

Digital Environments and Return Migration Imaginaries: How Higher Education Migrants Envision Coming Back to Their Home Region

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Research Overview

This study examines how university students who migrated from a peripheral Russian region to the capital construct imaginaries of possible return, and what role digital information environments play in shaping these imaginaries. Findings inform evidence-based regional education and human-capital policies addressing youth out-migration in federal states worldwide.

Purpose of Study

Educational migration of youth from regional peripheries to capital and metropolitan centres is a worldwide phenomenon with substantial implications for regional development, demographic balance, and labour markets (Corcoran & Faggian, 2017; Faggian & McCann, 2009). In federal states such as Russia, Canada, Australia, China, and Brazil, donor regions consistently lose their most educationally mobile cohorts to a small number of elite urban centres (Gabbrakhmanov et al., 2019; Newbold, 2017). While quantitative studies, including digital-trace research on social media data, document the scale and direction of such flows, less is known about the subjective dimension of return: how educational migrants themselves imagine the possibility of returning to their region of origin, and how digital environments shape these imaginaries.

This question is particularly salient at a moment when young people’s life choices are increasingly mediated through social media platforms and messaging services (Chonka et al., 2023; Leurs & Smets, 2018). Algorithmically curated feeds, regional online communities, diaspora networks, and personalised information flows do not merely transmit information about places but actively co-construct what those places mean and what kinds of futures are imaginable in them (Salazar, 2011). Understanding this mechanism is critical for designing evidence-based regional policies aimed at increasing return migration of higher education graduates — a policy goal explicitly articulated in the Russian context (Ledeneva et al., 2023) and across comparable federal systems (Corcoran et al., 2010).

The study addresses two research questions: (1) How do higher education migrants from a regional periphery construct imaginaries of possible return to their home region? (2) What role does the digital information environment play in forming, sustaining, or eroding these imaginaries?

Research Methods

The study employs a qualitative research design with elements of digital ethnography. The empirical case is constructed around students from a large Siberian region (Krasnoyarsk Krai) studying at universities in Moscow — a typical configuration of regional out-migration to the capital that mirrors patterns observed in other federal states (Corcoran & Faggian, 2017).

Data are collected through 40–45 semi-structured in-depth interviews (50–70 minutes each), recruited through a regional youth diaspora community in Moscow, with supplementary snowball sampling beyond the community core to control for selection bias. Purposive sampling follows a contrastive-case logic across five axes: year of study, field of study, gender, declared intention to return, and degree of involvement in diaspora networks.

A distinctive methodological feature is the integration of a scroll-back / walk-through component (Robards & Lincoln, 2017): during interviews, informants navigate their own VKontakte and Telegram profiles, commenting on subscriptions and content streams related to their region of origin. This produces a triangulated dataset combining narrative accounts and observable digital traces.

The theoretical framework draws on migration imaginaries (Salazar, 2011; Carling, 2002), translocal belonging, and the connected migrant paradigm (Diminescu, 2008; Madianou & Miller, 2012), positioning digital environments as infrastructure that simultaneously sustains ties with the region of origin and constructs imaginaries of possible lives. Analysis follows reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), with subsequent typologisation of return imaginaries.

Results and Discussion

The expected outcome is a typology of return imaginaries among higher education migrants — tentatively three to five types differing in their content, temporal orientation, and the role of digital environments in their formation. Preliminary observations suggest the existence of a distinctive bilocal type: students who maintain strong digital ties with their home region while simultaneously embedded in metropolitan digital ecosystems, occupying an in-between position not captured by conventional migration typologies of stayers and leavers (Diminescu, 2008).

The study contributes to international scholarship in three ways. First, it offers an empirically grounded account of how digital environments mediate migration decisions among emerging adults in a federal state context, complementing dominant quantitative approaches (Faggian & McCann, 2009). Second, it bridges digital migration studies and education policy research, demonstrating how qualitative insight into mediated imaginaries can inform evidence-based regional policy. Third, it provides comparative leverage: the Russian case offers analytical purchase for understanding return migration dynamics in other federal contexts where peripheries lose graduates to dominant metropolitan centres (Corcoran & Faggian, 2017).

Findings carry direct implications for regional educational and human-capital policy: rather than competing with metropolitan labour markets on salary alone, regional policy can address the digital information ecology in which return decisions take shape — aligning

with the conference's emphasis on co-creating knowledge across cultural and territorial boundaries.

Keywords

educational migration; return migration; migration imaginaries; digital environments; regional education policy

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