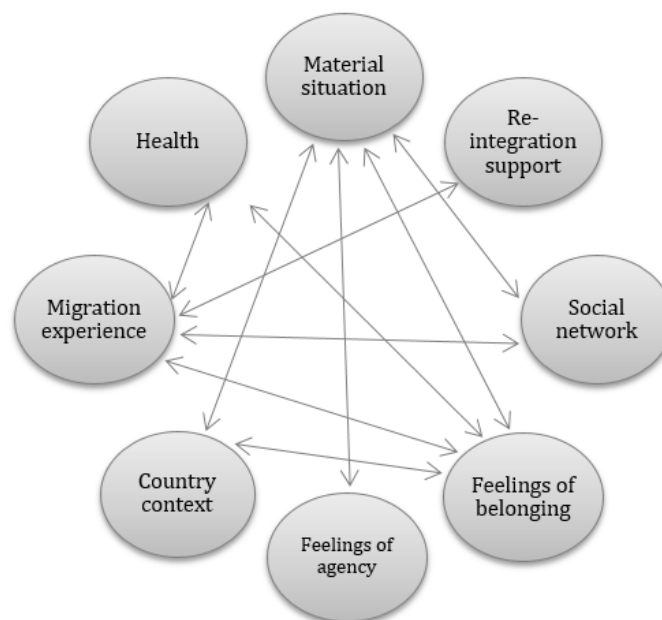
It became clear when disentangling the content of and interaction between the domains, yet the question of giving a wellbeing score put it bluntly: many respondents experienced strong contrasts between the different components; for example, between their material situation and feelings of belonging:

If we can put the financial issues aside, I am satisfied. I am very satisfied. But if you put the financial issues inside, I am not. Everybody wants to live in his own country, in his

motherland. But if there are no means of living, when people are living in bad conditions, how can a person be satisfied with this? Nevertheless, of course it is good to be in your own country (male, 31, 2).

Yet such contrasts were also mentioned between other components, and when trying to summarise or make conclusions about wellbeing, respondents made no distinction between domains as outcomes of their situation and factors influencing their situation in these domains. The component 'social network' for example was mainly mentioned as influencing factors for other domains, but became a factor mediating negative situations when summarizing one's wellbeing. Figure 1 visualises all type of contrasts mentioned by the respondents, and these represent discrepancies such as: "Life in general in Armenia is getting worse, but for me personally it became better" (female, 53, 1); "I don't regret being there, but I regret it for another reason. Because I went abroad, I have no wife, no children. But it was good" (male, 32, 1); "I couldn't stand the climate [in Belgium], my health is better here, though I love Belgium and I wish I was there" (female, 63, 1); "The solution to my problems is to leave this country, though I don't want to live abroad. I ask God to change the situation here, so we don't have to go" (female, 26, 1).

Figure 1: Experienced contrasts between components



Moreover, the experience of similar contrasts resulted in a positive wellbeing score for one, while resulting in a negative score for someone else. This was most evident in the domain of belonging. Feelings of (non)belonging often contrasted with, and even "overruled", positive or negative

evaluations of other components. This indicates that different meanings can be attributed to similar situations, and that the final summary of various elements and simultaneous processes is highly individual.

DISCUSSION

This article examined the post-return wellbeing of assisted returnees from Belgium after going back to Armenia and Georgia. This discussion reflects on how the lens of wellbeing, translated into an explorative, qualitative and longitudinal research design contributes to the understanding of the complexity and dynamics of post-return situations in different ways.

Firstly, the components mentioned by the respondents as meaningful for their post-return wellbeing are certainly comparable with those introduced in previous studies on post-return situations. However, starting from people's self-assessment revealed particular emphases in their evaluations, what brings nuances to the uniform images of what is important post-return. The respondents emphasised the importance of "health" and "feelings of agency", themes that are less central in other research. The findings suggest that this centrality of health, which is different than in other research, where people's health situation is principally situated as mediating factor for other domains and is influenced by the respondents migration motives and the context of inaccessible healthcare in the country of origin. This confirms the need for holistic approaches to our understanding of reintegration processes, incorporating life trajectories and migration motives (Flahaux, 2020; Gualda and Escriva, 2014). It is likely that feelings of agency are salient in all (re)integration processes (Korac, 2003), but might be overlooked in previous reintegration studies as this component is less tangible and measurable.

