

# Regional Policies for Sustainable Attractivity of the Euregio

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## ABSTRACT:

In the literature, quality of life is increasingly emphasised as a determinant for the location choice of highly qualified individuals. There is no doubt that the Euregio, which is ecologically, economically, and culturally rich, offers great potential for the settlement of highly qualified professionals. Statistical data show an increasing rate of migration from the Trentino-South Tyrol region in the last 10 years. In this research, causal factors are identified that encourage highly qualified professionals to move out of or settle in the Euregio. The importance of sustainable, attractive communities for their decision-making is identified.

Methods of the research mixed methods in exploratory design starting with open interviews with out-migrants, in-migrants, and return migrants.

Results of the qualitative data collection: High quality of life is not the primary determinant for staying in the Euregio<sup>1</sup>. The economic aspect has no clear primary relevance in the decision to leave, but it does in the decision to migrate and return. Closed mentality and cultural realities have a notable influence on the emigration of highly qualified professionals. A series of sustainable recommendations for action can be presented. Their implementation is necessary on a political and primarily a societal or community level.

*Keywords: 'quality of life and migration'; 'Euregio migration data'; 'professional workers in the Euregio'; 'sustainable attractivity in Alpine area'*

## 1. Introduction

Since early history, the Alps have been one of the most popular transit points between Central and Southern Europe and thus also an important cultural contact zone. Located in the heart of Europe, the Euregio<sup>1</sup> links the region of Trentino/South Tyrol (Italy, Northern Italy), and the province of Tyrol (Austria). The three Euregio member countries share a common history with numerous geographical, economic, and cultural factors. (EVTC 'European Region Tyrol-South Tyrol-Trentino', 2022). Living in the provinces of Trentino, South Tyrol, and Tyrol means living where other people go on holiday. The unique mountain landscapes, the different cultural diversity, and the social, ecological, and economic aspects offer a great potential to experience a high level of quality of life. In the economic literature, quality of life and well-being is increasingly emphasised as determinants for the location choices of highly qualified individuals and households (Diamond, 2016). There is no doubt that Euregio offers great potential for attracting highly skilled professionals. But the question arises why the migration of young, highly educated,

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The research project was co-financed by the European Union - ESF REACT-EU, PON Research and Innovation 2014-2020;

and highly qualified professionals from the Euregio, which provides such great potential ecologically, economically, and culturally, has increased enormously in recent years. What motivates highly qualified professionals to migrate to the Euregio and what sustainable and coherent recommendations for action for a sustainable attractiveness of the Euregio can be defined?

This article first discusses the topic of sustainability and the definition of brain drain. It then explains the research method and objectives. It then presents the main findings of the study on quality of life and identifies some determinants of brain drain, immigrant, and return migration. Finally, the conclusions to be drawn from the results are presented in order to propose some sustainable and coherent regional policy recommendations for action.

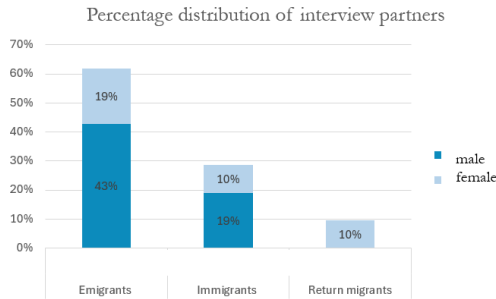
In 1987, the United Nations Brundtland Commission defined sustainability as 'meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.' The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, adopted by all United Nations Member States in 2015, provides a shared blueprint for peace and prosperity for people and the planet, now and into the future. At its heart are the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which are an urgent call for action by all countries - developed and developing - in a global partnership (UN, 2015). The ultimate goal of sustainable development is to ensure a better quality of life for all, both present and future generations, through responsible economic growth, equitable social progress, and effective environmental protection. These three dimensions relate to a sustainable society (Cavagnaro, 2017, p. 2-3). There is no doubt that the phenomenon of brain drain, i.e. the emigration and immigration of highly qualified professionals, influences the achievement of some sustainability goals (Usman et al., 2022; Desmond, 2020) and, conversely, the non-achievement of sustainable developments could influence the emigration, immigration or return migration of highly qualified professionals in their decision-making. For the successful implementation of the 2030 Agenda and the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), it is essential to take advantage of the existing knowledge of the many conflicting goals and the existing interactions to make targeted interventions at the local, national, and global level (Herlyn & Lévy-Tödter, 2019, pp. 3-4). Migration, or brain drain, is a global and complex phenomenon. Scientists have always traveled from one country to another in search of new scientific knowledge and more favorable living and working conditions. However, the debate about the economic impact of the brain drain only began to play a role in economic analysis and public opinion in the 1960s (Feld, 2021 pp. 23-26). The term brain drain is used as a synonym for the mobility of human capital (OECD, 2017). Extracted, the word "brain" refers to competencies, skills, and abilities that are potential capital. Drain implies that the churn rate is higher than normal (Bushnell, & Choy 2001). The word drain is considered in various disciplines as a derivation or outflow, which is close to the outflow of highly skilled professionals. The empirical literature review on brain drain yields a comprehensive literature review (Giannoccolo, 2009; Gibson, & McKenzie, 2012) and dates back to the 1950s. The literature primarily focuses on various social or economic dimensions such as international or national migration, human capital, post-war migration, illegal migration, political migration, and occupational migration. Giannoccolo, (2009) in his elaborated literature review on brain drain has elicited and compared the different definitions and aspects after

