

Migrant well-being after leaving transition economies

Evidence is mixed on whether quality of life improves for migrants from post-socialist economies

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ELEVATOR PITCH

Most comparative research suggests that immigrants from post-socialist countries earn less than natives, work in jobs for which they are overqualified, and may experience unhappiness compared with natives, other immigrants, and non-migrants. In contrast, one study presents causal evidence which shows that moving from transition economies to live in the West increases the incomes, life satisfaction, and freedom perceptions of those who move. Credibly assessing whether leaving transition economies improves movers' quality of life remains a challenging empirical question.

KEY FINDINGS

Pros

- ⊕ Post-socialist immigrants who are happy and productive abroad positively contribute to their home and destination countries.
- ⊕ Temporary migrants from “Eastern Partnership” countries investing in their skills before moving can increase their earnings upon return and constitute a “brain gain” for the sending countries.
- ⊕ One study shows a positive causal effect of migration on the well-being of those who leave transition economies to work and live in the West.

Cons

- ⊖ Few studies credibly assess the well-being consequences of leaving transition economies, and the evidence focuses mainly on experiences in the West.
- ⊖ Post-socialist immigrants earn less than natives in Europe, though the earnings gap could decrease over time.
- ⊖ Post-socialist immigrants often experience occupational downgrading or “skill waste” in the destination countries.
- ⊖ Migrant happiness in the destination countries may decline over time due to rising aspirations or adaptation, or if migrants compare themselves to high-earning natives.

AUTHOR'S MAIN MESSAGE

Post-socialist migrants can contribute positively to social outcomes at home and abroad. Recent research finds that leaving transition economies leads to improvements in income, life satisfaction, and freedom perceptions. However, the comparative evidence is mixed and suggests that immigrants from transition economies have worse labor market outcomes than natives and certain immigrant groups. Policymakers need to consider the material and emotional well-being of immigrants from transition economies and reduce the barriers to labor market integration, as there can be potential “win-win” situations if migrants are happier and more productive abroad.