In addition to particular emphases, the results reveal that certain themes are remarkably absent in the narratives. Although the influence of the lack or loss of ties and the importance of social networks was clearly apparent throughout the narratives (e.g., in generating feelings of belonging or in starting up an IGA), respondents did not mention the impact of the socio-cultural shame of a failed migration, the difficulties in meeting family or community expectations, or the social distance between returnees and those who stay (Kleist, 2017; Markowitz and Stefansson, 2004). One explanation here is that this relates to differences in meanings, imaginaries and expectations attached to migration and return across places. As for the respondents of this study, their migration processes were individual or family endeavours, not ingrained into broader family or community expectations like is the case in several African or Asian countries (Kleist, 2017; Yeoh et al., 2020). Therefore they did not mention social obligations hampering their reintegration processes. More so, these respondents did not leave during a conflict and were not part of a minority group returning (Blitz, 2005; Porobic, 2017), and also did not

return in large numbers putting pressure on the community of return (Lietaert and Van Gorp, 2019). This made it so they did not need to rebuild any community or renegotiate their place within the broader community, making them less visible as 'returnee' and not engaging into returnee associations like noticeable in other contexts (Porobic, 2017). This was articulated in a different way by the respondents themselves. They referred to the strength of childhood ties in both countries, on which migration or return seemed to have little impact. Social networks were not mentioned as something that one needed to be reintegrated into, which might explain as well why it was not positioned as core domain for their post-return wellbeing. Secondly, the in-depth explorations of the meaning of the components, the interactions between components, and how this relate to changing evaluations of overall post-return wellbeing lead to interesting findings regarding their feelings of belonging. The results did not only confirm its importance. The data allowed to further explore the plurality of scales at which this important component is articulated (Antonsich, 2010), and the changes that occurred over time illustrated differential influence of factors contributing to feelings of belonging on post-return wellbeing. It also showed how feelings of not belonging – often induced by feelings of insecurity or of being unsafe – coincide with very negative self-evaluations of post-return wellbeing (Cummins, 1996), regardless of the material situation. From the perspectives of the returnees, the concept of safety extended far beyond the conventional understanding of physical protection from harm; a conceptualisation that is often the only prerequisite for repatriation within the return policy of host countries (Zimmermann, 2012). Respondents talked about having a secure or stable income, making it possible for them and their family to survive, and allow them to create a future. They talked about being protected against arbitrariness and corruption – leading to peace of mind and an overall feeling of being protected by law – and about receiving the necessary health care, sometimes literally protecting them from death. Accordingly, respondents talked about ontological security (Giddens, 1991), which entails physical, material and juridical elements, as well as the need for stability and predictability of life, and the opportunity “to carve out a life plan and envisaging [sic] a trajectory into the future” (Chase, 2013: 860). Hence, it is this conceptualisation of safety that was relevant to understand people’s evaluations of post-return situations.

Thirdly, the focus on overall wellbeing also reveals the manifold of contrasts experienced between different components and such contrasts were mentioned between all components, those consider as central domains or as influencing factors alike. Uncovering these contrasts helps us to understand the inherent ambiguity of how people experience their post-return situation. According to Markowitz and Stefansson (2004), the effort to deconstruct the notion of an “easy and natural homecoming” has focused on somewhat one-sided, pessimistic pictures of return migration, instead of including a more complex and balanced account, containing elements of both hardship and satisfaction. Indeed,

throughout all the themes, respondents in this study mentioned inhibiting and hampering issues that strongly complicated their post-return situation, though at the same time, also positive elements and resources that mitigated the difficulties faced (Best et al., 2000). What is more, the results expose how experiences of similar contrasts sometimes resulted in a different overall score for wellbeing. This hints at how people attribute different meanings to similar situations and confirms the complexity of summarizing findings from different life domains. This relativity of importance is widely recognised in studies of wellbeing where several concepts such as “domain importance”, “value priority”, and “psychological centrality” are evoked when discussing this issue (Cummins, 1996; Diener and Suh, 1997, Hsieh, 2003). In the study of post-return wellbeing, this has received little attention, yet importantly illustrates that adding up findings from different life domains and comparing outcomes of return processes with a particular norm could overlook the meanings returnees themselves attribute to their situation (Wright, 2011).

