

Securing Retirement Through Intra-European Migration: Older Romanian Women's Transnational Struggle for Formal Social Protection

Estrategias de protección social transnacional: mujeres mayores de Rumanía asegurándose la jubilación mediante la migración intraeuropea

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This article explores through qualitative methods how structural inequalities and weak welfare states push women to migrate in their old age to piece together their pension across different countries. Based on in-depth interviews, observations, and ethnographic conversations conducted with Romanian women in Spain, it explores how they navigate the European Union's (UE) law on Social Security to aggregate social insurance periods from the work performed in different member states and therefore get entitled to a state pension. We analyze how the accumulation of vulnerabilities (related to class, gender, age, and ethnicity) shape the trajectories of these aging women in a context of structurally unequal welfare systems. The paper thus contributes to the transnational social protection field with a timely focus on old age formal arrangements within the EU and use of life-course approach to understand the reasons of related with social protection older migrant's im/mobilities.



Abstract

Este artículo explora a través de métodos cualitativos cómo las desigualdades estructurales y los estados de bienestar débiles empujan a las mujeres mayores a migrar hacia distintos países con el fin de completar su pensión. Basándose en conversaciones etnográficas, observaciones y entrevistas en profundidad realizadas a mujeres rumanas en España, explora cómo ellas navegan la ley de la Seguridad Social de la Unión Europea (UE) con la finalidad de agregar periodos de cotización a la seguridad social en diferentes estados miembros y de esta manera obtener derecho a una pensión estatal. Analiza cómo la acumulación de vulnerabilidades relacionadas con la clase, el género, la edad y el estatus migratorio moldean las trayectorias de estas mujeres, quienes envejecen dentro de sistemas de bienestar estructuralmente desiguales. Por lo tanto, el artículo contribuye al campo de la protección social transnacional al enfocarse en la protección social for-

mal dentro de la UE y al adoptar un enfoque del ciclo de vida para explicar las (in)movilidades de las migrantes mayores en relación con la protección social.

Intra-European migration; older migrants; transnational ageing; pensions; transnational social protection; gender and class inequalities; life-course



Migración intracuropea; inmigrantes mayores; envejecimiento transnacional; pensiones; protección social transnacional; desigualdades de género y clase; ciclo de vida

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1. Introduction

The numbers of older foreign-born people increased drastically in virtually all European countries during the last decade (King et al., 2017, see Ciobanu et al., 2017 for more detailed exploration of statistical data). In some countries, the number of foreign-born populations over the age of 50 has increased by 80% between 2010 and 2019¹ creating significant challenges for social work and social policy. Importantly, this phenomenon takes place not only because of the general trend of demographic ageing, but also because of the new migration flows of ageing migrants. They are new international retirement migrants (Olsson & O'Reilly, 2017; Croucher, 2012; Gustafson, 2008) or Eastern European labour migrants who late-in-life look for work in Western Europe as a survival strategy after losing their jobs (Morokvasic, 2004), among many others.

Even though, aging and migration have increasingly caught the attention of scholars with different backgrounds, the topic remains understudied, and we still know relatively little about the migration motivations of aging migrants (Ciobanu et al., 2017). Within the scholarship on transnational social protection, however, this is a highly relevant topic. The aim of this article is to analyse the link between older people's decision to migrate and their need to access basic social protection. The article scrutinizes the case of late-in-life Romanian domestic workers who moved to Castellón after the 2007 EU expansions as a plan to aggregate social insurance periods from work in different member states and get entitled to a state pension in Romania where they want to get old. The article problematizes the in/voluntary migration decisions of these women who chose (or are pushed) to migrate as a social protection strategy. We pose therefore the following question: what kind of personal, structural, and historical circumstances are leading to the scarce social-protection opportunities that shape older Romanian women's migration and return opportunities?

This article is structured as follows: first, we frame the study in the existing literature on older migrant's migration motivations, transnational social protection, and the theory of core-periphery structures within Europe. Secondly, we explain the methodology used in this study. Thirdly, we explain contexts in which Romanian women develop their social-protec-

¹ Statistical data from Eurostat.

tive choices: European law on Social Security and Romanian pension system. Subsequently, we explain migration motivations of Romanian older women and then introduce a specific case to better understand how these women navigate the European Union's (UE) law on Social Security to aggregate social insurance periods from work in different member states to get entitled to a state pension. Afterwards, we analyse how the accumulation of vulnerabilities (related to class, gender, age, and Eastern European origins) shape the trajectories of these aging women in a context of structural inequalities among welfare systems and accompanied them discourses. We conclude by showing the contributions of the article to the existing scholarly literature on older migrants and transnational social protection literature.

2. A social protection and life-course take on older migrant Im/mobilities

The ageing tendency in European and other developed societies started to be researched in the field of transnational aging (King et al., 2017; Deluigi, 2016), which refers to the processes of organizing, shaping, and coping with old age in contexts that are no longer limited to the frame of a single nation state (Horn et al., 2013, p. 7). At the same time, the last decade also brought into life a new research field interested in transnational social protection (TSP). TSP can be defined as the resources available from different nation-states, supra-national organizations, and individual cross-border strategies to reduce risks in human reproduction (Amelina et al., 2012). Such strategies can be taken individually or, more frequently, as a family strategy. Scholars interested in TSP observe that social protection is not necessarily provided and consumed within the territory of a single national state and that migrants often secure their social protection by transnational informal arrangements based on social networks and kinship bonds (Amelina et al., 2012; Bilecen & Sienkiewicz, 2015; Boccagni, 2015). TSP scholars have examined the so-called social protection assemblages of formal and informal sources in different nation states (Bilecen & Barglowski, 2015). The former refers to “publicly funded formal state regulations that are reinforced by laws, statutes, and regulations, institutionalized in policy and legislation, and conveyed in the form of (supra)national frames and eligibility criteria” (Bilecen & Barglowski, 2015, p. 203). The latter refers to practices of mutual support, information exchange and attention, and monetary transfers, such as remittances among different generations of migrants, non-migrants, and other members of the diaspora (Boccagni, 2015).