1981 and states that in the first definition (1981) brain drain refers to migration from poorer countries to richer countries. In 1982, brain drain resulted from the causal factor of a transfer of technology, and the search for new, promising opportunities. In 1992, on the other hand, the cause relates to significant differences in salaries, research facilities, and an oversupply of specialised graduates in less developed countries. The hypothesis that highly qualified professionals migrate for economic reasons is still very close today. In 1997, the motivation of a brain drain expands to include social and political differences between poor and rich countries (Giannoccolo, 2009). It should be noted that the very different definitions of brain drain describe outflows of highly skilled or educated individuals (Resources Information Center-ERIC), but also of academic individuals (Subbotin & Aref, 2021), and so the question of what should be defined as highly skilled professionals need to be addressed. No convincing explanation and definition can be found in the literature, for example, the term highly qualified professionals very often refer to the level of education, while others include diverse qualifications, competencies, and talents (Kofler et al., 2020 p. 3), but the term talent is also assigned very different characteristics (Gallardo-Gallardo, Dries, & González-Cruz, 2013; Skuza, Woldu & Alborz, 2022). The language around brain drain has continued to change and expand with more terms and definitions. One important phenomenon is the concept of brain circulation. What is new is that brain circulation could replace brain drain versus brain gain in a globalised, knowledge-based world. Brain circulation is understood as the movement of highly qualified people between different countries and institutions and the related acquisition of knowledge but also the sharing and dissemination of their knowledge. Brain circulation is one of the most important factors in stimulating economic growth and promoting the competitiveness of countries (Daugeliene & Marcinkeviciene, 2009). Moreover, brain return is an integral part of the brain drain debate. In an important study on brain return, Glaser (1978) shows that the willingness to return to the home country is very strong among highly qualified professionals who work or study abroad (Glaser, 1978). However, the question arises whether this episteme is still valid today. As already mentioned, brain drain is a worldwide phenomenon that also affects Euregio. According to the Eurostat database (2023), a total of 158,312 people migrated from Italy and 67,299 people from Austria in 2021 (Eurostat, 2023). More than half of the Italian out-migration comes from the north of Italy. The highest emigration rate in 2021 is in the region of Trentino/South Tyrol (ISTAT, 2023). The province of Tyrol records a total emigration of 20,780 persons in 2022 (Statistik Austria, 2023). Due to the topicality of the issue, an in-depth analysis of the causal factors of the emigration of highly qualified skilled workers is essential.

## **2. Research method and research objectives**

The selected method of the research project is a mixed-methods, exploratory design, starting with open interviews with highly skilled professionals who have migrated out of the Euregio, migrated in, or migrated back to the Euregio after having migrated out. The research project aims to identify the causal factors of out-migration, in-migration, or return-migration of highly qualified professionals and to develop recommendations for action for sustainable community development. The sample of the study is composed of

twenty-one open interviews with eight highly qualified women and thirteen highly qualified men. The percentage distribution of interviewees is shown in the following chart.