Lastly, the role of people’s migration experience remained very ambiguous within all the aforementioned. Having been abroad had a negative impact on the material situation of most respondents. Its impact on health and agency went in both direction. When considering belonging, it appeared that quite similar experiences in Belgium could weaken as well as reinforce feelings of belonging. Yet what triggered this different outcome, whether it could be related to people’s migration and/or return motives, life-cycle effects, people’s value priority or whether they used different contexts of reference (host country or country of origin) for comparison, remains extremely challenging to determine and was not possible to further explore with the data at hand. The findings did suggest that peoples frame of reference was not a constant, respondents changed frame of reference when talking about different life domains. The context in Belgium was clearly the basis of comparison when talking about health, whereas for their material situations some people compared with the situation in Belgium, while others placed themselves within the country of return (Sienkiewicz et al., 2016). This might partly explain the experienced contrasts between components. However, this study started from the premises that evaluations of wellbeing incorporate people’s self-chosen context of reference. With whom, when, and in which realms the returnees compared themselves was not explicitly questioned, and might not be that easily uncovered (Sienkiewicz et al., 2016). Moreover, more and much longer longitudinal follow-up research is needed in order to further disentangle the effect of the migration experience from other factors, including examining whether there might be something like a “returnee identity” or whether differences fade with the passing of time (Lietaert et al., 2017c).

In sum, the findings of this research illustrate that investigating post-return situations through a wellbeing lens is a useful analytic strategy to reveal particular accents, vulnerabilities, (social) meanings

or priorities, and their linkages with pre- and post-return context and personal trajectories. It emphasises that any comparison of reintegration processes across different countries or regions should not only consider differences in modes of return and the structural conditions before and after return, but also the meaning of migration and return in particular geographical and social contexts (Porobic, 2017). Such insights are important in complementing and potentially adjusting past studies that aim to measuring people's reintegration. This explorative qualitative research also touches upon different connections and interactions between components of post-return wellbeing, though much more systematic dynamic analyses are required to understand these interactions and the changes in wellbeing which they might induce. These findings also have implications for policymakers and practitioners concerned with developing return and reintegration assistance. The displayed contrasts and priorities show that precaution is needed when monitoring and measuring overall reintegration across countries to inform policy and practice. Composite scores, which counts up various indicators in different dimensions, or too simplistic or uncritical measurements of post-return situations where important elements which are difficult to measure or influence or left out, might give a total different view on post-return realities than returnees' understanding of their post-return wellbeing within their specific context. Hence, in order to increase understanding in reintegration processes and the impact of assistance, more effort needs to be done to include elements such as agency, belonging value priority and context specific or relational meanings in measuring reintegration and composing support packages (Porobic, 2017).

Moreover, given the diverging interests and priorities involved in assisted return (Lietaert, 2019), an open category of post-return wellbeing might also provide an interesting discursive tool to scrutinise post-return situations (Atkinson and Joyce, 2011). On the micro level, discussions and negotiation between returnees and counsellors on how individual reintegration assistance can be mobilised to contribute to post-return wellbeing, might be a promising avenue to truly realise the "tailor-made" approach these programmes aim for. This however requires sufficient flexibility to be built into these programmes to enable adaption of the support to specific contexts, needs and priorities (Lietaert, 2019; Kuschminder, 2017b). On the policy level, Atkinson and Joyce (2011) argue that discussions on the content and meaning of wellbeing as valuable, as it stimulates critical debate about the nature of overarching policy goals, such as reintegration, and enables strategies to be negotiated and reconciled locally.