While state-provided social protection or social welfare has often been considered the main source of social protection, TSP scholars have shown that informal sources of support, such as transnational social networks play a crucial role for migrants themselves and their significant others abroad. While this is often by virtue of the lack of access to formal resources in national welfare systems due to their migration status (Amelina et al., 2012; Bilecen & Sienkiewicz, 2015), other studies have shown that informal resources are sometimes the preferred ones since they are more flexible and adaptive to their needs (Serra Mingot & Mazzucato, 2018). This article, in turn, focuses on formal social protection the retirement contributions, which lower-class migrants desire to achieve to secure their future retirement. In doing so, it aims to contribute to exploring the consequences of cross-border employment and social protection practices for social inequalities in Europe (Faist, 2014). Whereas labour migration and some practices of cross-border social protection can be considered an adaptive response to social risks and related inequalities, they also perpetuate old inequalities and may create new ones (ibid.).

The cases discussed in this article can be conceptually analysed from the core–periphery model developed in the 1960s to explain spatially uneven development (see: Frank, 1969). In this case, this theoretical tool serves the purpose to explain the migration flows at hand. Ever since the late 1970s, core–periphery structures within Europe have been discussed, highlighting the links between the so-called “secondary European economies”, with the industrial economies of the “core” (see: Seers et al., 1979). More recently, scholars have advanced this idea by expanding it beyond the labour market and including the desire of young migrants to live in dynamic global cities, such as London (King et al., 2016). This study contributes to this body of literature by looking at how unequal welfare states are a push factor for a specific migrant group to secure a decent old age retirement. Yet, supporting Faist’s arguments on the potential of migration to increase social inequalities (2014), the cases presented here show how core-peripheral inequalities in the labour market and welfare systems, not only perpetuate inequalities, but create new ones.

Life-course perspective and intersectionality have been barely employed in the TSP literature (see exceptions: Marcu, 2018; Lafleur & Romero, 2017; Serra Mingot, 2021). In this article we look at both migrant’s agency and strategies together with the structural circumstances which shape them according to the given markers of inequality such as gender, class, age, and ethnicity, considering different temporalities of migration, experienced past, and projected future, for understanding TSP. This approach allows us to unpack the reasons that lead older migrants to carefully plan TSP strategies in the European context in a more holistic way. The heuristic tool of life-course was recently suggested by other scholars to study migration (Marcu, 2018; Ciobanu & Bolzman, 2020). De Jong & de Valk (2020) argue that both migration decisions and the factors shaping them should be understood as connected to one’s life course. Contextualization of individual lives within social, cultural, historical, and familial contexts provides “a framework for studying phenomena at the nexus of social pathways, developmental trajectories, and social change” (Elder et al., 2003, p. 10), allowing insights on “the interactions and intersections between the micro-level of individuals and the macro levels of culture, economy, social policy etcetera” (Kok, 2007, p. 5).

In relation to social protection and inequalities, critical feminist studies on welfare states have shown that the mere design of a welfare state as a constructed political structure is discriminatory based on class and gender (Korpi, 2000). Shaver (1989) proved that pensions and other social benefits assume and reinforce a gender division of labor, making women dependent spouses responsible for caring for others (Lewis, 1997). Adopting an intersectional approach, others evidenced that migrants’ social-protection choices depend on heterogeneities (Lafleur & Romero, 2017), such as gender, race, class, or degree of transnationality, which shape the way they can access welfare systems.

For the purposes of this article, social class is defined drawing on Bourdieu’s work; as a group of people who share similar living conditions (see more on that in: Hong & Zhao, 2015). We focus mostly on material possibilities of existence and economic and educational capital. In case of Romanian women who are the focus of this study, we assign them to lower class as during socialism they worked mostly in factories and collectives, most of them started to work before being 20 years old, and many could not finish high school. After the transition to neoliberalism, if they were not unemployed, they remained physical and low-paid workers, often informal, with precarious life conditions and without having important economic capital.

It is also important to clarify what we mean by “older migrants”. Whereas in statistical data “older” normally refers to those 65+ years of age, here we use the term “older” to refer to

women who are not necessarily above 65 years old. This is because someone's social age does not always overlap with people's biological age, considered in statistical approaches. The social age, which is the relevant one in this study, is determined by inequality markers and accumulation of vulnerabilities within the life experiences (Comas & Roigé, 2018). Thus, the social age of a person with a lower economic class background and without access to good healthcare system is very different to the social age (including the physical appearance indicating someone's age) of a wealthy person with access to high standard medical services. Furthermore, as Warnes & Williams pointed out: "many 'retirement migrations' occur well before the conventional delimiter (65 years) of socially constructed old age, and (...) many less-skilled labour migrants experience job-related illness, disabilities or redundancy and cease paid work in their 50s or even earlier" (Warnes & Williams, 2006, p. 1258).