The highly qualified professionals were recruited according to the 'snowball principle' and had emigrated from the Euregio for at least two years or had immigrated to or returned to the Euregio. It should be noted that the snowball principle is inherently associated with the risk of over- or under-representation of individual groups of people (Faist, 2020). To reduce systematic gaps concerning the heterogeneity of the field, interviewees were asked to address 'multifaceted cases' and, if possible, to name the selection of certain case types, which range either to the samples of typical, extreme, intensive, or critical cases (Schreier, 2010, p. 243; Flick et al., 2022, p. 291)

In this study, the term highly qualified professional refers to the criterion of educational level. The interview participants have at least a Bachelor's degree. The qualitative data were analysed using qualitative content analysis according to Kuckartz and Rädiker (2022). The data analysis was carried out according to an open, explorative procedure and in the form of a topic-oriented and analytical, inductive category formation (Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2022, p. 56). The full transcriptions were made according to the transcription recommendations (ibid., pp. 200-201). The inductive category formation of the material, the hierarchical category development with category definition, and the coding were carried out in MAXQDA (2022). This report shows the first results of the qualitative part of the research project and was approved by the ethics committee.

### 3. Results

#### 3.1 Quality of life and well-being

Quality of life and well-being is increasingly emphasised as determinants of highly skilled individuals' location choices (Diamond, 2016). The sample of the present study revealed that out-migrants rate the quality of life in the Euregio as very high, which can be decoded as follows:

"Yes the quality of life is of course top, I would say, yes the quality of life is a big plus." (Interview female A7)

"The quality of life is extremely high, it is extremely high, whether it is the offer that South Tyrol has, that is especially in this mix, it is very rare in the world with the high quality and therefore, and therefore it also has a certain attraction and that also remains." (Interview, male A8).

"The quality of life is very high [...] It is of course the attractiveness of a country." (Interview, male A3).

Quality of life and life satisfaction are closely coherent. According to OECD (2023), Italians rate general life satisfaction on a scale of 0 to 10 with an average score of 6.5. Austrian citizens rate an average score of 7.2. The OECD average score for the EU is 6.7, so it can be stated that life satisfaction in Italy is rated somewhat lower than that in Austria and the EU (OECD, 2023). Bausch & Tauber (2023) confirm this result in a locally conducted study on the subjective perception of quality of life in South Tyrol. The result showed that more than 60 percent of South Tyroleans are satisfied or completely satisfied with their past and present life (Bausch & Tauber, 2023). Thus, it could be assumed that the Euregio is a great attraction for highly qualified professionals due to its high quality of life, and its attractiveness. The sample showed that the quality of life is also perceived as high by immigrants, but at the same time as very cost-intensive in terms of housing prices and the general cost of living.

"The quality is good, in these two-three years maybe it has become very expensive, very, very (laughs)." (Interview, male, Z5)

"one of the most negative points is the housing situation the cost of living and this is a big problem for everyone." (Interview, male, Z6)

The World Health Organisation defined quality of life in 1995 as 'an individual's perception of their position in life in the context of the culture and value systems in which they live and in relation to their goals, expectations, standards and concerns' (WHO, 1995). Quality of life and well-being are often used as synonyms, but it is advisable to distinguish between material living conditions, which include income, working and living conditions, from the concept of quality of life, as these include subjective aspects of well-being, aspects such as health status or social relationships (Bericat, & Jiménez-Rodrigo, 2019, pp. 51-53)

The sample showed that return migrants perceive the existing quality of life of Euregio differently and much lower. This can be decoded in the extract below as follows:

"the quality of life of what? (emphasises this a lot) So I can go to the mountain?" (Interview, female, R2)

"on the surface everything looks so fancy because there is more than in other regions so much or the province as a whole the façade is seen as so important, but behind the façade is just, this is a new poverty that we've had for years and it's going to get worse." (Interview, female, R1).

For example, in 2020, the population at risk of poverty or social exclusion is 11 percent in the province of South Tyrol and 13 percent in the province of Trentino (ASTAT, 2023). A considerable proportion assumes that the region is defined as a "country of prosperity" (Interview, male, A3).

The quality of life "for those who live here" is perceived differently

"because I don't have to pay for the fantastic landscape, it belongs to all of us, but by now we are at the point where we have to pay." (Interview, female, R2).

It can be stated

"that more and more people cannot participate, this is increasing and not decreasing and we are not doing anything about it, we are reducing the resources for the areas instead of building up the resources." (Interview, female, R2)

Although financial resources are available, little is invested in the social sector, culture, and small-scale arts.

"to make this a liveable, well to make this a liveable region." (Interview, female, R2).

The determinants of social inequality (SDG-10), life on land (SDG-15), and interrelated climate protection (SDG-13) are identified as factors of impaired quality of life.