NOTES

1. Six respondents from the initial group were not interviewed after their return. Fourteen respondents did not participate in the second interview. Drop-out reasons at the first and second interview moment were: respondents resided permanently or temporarily abroad at the moment of the fieldwork (11), respondents ceased participation (4), it was practically not possible to arrange an interview during the time of the field visit (4), and the respondent could not be reached (1). This drop-out rate might have impacted the findings, given that the respondents who stopped their participation might have been confronted with different post-return situations than those covered in the study.
2. The codes assigned to the interview quotes refer to the respondents' gender, their age at the time of the interview and the number of the interview (first or second year after return).

References

- Alcock, P. (2004). The influence of dynamic perspectives on poverty analysis and anti-poverty policy in the UK. *Journal of Social Policy*, 33(3), 395-416.
- Antonsich, M. (2010). Searching for belonging—an analytical framework. *Geography Compass*, 4(6), 644-659.
- Atkinson, S. (2013). Beyond components of wellbeing: The effects of relational and situated assemblage. *Topoi*, 32(2), 137-144.
- Beier, H., & Kroneberg, C. (2013). Language boundaries and the subjective well-being of immigrants in Europe. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 39(10), 1535-1553.
- Best, C. J., Cummins, R. A., & Lo, S. K. (2000). The quality of rural and metropolitan life. *Australian Journal of Psychology*, 52(2), 69-74.
- Black, R., Koser, K., Munk, K., Atfield, G., D'Onofrio, L., & Tiemoko, R. (2004). *Understanding voluntary return* (Home Office Online Report 50/04). Brighton: Sussex Centre for Migration Research.
- Cassarino, J.-P. (2008). Editorial Introduction. *International Journal on Multicultural Societies*, 10(2), 95 - 105.
- Chase, E. (2013). Security and subjective wellbeing: the experiences of unaccompanied young people seeking asylum in the UK. *Sociology of Health & Illness*, 35(6), 858-872.
- Cummins, R. A. (1996). The domains of life satisfaction: An attempt to order chaos. *Social Indicators Research*, 38(3), 303-328.
- Diener, E., & Suh, E. (1997). Measuring quality of life: Economic, social, and subjective indicators. *Social indicators research*, 40(1-2), 189-216.
- Dodge, R., Daly, A., Huyton, J., & Sanders, L. (2012). The challenge of defining wellbeing. *International journal of wellbeing*, 2(3), 222-235.
- European Training Foundation (ETF) (2013). *Migration and skills in Armenia and Georgia: Comparative report* (ETF Working Paper). Turin: European Training Foundation.
- Flahaux, M.-L. (2013). *Retourner au Sénégal et en RD Congo: Choix et contraintes au cœur des trajectoires de vie des migrants*. Doctoral dissertation : Université Catholique de Louvain.
- Flahaux, M.-L. (2020). Reintegrating after return: Conceptualisation and empirical evidence. *International Migration*.
- Fleuret, S., & Atkinson, S. (2007). Wellbeing, health and geography: A critical review and research agenda. *New Zealand Geographer*, 63(2), 106-118.
- Fransen, S. (2017). The Socio-Economic Sustainability of Refugee Return: Insights from Burundi. *Population, Space and Place*, 23(1), 1-16.