It was recently suggested that manoeuvring through different locations, later-life migrants consider structural opportunities from meso- and macro-levels to improve their quality of life and/or excel in vulnerabilities (Sampaio, 2020; Ciobanu et al., 2017), highlighting their agency in doing so. Concerning social protection drivers, older migrants were studied in the context of their cross-border roles as informal caregivers and care receivers in their transnational families (King et al., 2017; Zickgraf, 2017), their retirement lifestyles, including those seeking to spend their pension abroad generally with better climate conditions and where their pension would have a higher purchasing power (Olsson & O'Reilly, 2017; Croucher, 2012; Gustafson, 2008). Researchers have also paid attention to migrants who develop transnational arrangements to access health provisions (Gehring, 2016). Scholars have also identified different migrants' strategies for securing their retirement. The case of Ecuadorian migrants, for example, showed that one of these strategies consists in buying a property in the country of origin to secure an income or buying a home for their own use when they retire in order to lower the cost of living, as well as accessing social protection through mandatory insurance via the employer, for those who decide to stay in Europe (Herrera & Grijalva, 2017). When it comes to intra-European older-age migration, most studies have focused on already retired Northern-European migrants in Southern-European countries (Hall & Hardil, 2016; Huber & O'Reilly, 2004), and Western European migrants moving to Eastern Europe where care facilities are cheaper (Bender & Schweppe, 2019). All of them are migrants who are already entitled to have an old age pension. Yet, gendered TSP strategies of later-life migrants from Eastern Europe, whose formal old age pension is either unsecured or insufficient, did not receive much attention.

3. Data, methods, and ethics

This paper draws on primary qualitative data collected by the first author during fieldwork carried out in Castellón de la Plana, a Spanish city (170.000 residents) on the Mediterranean coast, but interviewees were commuting to the city from different places of the Castellón province. This fieldwork was conducted for a broader project on "Global Post-Socialist Workers and the Care Crises" (Kussy, 2023), focused on Romanian domestic workers in Spain. The fieldwork conducted for that broader project consisted of two phases. The first one, from March to July 2018, overlapped with conducting questionnaires for a binational (simultaneously in Spain and Romania) I+D research project on transnational lives and social net-

works of Romanians in Castellón.² During this stage of the research, the first author stayed in place living in a shared flat owned by a manager in a ceramic factory where some Romanians worked. The flat was situated in front of a bar, which is one of the Romanian men's "spots" in the city, and close to the square where Romanian women gather waiting to be informally recruited to perform domestic work for mostly Spanish women. This process, and especially informal conversations after conducting surveys (about 80 both in Spain and Romania), shed light on the main social protection problems of Romanian migrants in Castellón.

The second phase of the ethnographic fieldwork was a result of narrowing down the research interest and research group to older Romanian women who mostly happen to work as domestic workers, cleaners, and careers. It took place from November 2018 to July 2019 and was designed to deepen into the topics related to domestic workers conditions of existence and migration motivations. Numerous observations and informal conversations were conducted in some Romanian worker's workplaces, as well as churches, parks, coffee shops often visited by the members of the local Romanian community, their private homes and plots of land in the city's suburbs. Exploratory interviews, open in-depth interviews and in-depth semi-structured interviews (See Appendix) were conducted mostly with domestic workers, but also with others who could comment on their and Romanian community's situation. In-depth life-story interviews allowed the combination of an open narrative, prepared questions, and biographical orientation with a focus on the topic of social protection, migration motivations, family needs and conditions of living, work and social protection strategies in Romania and Spain and their future plans, among others.

In total, 45 people were interviewed in 41 interviews, 8 men and 37 women. Many interviews lasted about 1,5 hours, a few were very long reaching almost 4 hours. The interviews were conducted in Spanish, since for almost all the participants it is a well-mastered second language. Only two interviews required the support of an interpreter. When the interviewees gave their permission (most of the cases), the interviews were recorded via voice recorder, otherwise they were recorded by note-taking during the conversation. The informants were recruited by a snowball procedure, starting with independent gatekeepers. The transcribed interviews were later coded using a free software Taguette for simplified information's coding with different tags according to the research interest and categories emerged from the gathered qualitative material.

This paper draws on the complete data set from the ethnographic fieldwork, but for the purpose of a deep analyses with intersectional and life-course lens, it focuses on the coded interview material concerning mobilities and immobilities of older female migrants related with their desire to access state pension. This identified in the field particular case was explained by many members of Romanian community in Castellón and commented in informal conversations and is represented by a few women in the table of the interviews who migrated to the city after 2007. Other women interviewed emigrated for different reasons. Among them are those who migrated to Spain before 2007, so not in relation to pension arrangements, but ageing in place they also started to be worried about their pensions as they worked too long informally in Spain and now must postpone their return until they will have enough contri-

2 ORBITS (2016-2020), "The Role of Social Transnational Fields in the Emergence, Maintenance and Decay of Ethnic and Demographic Enclaves", funded by the Ministry of Economic and Competitiveness, Government of Spain (MINECO-FEDER: CSO2015-68687-P).