"Something else that is very important to me, something I have suffered from since I was a child, I find this industrialised agriculture and this aggressive agriculture an imposition, yes, and we are a total taillight in terms of organic farming [...] So there, I find that quite sad." (Interview, female, R2).

The excerpt from this interview represents the interaction between the bio-based economy, the 2030 Agenda, and the so-called paradigm of strong sustainability (Bennich et al., 2021). It impressively shows that while gross domestic product (GDP) is suitable as a single indicator to capture economic activity, it is not suitable as a measure of people's material well-being (OECD, 2023).

"all the money has not done us any good, we have not managed it well in terms of the essential issues that make up life and that is social and that is culture and that is not more money." (Interview, female, R2)

### **3.2 Push factors or causal factors of highly skilled brain drain**

The present study has shown that the reasons for the emigration of highly qualified skilled workers are multifactorial. Viewed segmentally, the determinants can be attributed to socio-cultural, educational, labour market policy, and personal reasons.

The sample revealed that the decision to leave can be linked to the need for self-fulfillment.

"the realisation I need to do something else." (Interview, male, A3)

"I knew relatively early on that I was going to leave. I have always been interested in going somewhere else." (Interview, male, A1)

Another reason for leaving is shown by the fact that not all fields of study are offered in the region.

"...I couldn't have studied (anonymised) here." (Interview, female, R1)

"that not all education is offered here in the country (anonymised). I think the main reason is really the training, that you have to go away." (Interview, male, Z2)

The need to gain personal or professional experience represented another factor of emigration.

"you get new insights, you learn new things, so from that point of view it certainly makes sense." (Interview, female, A9)

"if I only stayed in the same place, you would only ever stay in the same babbel and so it certainly makes sense to gain some experience." (Interview, female, A9)

The empirical data have illustrated that, on the one hand, culture is seen as a great "cultural treasure" (Interview, male, A3), but its positive benefits are often not recognised by society. The traditional cultural asset is perceived as "something special" (Interview, male, A3), and cultural diversity is an advantage. On the other hand, the determinants of culture, cultural

assets, and tradition are seen as enormously constricting factors and are often brought into coherence with a closed mentality.

The closed mentality can be decoded under the following statements:

"living unbelievably in a bubble" (Interview, female, A6);

"one is not quite open to the world" as "narrow-mindedness" (Interview, male, A5);

"closed [...] as a small island" (Interview, male, Z5) or

"Yes, the bubble is already there here [...] always and, you just don't move beyond it" or "the opening, the mental opening [...] has not yet taken place" (Interview, female, Z3).

UNESCO defines culture 'as the set of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features of society or a social group, that encompasses, not only art and literature, but lifestyles, ways of living together, value systems, traditions, and beliefs' (UNESCO, 2001, p. 3). This definition of culture is very closely linked to the way societies, groups, and communities define their identity. The US anthropologists Alfred Louis Kroeber and Clyde Kluckhohn collected around 160 different definitions of the term culture as early as 1952. The term culture could be understood as a system of orientation that is formed from specific symbols and is learned and passed on in the respective society. It influences the perception, thinking, values, and actions of all its members who feel they belong to a society (Hoppe & Heinze, 2016 p. 7-17). If culture, tradition, and a closed mentality cause an "external narrowness" or "constriction" (excerpts Interview, female, R2), this phenomenon can be evaluated as a cause of migration that should not be underestimated. According to Carlos Chavez et al. (2022) cultural values can play an active or passive role in their decision to migrate to another country (Carlos Chavez et al., 2022) and can be decoded as follows:

"to leave for the first time, to break out of this sadness (tristezza), it was very conventional, very conservative for a young woman, no room for maneuver, so an extreme constriction also in my creativity, in my being a woman, I had the feeling that it is extreme, also because of this Catholicism that is strongly controlled, so as a young woman you are immediately judged, so I grew up in a small village, so that, that I had an urge for freedom, I wanted to get out and simply discover the world." (Interview, female, R2)

It can be stated that conservatism is clearly one of the push factors (Slibar et al., 2023). As the concept of culture is closely intertwined with power struggles, group negotiations, social structures, and prevailing ideologies (Ahmed & Mao, 2017, p. 5), it can be argued that the socio-cultural aspects of the migration process have become increasingly important (Faist, 2020 pp.13-24).

"What I found most difficult here was that there was no public space for alternative lifestyles, women and men were very controlled in their options and it was simply important for me to be able to experience new horizons" (Interview, female, R2).