- Gevorkyan, A. V. (2015). The legends of the Caucasus: Economic transformation of Armenia and Georgia. *International Business Review*, 24(6), 1009-1024.
- Giddens, A. (1991). *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Gualda, E., & Escriva, A. (2014). Diversity in return migration and its impact on old age: the expectations and experiences of returnees in Huelva (Spain). *International Migration*, 52(5), 178-190.
- Habibov, N., & Afendi, E. (2009). Analysis of subjective wellbeing in low-income transitional countries: evidence from comparative national surveys in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia. *Journal of Comparative Social Welfare*, 25(3), 203-219.
- Howitt, D., & Cramer, D. (2007). *Introduction to Research Methods in Psychology*. Harlow: Pearson Education.
- Hsieh, C. (2003). Counting importance: The case of life satisfaction and relative domain importance. *Social Indicators Research*, 61(2), 227-240.
- King, R., & Collyer, M. (2016). Migration and development framework and its links to integration. *Integration Processes and Policies in Europe* (pp. 167-188). Cham: Springer.
- Kleist, N. (2017). Disrupted migration projects: the moral economy of involuntary return to Ghana from Libya. *Africa*, 87(2), 332-42.
- Korac, M. (2003). Integration and how we facilitate it: A comparative study of the settlement experiences of refugees in Italy and the Netherlands. *Sociology*, 37(1), 51-68.
- Kuschminder, K. (2017a). *Female return migration and reintegration strategies in Ethiopia*. (Doctoral dissertation), Maastricht University.
- Kuschminder, K. (2017b). Interrogating the Relationship between Remigration and Sustainable Return. *International Migration*, 55(6), 107-121.
- Lietaert, I. (2019). The usefulness of reintegration support: the dual perspectives of returnees and caseworkers. *British Journal of Social Work*, advance online publication.
- Lietaert, I., Broekaert, E., & Derluyn, I. (2017a). The boundaries of transnationalism: the case of assisted voluntary return migrants. *Global Networks*, 17(3), 366 – 381.
- Lietaert, I., Broekaert, E., & Derluyn, I. (2017b). From social instrument to migration management tool: Assisted voluntary return programmes—the case of Belgium. *Social Policy & Administration*, 51(7), 961-980.
- Lietaert, I., Broekaert, E., & Derluyn, I. (2017c). Time heals? A multi-sited, longitudinal case study on the lived experiences of returnees in Armenia *Return migration and psychosocial wellbeing: discourses, policy-making and outcomes for migrants and their families* (pp. 165-181): Routledge.

- Lietaert, I., & Van Gorp, L. (2019). Talking across Borders: Successful Re-entry in Different Strands of Re-entry Literature. *International Migration*; advance online publication.
- Luhmann, M., Hofmann, W., Eid, M., & Lucas, R. E. (2012). Subjective well-being and adaptation to life events: a meta-analysis. *Journal of personality and social psychology*, 102(3), 592.
- Markowitz, F., & Stefansson, A. H. (2004). *Homecomings: unsettling paths of return*. Oxford: Lexington Books.
- Porobić, S. (2017). Daring 'life-return projects' to post-Dayton Bosnia and Herzegovina. *International Migration*, 55(5), 192-204.
- Prilleltensky, I. (2008). Migrant well-being is a multilevel, dynamic, value dependent phenomenon. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 42(3-4), 359-364.
- Ruben, R., Van Houte, M., & Davids, T. (2009). What Determines the Embeddedness of Forced-Return Migrants? Rethinking the Role of Pre-and Post-Return Assistance. *International Migration Review*, 43(4), 908-937.
- Sienkiewicz, J., Hapke, P., & Faist, T. (2016). Social comparisons in migration and inequality studies: A literature review and evidence from a pilot study. COMCAD Working Papers n. 139.
- Sloan, M. K., & Morrison, P. S. (2015). The post-move satisfaction of internal migrants. *Migration Studies*, 4(1), 97-115.
- Stefes, C. H. (2008). Governance, the state, and systemic corruption: Armenia and Georgia in comparison. *Caucasian Review of International Affairs*, 2(2), 73-83.
- Vathi, Z., & King, R. (2017). *Return migration and psychosocial wellbeing: discourses, policy-making and outcomes for migrants and their families*. London and New York: Taylor & Francis.
- Vandevoordt, R. (2017). Between humanitarian assistance and migration management: On civil actors' role in voluntary return from Belgium. *Journal of Ethnic Migration Studies*, 43(11), 1907-1922.
- Wright, K. (2011). Constructing migrant wellbeing: An exploration of life satisfaction amongst Peruvian migrants in London. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 37(9), 1459-1475.
- Yeoh, B., Somaiah, B., Lam, T., & Acedera, K. (2020). Doing Family in "Times of Migration": Care Temporalities and Gender Politics in Southeast Asia. *Annals of the American Association of Geographers*, 1-17.
- Yin, K. (2009). *Case Study Research: Design and Methods* (Fourth edition). London: SAGE Publications.
- Zimmermann, S. (2012). Understanding Repatriation: Refugee Perspectives on the Importance of Safety, Reintegration, and Hope. *Population, Space and Place*, 18, 45-57.