butions or even re-emigrate to yet another European country due to their problems with formalising their labour contract in Castellón. Another case, for instance, are those who migrated to send remittances and help their family and/or save money to reform their houses in rural areas in Romania. These and other cases are explored elsewhere and are beyond the scope of this article. Also, sometimes their migration motivations can overlap: a person can migrate due to the imperious need to secure her pension, but at the same time is reforming her house from her humble savings. For the purpose of the analyses, we reduce the complexity of the case focusing on the primary reason for migration, the one in relation to age old pension. All participants gave their voluntary and informed consent to participate in the research. Interviews with domestic workers cited in the text are presented with a pseudonym.³

4. Research contexts

4.1. European Union's Law on Social Security

The European Union is a specific transnational space when it comes to social security as its member state's independent systems are coordinated. However, its regulations governing the coordination of social security (SS) systems do not replace national schemes with any pan-European social security system, being limited to coordinate different welfare systems of its Member States. They were designed to enable the core value of the Community—the freedom of movement (Benton, 2013) what was assumed to be done by protecting EU citizens from losing their social security entitlements while crossing the borders of the nation states. The principle of the “aggregation of periods” is one of the most important for these regulations. It means that periods of insurance, employment, or residence from one member country must be considered by welfare systems of another countries.⁴ What is relevant for this article, it is due to this principle that some people can aggregate periods of contributions in different countries and get entitle to the old age pension by fulfilling the minimum period of insurance in some of the countries where they have contributed. Otherwise, this would not be possible if the contributor did not reach this minimum period in any of the countries counting only the contributions made there.

4.2. Getting old in Romania: the grey zones of the old age pension system

During the economic transition of 1989 in Romania, massive factory closures, de-collectivization and reductions left many workers unemployed. The new neoliberal system maintained after the communist state a strong relationship between entitlement to social protection and employment while, at the same time, it did not secure jobs. Most of those who arrived in Castellón in nineties or later lost their jobs back then.

³ In the Appendix with the table of interviews the names of the public representatives and others who consent to participate in the study under their real names, are not anonymized.

⁴ When it comes to the contributive old age pension, even the periods of contribution will be aggregated, pensioners will receive a part of their pension from each country separately according to the insurance record in each Member State and receive their respect pension once they reach the retirement age of a given country.

Currently, Romanian pension system combines a pay-as-you-go public scheme with two privately managed, funded components: a statutory funded scheme and two comprising personal pension schemes (however, since these last two pillars were introduced in 2007, were not mandatory for all and the inception of payouts still did not start, it had no importance for the cases described in this article). The Romanian pension system is characterized by huge disparities, with some people receiving only 8 EUR per month and other people with over 2,000 EUR (Nuță et al., 2016, p. 430). 33% of those entitled to an old-age pension receive less than 1,001 LEI (206.87 euros) a month, however, old-age pensions still help to reduce poverty risk at 65+ (European Commission and Social Protection Committee, 2018, p. 221).⁵ While many retirees' pensions are too low for a decent livelihood, those who have not contributed for the minimum period of 15 years required to receive a state pension are in an even worst situation, as social (non-contributive) pensions do not exist in Romania, and Social Assistance transfers are also very small compared to the cost of living. According to the information from the fieldwork, in rural Romania, the bills in winter can be higher than someone's pension. Since 2009, pensioners who have a state pension below 137 EUR have the right to social indemnity, but according to official statistics from 2018, the average benefit from it was 32EUR. In 2017, the gender gap in old-age pensions was the highest (28.8%) in Europe (European Commission and Social Protection Committee, 2018, p. 221). In 2010, the at-risk-of-poverty rate (AROP) for the 65+ population was higher than average rates in the EU and amounted to 30% for women and 21% for men (Zaidi, 2010). Lower-class women from rural areas who are reaching old age are even more exposed on the risk of poverty (European Commission and Social Protection Committee, 2018, p. 221), as it is three times higher in rural areas.⁶

5. Securing Retirement in Romania by migration to Spain

Castellón is a province on the Mediterranean coast situated in the Valencian Autonomous Community in Spain. The city of Castellón de la Plana (where the fieldwork was conducted) is the capital of the province. It has approximately 170.000 inhabitants, while the whole province reaches almost 600.000 inhabitants. 2008 was a tipping point when it comes to the number of residents with Romanian origins in the province of Castellón.⁷ That year, more than 50.000 Romanians resided there (9% of the total population). More than 24.000 people were registered in the capital (almost 15% of the total population). At the beginning of 2021, 37.466 Romanians were registered officially in Castellón, 17.917 men and 19.549 women, while in Castellón city in 2019 there were 8.335 women and 7.602 men registered officially. Molina et al., (2018) showed that the migratory chain dynamic based on word of mouth and mutual help, as well as specific circumstances assembled in this city such as Romanian churches and other institutional support, facilitated Romanian migration to the city. They also evidenced that many of these migrants came from a specific rural and industrial area in the south of Romania, Dâmbovița. However, many Romanians in Castellón are also from other villages and suburbs of industrial cities. Usually, Romanian migrants work in Castellón and its surroundings in agriculture, factories, tourist sector, restaurants. Men also often work

⁵ Romanian National Statistics Institute (INS), 2018.

⁶ World Bank, 2018.

⁷ Spanish National Statistics Institute (INE).

in construction (especially before the economic crises started in 2008) and women as domestic workers.

The city of Castellón evokes the impression of stagnation and relatively limited cultural, economic, educational, and night-life offer, comparing to other cities in Spain. It is a place with a rapidly increasing aging population, both because of the general tendency in Europe and Spain (e.g., low natality rates and longer life span), and because many younger Spaniards and second-generation Romanians who were born in Castellón (or came there being small kids) leave the city in search of better life and work opportunities. After the economic crises hit Spain, a few years after unemployment, precarious jobs and different family strategies, many Romanians are re-emigrating to Northern Europe, where they can find any job or earn more money. In the first phase of the ethnographic research in different conversations spontaneously emerged the topic of older women being those who do keep immigrating to Castellón. As various respondents indicated, this is related to their will to “secure a pension for themselves”:

AK: What does it mean that women are coming to Castellón to “secure a pension for themselves”?

O: Because [in Romania] there are women who didn't work. They don't have years of contribution. They used to take care of the house, animals, children, and land. I mean... There were their husbands who worked and earned money. In the past, you couldn't afford one of these... “caregivers”, so one of two had to stay at home (...).

AK: They come here to make up the contribution years?

O: Exactly. Because they don't have any pension. When they will reach the age of 60 and something, they will have nothing. They [the state] give them some social aid, the same as here [in Spain]. But in my country [Romania], this benefit is nothing. You can't even buy medications with that. And when you become old, you need diapers, and so... you become old! That's why... [they migrate] (Ozana).

The above excerpt summarizes the reasons why Romanian women over fifty started to migrate there after 2007, when their country of origin entered the European Union. Ozana indicated that their migration is related to the social protection needs and the reasons why the intra-European migration becomes a social protection strategy for their old age can be tracked to their past accumulation of vulnerabilities, as she explains, related to the class and gender social inequalities.

In lack of employment opportunities in Romania, Romanian women decide to emigrate because they wish to find easier a job abroad and because they would contribute in euros, a currency which will have a higher purchasing power in Romania. However, even they would earn more money in Northern Europe and so have higher contributions to the state's social security system, women who emigrated in relation to their pension arrangements to Castellón, chose this place as a destination majorly for two reasons. First, as most of them highlighted, they already had been familiarized with Spanish, a Latin language like Romanian, from watching Latin American telenovelas (soap operas). Secondly, given the previous massive migration to the city started in the 90s, they usually already knew someone who could give them a helping hand in Castellón de la Plana. Thanks to the existing migrant's chains between this city and different places in Romania (Molina et al., 2018), they knew someone who would allow them to stay over until they would find a job or someone who would instruct them with basic bureaucratic requirements to formalize the residency and work in Spain. These migrant's chains

and their compatriots' claims that they would find a job in Castellón easier than in their place of origin and so be able to make up for the missing periods of insurance to get entitled for the pension, were a pull factor for them to migrate to Castellón. The fact that the Spanish welfare system is more generous comparing it to the very weak Romanian welfare system, was not a matter of consideration for them when they were making their decision. If they could find a job in Romania, they would not have migrated abroad. The retirement age for women in Spain is higher than in Romania, as it is 65 years comparing to 60 years and 8 months so they would not be able to retire earlier thanks to requiring the pension in Spain based on joint contribution periods from Romania and Spain. In both countries the minimum contribution period is 15 years, and the full contribution period is 30- and 8-months in Romania and 35 in Spain so in this sense moving to Spain brings better welfare opportunities.

In the following part of the article, we employ a life-course perspective to illustrate the concrete case of Maria to better understand migration migratory projects of Romanian older women in Castellón. Although every woman interviewed in this research had a peculiar situation, the case of Maria encapsulates most experiences faced by other respondents and it also illustrates the migration motivation of the studied older women, and the role of inequalities in shaping these women's trajectories. Moreover, it was the close relationship that the first author established with Maria that allowed for an in-depth understanding of the life-course, observing all factors of vulnerability: gender, class, ethnicity, and age which shaped their social protection decisions are visible clearly and at the same time.

5.1. Maria: Moving to Spain to become entitled to a pension in Romania

Maria (60) was interviewed in a silent coffee shop at a railway station in Castellón, because, as she explained, she was temporarily living in her friend's house outside the city. That hot June day her wrinkled face looked very tired. She explained that she came to Spain in her early 50s "to secure a pension for herself" (*hacerse la pensión*) because in her region, rural area close to a bigger industrial city where before she commuted to work, it is impossible to get entitled to a pension as it is impossible to find a job there anymore, after the de-industrialization. Her friends, who neither meet Romania's pension scheme requirements went to Austria, Germany, Italy, and France. She was informed about the option of aggregation of insurance periods from different EU's countries by another female friend who decided to go to Castellón with the same plan. She had moved alone to Spain where she found work as a live-in caregiver. Back then, migration seemed to her a necessity; she would have preferred to stay with her family in Romania, consisting of an already adult and married son, grandson, and her biological aunt, already 80 years old and ill, who raised her and was her adoptive mother. However, she needed to secure her reproduction in old age and migration to Spain seemed the most feasible option to her to achieve a state pension and so a regular income.

Maria had no right to a pension in Romania where she contributed 10 out of the minimum 15 years required by the Social Security (SS) system there. She could not find a job in her region of origin in Romania, as she said, because of her age. In workplaces looking for non-qualified physical employees like her — for example, bars, shops, factories — they were hiring only younger woman. Other interviewed females in a situation like hers said beyond doubt that they were "too old to find a job in Romania". Maria could not count on the help from her son who earned 300 euros per month and had to support his own family. Therefore, in

2009, she decided to find employment abroad for five years to “make up” for the lacking years required to be entitled to the state pension in her country of origin. With 5 additional years of work in Spain, Maria could go back to Romania thanks to aggregating contribution periods from both countries, which would allow her for securing her a humble old-age pension in Romania.

The reason why during the decades of her adult life, in the so-called “productive age”, she could not reach the minimum 15 years of contribution periods, resides in the accumulation of different vulnerabilities during her life trajectory related to the Romanian (and subsequently also Spanish) welfare system. As a child, Maria was adopted by her aunt and uncle who could not afford her education. Most women in this study had a very similar educational background: some of them finished a high school or equivalent, most had completed primary school. They come from rural areas or residential suburbs of industrial cities. Most of them started to work in factories or collective farms in the 80s before they were twenty. In those days, as workers, they had access to state-provided formal social protection, but in the next decade with Romania’s transition from a centralized economy to a market economy, they lost their jobs with massive reductions. This is when their contribution gaps started.

During socialism and beginnings of the 1990s, Maria was an insured worker in a factory that provided electronic installations in the city until she was made redundant. Subsequently, she dedicated most of her adult life to raising her son and working the piece of land they had with her husband, gardened, cleaned, and cooked while her husband, who maintained his job, provided the main income. Nevertheless, when their son grew up, Maria and her husband got divorced. She then returned to her parents’ house where she took care of them and worked the land for the family’s own consumption and sporadic marketing. In turn, her already retired parents shared their income with her. They lived modestly “like people in their vicinity were used to living”, she explained, but they had enough for all of them to make a living. However, as Maria’s parents were getting older, and she herself turned fifty, she started to worry about the time when she herself would grow old and would neither be able to work the land nor count on the income of her parents once they passed away. If she had continued in that situation, she would not have been entitled to a pension in Romania because in those days she had been formally employed for only 10 years in her life. She chose transnational pension arrangement as a survival strategy oriented to the future.

Consequently, she “gained” new contribution gaps in Spain, too. After coming to Spain, Maria found a job as a live-in-caregiver. She could save some money as she did not pay rent and pay the contributions to the Spanish Social Security system to gain her pension in the future, but she had a great deal of work caring for an elderly person, doing laundry, cleaning, going shopping, and preparing food, and suffered from isolation until the point that she started to have mental health problems. When she met a new romantic partner (also from Romania) in Castellón, she decided to leave her job. He would have a relatively generous Spanish pension in the future, which they could share so considering the difficult character of her work, in that, it was one of solitude, bad payment and working conditions, and no time for her new relationship, that was a reasonable decision for her in that moment. Their relationship, however, ended up after a few years, and she resumed working towards her goal of securing her own pension through working abroad. But she found difficulties in finding a job with a legal contract; thus, she worked informally. When she changed this job for a formal one, again living in the house of the person she took care of, her formal contract stipulated that she was working for only four hours a week thus allowing her employers to pay lower taxes. At the time of the

interview, she was looking for a new job as the person she took care of had died. She had to maintain herself from her own savings, as according to Spanish law, domestic workers have no right to unemployment benefits. For this reason, she (as well as other women reported) felt more pressured to accept any work, even informal ones. Yet, once they have the job, it is also difficult to look for something else, as it is live-in 24 hours living with their employer and being “on demand” always all the time, except two hours a day and Sundays.

On the other hand, employers feel entitled to abuse caregivers. Maria asked about why they do not recognize real hours she worked for them or legalize her work but did not receive any reasonable answer. Other women narrated that some employers think about Romania as an “uncivilized” place lacking basic infrastructures and where people live in extreme poverty so once they are here giving them work is equivalent with making them a favor, giving a chance to make a living and maintain their families. Within this logic, the legalization or full recognition of the already scarce labour rights is already not needed.⁸ However, it is worth to mention, other Spanish families struggle themselves with precarity and feel left by the Spanish welfare system alone with their care commitments (Comas-d’Argemir & Bofill-Poch, 2022). Nevertheless, according to Romanians, they are paradoxically most often wealthier people who do not want to pay taxes for a care-givers work.

Many Romanian older women in Castellón managed to contribute to social security only about half of the years they lived and worked in Spain because they worked informally or partially informally, for the same reasons as in Maria’s case. They could not find a job or for some time came back to the gendered division of labour with their romantic partners, “taking care of the house” when they were doing the “productive” work.

If the plan of Maria had worked out well and she had contributed those 5 years to the Spanish social security during 9 years of her stay, she would have started to receive part of her pension from Romanian’s state once she would have reached the age of 60 years and 8 months, and the part of her pension from Spain once she would have reached 65. Nevertheless, her plan was more difficult to achieve than she thought. Unfavourable job opportunities and personal decisions handicapped Maria’s plan to “make herself a pension” in Spain. At the time of the interview, she had already been living in Spain for nine years. Almost four years more than she had needed to get entitled to a pension arriving there, and still missed about one year of contribution to the Spanish social security in order to achieve 15 years in total in both countries and be able to come back to Romania.

5.2. Gender, class, age and “Eastern-Europeanness” as factors of accumulation of vulnerabilities towards the Welfare states

Adopting an intersectional lens to look at the systemic and structural (as opposed to individual decisions and responsibilities) factors contributing to the fact that nowadays Romanian women navigate different European welfare systems to access state’s old age pension. The case of Maria shows how different markers of inequality have influenced her — and other women in a similar situation — position towards the systemic political and economic circumstances,

⁸ The role of stigmatizing discourses on Eastern Europeans in the exploitation of their care work and the process of creation of a new servant class within the European care chains has been further developed by the first author elsewhere (Kussy & Moll, 2023).

defining her opportunities to access social protection during her life. Thus, putting also at risk her prospects for social security in old age. In what follows, we take a closer look at typical heterogeneities like gender, social class, age and the migration status. Regarding the latter, we distinguish a more specific social construction of difference, related to Eastern European origins.

Maria's story shows how structural circumstances created by a given historical political decisions influenced her social protection opportunities as a woman from lower class, and subsequently as an aging woman and a migrant. From the very beginning her job opportunities were determined by her social class background, as her parents could not afford her studies, she had to start to work very young and, in a place, (factory) and position (unskilled worker) where she could not develop skills that could later allow her to have better professional opportunities in a dynamically changing capitalist market.

The economic transition from socialism to neoliberalism hit hard all workers who did not have important connections from the previous system, but women were affected especially as conservative gender discourses (re)emerged alongside the rhetoric of liberal economic transition. As Thelen et al., (2008, p. 7) explain, they constructed.

[...] home and kinship as the most authentic forum for care provision. In contrast to the socialist states that shared commitment to the emancipation of women through their full-time participation in the labour market and took over some caring responsibilities, the new discourses re-positioned women typically as careers rather than workers.

With their withdrawal from the “productive” sector, many working-class women, like Maria, just got disconnected from the formal social protection provision during the transition to the neoliberal state. A changed women's position in society and few social-protection opportunities for working-class people resurged in tandem with the vision of men as protectors and marriage as a social-protection strategy among the women and their families, and it is in this context when Maria started to dedicate herself to raising her child and take care of the home, without contributing to Social Security system. At that moment, women's participation in the labour market decreased significantly. According to Momete, (2008, p. 2520), in 2007, the employment rate computed for the ages range 15-64 was 53% for women (65% for men), while in 1989, for comparison, this number was of 80% for women of working age (Hardt & Kaufman, 1995). Considering the lack of the state's involvement in caring responsibilities, livelihood choices of women like Maria were also determined by the possibility (or the lack thereof) to count on their family's help with childcare. However, when their kids grew up and these women wanted to find employment, the discrimination by age at the labour market created obstacles for them, excluding those who are over 50 years old. In bars, shops, and factories where they could work as unskilled workers, they preferred to employ young workers.

Then, their vulnerabilities towards the welfare system (re)produced transnationally due to the character of work they are offered in Spain. The care work is a highly feminized and “ethnicized” sector. In Spain, 88,4% of the employees are women and around half of them have foreign origins, mostly from Latin America, but also from Eastern European countries. The number of aged workers in the sector has recently increased too (UGT, 2019).

Female migrants are perceived as “natural caregivers”, ready to do the reproductive, “women's job” and as exploitable, ready to perform the “dirty work” (Gottfried, 2013, p. 205; Rodríguez, 2014, p. 14). The type of work that most Romanian older females are offered in Spain

considerably limits their social-protection possibilities because of a high degree of informality and weak labour rights. They are “delegated” to these jobs by the Spanish labour market because of their gender: the belief that women care better and that it is “natural for them”; age, because they are less desired workers in other market niches and class, due to the lack of economic capital allowing to negotiate work conditions and lack of a specific unionization, and because of being from “peripheral” regions, in this case, Eastern Europe. Regarding their origin, being citizens of the EU, they do not have a problem with legalizing their residency and work, as it is the case for migrants from African and Latin American countries. However, they are discursively constructed by Spaniards, similarly as by Italians (Stefanelli, 2016, p. 76) as “more trust-worthy and clean” than others and as such are demanded as “better” care workers. In Spanish employers’ discourses, they come from a “poor country” so giving them a job is considered already making them a favor, what comes to justify not respecting domestic worker’s rights. In an unequal Europe divided into “core” UE countries and the “new member states”, division which overlaps with the dichotomy between “developed” and “developing countries”, stereotypes are embodied in the essentialist identity of the migrant allowing patronizing stance towards “the poor thing” from abroad (Gutierrez-Rodríguez, 2010, p. 113).

The discrimination in the highly feminized and “ethnicized” care sector comes also from the top of the system, the Spanish welfare state. Although their labour rights improved in recent years, domestic workers in Spain have bad working conditions and weak social security. In 2017, 51,6% of the domestic workers, mainly women, had part-time contracts (85% of them received a monthly salary lower than 717,2 euros), so their contribution base for old age pension is also low. Different studies showed that employees are exposed to labour abuses like too long working hours, not recognized real working hours in the contract, unpaid holidays, as well as sexual and mental harassment (Chulvi, 2019, p. 27). They are also discriminated by law, since domestic work is registered upon a Special Regime of Household Employees, as opposed to General Regime. Consequently, domestic workers do not benefit from the same rights (e.g., sick leave or unemployment subsidy) as other workers (León, 2010). Regarding the lack of rights to access unemployment benefits, in case of losing their job, this creates new contribution gaps in their labour history, and this happens often. Romanian migrants who do not have much negotiating power — no private capital, no husband, no family support, high costs of rent and maintenance, compared to what they have in Romania — are economically forced to accept those conditions, at least for some time, as they need any income they can get. Even their individual situation could differ considerably, in those circumstances; many of them, similarly to Maria, have problems getting a well-secure job, which would allow them to pay their contribution to the social security system. Around 30-40% of the domestic workers work in the underground economy (Chulvi, 2019, p. 26). Class and the status of migrants intersect here, as apart of lacking the economic capital, generally they are less aware of their rights in a foreign country, are worst organized, have weaker local social networks and so the pressure to accept any job, even the one which will not help them to “make themselves a pension”, is strong.

6. Conclusions

This article advanced the empirical debate on older migrants providing ethnographic evidence from interviews with an understudied collective: lower-class Eastern European female migrants prior to retirement age. The study revealed that in the European context, older migrants’ residence abroad can be related to social-protection arrangements, but not only to

their role as informal care receivers and caregivers in transnational families or to the retirement migration of those who move to countries of better climates and purchasing power for their pensions, as the existing literature on older migrants discloses. Regarding the herein-described women, it is related to their transnational strategy to secure a state pension and to provide for their own old age in the country of origin. To be precise, the article focuses on women below retirement age who did not achieve the minimum contribution period to be eligible for a pension in Romania. Unable to find work in their region, they decide to “make up” for the lacking years of contribution by working in Spain, to, later on, be able to secure a state pension in their native country.

Secondly, the study reveals the potential to understand TSP not only in the synchronic perspective describing simultaneous practices in transnational social spaces but also in a diachronic perspective of the life-course. This potential then supports the reasons why some Romanian lower-class late-in-life women develop TSP strategies trackable long before the migration. Delving into this question exposed their life trajectories against the background of historical circumstances, which truncated their lives both in Romania and Spain, as well as structural conditions of the welfare states in which their individual social-protection choices were made. This allowed for an in-depth analysis of the factors that, during their life, handicapped the possibilities for having an old-age pension in the future and hence the reasons that they try to secure their retirement by transnational arrangements. The life-course perspective enabled the analysis with respect to how different inequality markers, such as gender, social class, ethnicity, and age intersect at different moments in their lives as well as how they are impacted by vulnerabilities that accumulate and subsequently reproduce transnationally, thus determining social-protection opportunities in different European welfare states.

Thirdly, investigating life's trajectories of female migrants from a relatively new EU member state who travel to the older EU countries framed in its structural context has shown that older migrants TSP can be related to social inequalities experienced throughout the life-course. In line with other recent studies, this article has evidenced that “the EU cannot be understood as a neutral space of mobility where all EU citizens and long-term third countries residents are entitled to the same social rights” (Castellani, 2020, p. 11), but as a space producing and reinforcing inequalities. In line with other recent studies (Godin, 2020; Amelina et al., 2020), the paper shows how intra-EU migrants adopt tactics for shaping TSP from below in order to plug the loopholes of an incomplete EU transnational social welfare. For such a purpose, they rely on their transnational networks or organize politically. In this article, distancing from the (neo)liberal assumption that life opportunities are a consequence of merely individual choices, we showed them through intersectional lens, as historically constituted and mediated by social inequalities. This helps to explain how individual social-protection opportunities and strategies are “entangled” (Costa, 2018) in historical circumstances and determined by different inequality markers. A weak Romanian welfare state became a crucial institutional actor in the process of reproduction of the structural inequality which subordinates lower-class aging women pushing them, therefore, to emigrate. Simultaneously, research findings showed a concrete example of how inequalities (re)produce transnationally (Faist, 2019) and handicap cross-border formal social protection strategies of older migrants in Europe. In post-socialist Romania, gender, social class, and age conditioned social-protection possibilities of these women. In Spain, where they have better opportunities to be hired, those factors of vulnerability accumulate and (re)produce transnationally. Gender, class, and age intersected abroad with ethnicity; the fact they are from Eastern Europe, making these women structurally four-fold discriminated against. Hence, the same difference markers that generate social inequali-

ties continue to affect these women's social-protection opportunities in the Spanish context, too, and so delay their return.

Furthermore, it was found that older migrants social-protection choices have changeable character and are bound to future expectations, are dynamic and depend on the external circumstances (Hashimoto, 1996). The described cases showed that the changes produced in their strategies, thus, also circumscribed the social inequalities. In the case of female older migrants from lower social classes, obstacles to accessing formal social protection encourage informal arrangements, which do not guarantee their autonomy and social security beyond the economic sphere, but rather perpetuates gendered dependency. The paper contributes to the transnational social protection field with a timely focus on old age formal arrangements within the EU and use of life-course approach to better understand the reasons of related with social protection older migrant's im/mobilities.

Finally, the results of the study could be politically relevant as they illustrate the mechanism of social inequalities behind the reasons that some European older migrants currently reside abroad and increasing inequalities between EU's regions. Inequalities, which encourage intra-European migration flows from East to West of late-in-life migrants, are seen as one consequence of the model of the EU integration where free-market principals were unaccompanied by a striving for equal standards in basic social protection. In this model, different social security systems of the nation states are coordinated mainly to guarantee free movement, but it lacks fiscal policy and elements of a common pan-European social-protection system. In such a free movement Europe, the right not to move to be able to secure the future is not considered a value. Thus, the right to a minimum-existence benefit in all countries that would minimize this kind of migration flows is not secured by European laws. Therefore, the weak welfare systems of new member states, together with the EU law on social protection and the demand for caregivers in older EU countries result in new post-Wall, postponed-in-time, "undesired" migration to survive in old age. Conversely, in welfare states, such as Spain's, which substitute states expenditure on care provision with migrants' cheap work, often illegal and unprotected, long-term, and already older migrants are "trapped in mobility" forced to postpone their return to the country of their origin, as they cannot do so without securing their old age.

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