A major factor in migration was the need for diversity in social structures.

"The greatest desire to experience diversity in social structures and social patterns. I somehow see the biggest limitation in South Tyrol, that it has really not yet been accepted that most of the population can feel comfortable here and lead their lives

in an orderly way. But there is still a part of the population that feels oppressed or where you think it's too much, too regulated, too traditional, too tradition-oriented." (Interview, male, A3)

Thus, the reasons for emigration can be assigned to "individual, intrinsic reasons that were very strongly influenced by biography", which are coherent with social, cultural, conservative stereotyping and stigmatisation.

The fact that in a "system that is relatively rigid and tends to pigeonhole you relatively quickly, where you can't get out very quickly" (excerpts Interview, male, A3), which is possibly due to the "conservative country" (Interview, male, A8).

"So I didn't have the impression that I could live out the homosexual tendencies so easily in my public life. But I had the urge for a situation, which gave me a certain anonymity and where I have the impression that I can be what I want, without relatives, neighbors and work colleagues and friends judging it." (Interview, male, A3).

This interview extract represents the fact that general society still allows very little leeway in the acceptability of alternative sexuality. Heteronormative hegemony manifests itself through psychological abuse such as social rejection or ridicule in public, which can trigger self-doubt and feelings of inferiority in those affected (Sen et al., 2021).

It was found that at the time of emigration, the causal factor of emigration

"could not be put into words at all"

and the awareness was only perceived retrospectively.

"...and this term "Fuga dei Cervelli" (Brain drain) did not apply so much as [...] I felt more in fuga (run away) from, my situation, that is, somehow, which determined my life far too closely, that is, somehow, and where I simply no longer saw any possibilities for development. I somehow found that the most, that is the most meaningful and the reason for my migration." (Interview, male, A3)

This interview extract represents a part of social injustice and a significant cause of emigration. The study has shown that this is not an isolated case, but a widespread phenomenon that has been very little addressed in the context of studies of the causes of emigration. The economics community is very much engaged with the brain drain argument, but little effort has been made to understand how a seemingly private aspect of life - that of sexuality - quantitatively influences people's emigration decisions and how this phenomenon of the so-called gay brain drain should be addressed in social policy terms (Suen & Chan, 2021). The phenomenon of gay brain drain has a major impact on SDG number 10 on reducing inequality and a significant impact on SDG number 8 on decent work and economic growth.

The definitions of brain drain, such as that of the thesaurus of the Education Resources Information Center-ERIC, which defines emigration 'as the loss of highly skilled or educated persons from one country, region, institution, or job sector to another, for better pay, improved living conditions, expanded opportunities' (ERIC), could not be fully confirmed.

The sample has shown that the economic factor is not a primary determinant of emigration. However, the economic factor can be an influencing factor for return migration or immigration.



Thus, the interview excerpts below show that the causal factors are not primarily due to the economic aspect.

"...I'm not even talking about the salary ... like I said I'm not talking about the salary, it's secondary." (Interview, female, A4)

"it's not about the financial aspect ... that the economic reason is not the main reason." (Interview, male, G1).

According to Eurostat, the average income of Austrian citizens in 2023 is 31,443 euros per year, while in Italy the average income is 18,592. In comparison, the average income in neighboring Switzerland is 45,405 (Eurostat, 2024) and shows a relatively high divergence. However, the sample showed that due to other different causal co-factors of emigration, for example.

"the career opportunities abroad are just higher and you immediately translate that into financial compensation" (Interview, male A8).

In fact, however, the economic aspect plays a significant role in the immigration or return of highly qualified skilled workers. This can be explained by the fact that salary levels are sometimes higher abroad and are consistent with

"the high cost of living and the high housing prices in the Euregio" (Interview B2, Z2, Z4, Z5).

If for potential return migrants

"the whole financial framework is far below what you are used to abroad, then it very much becomes a problem" (Interview, male, A5)

"What we have been seeing lately and I actually almost only manage to hire people from outside the European Union because they are the only ones who agree with the economic conditions we can offer. People from South Tyrol are not interested at all in what we can offer anyway." (Interview, male, Z4)

Woosik, (2021) shows in a study that middle-income countries have a higher brain drain compared to high-income countries (Woosik, 2021).

The historically developed linguistic diversity in South Tyrol can be described as a strength and a "cultural treasure" in the sample, but it also has negative aspects of high significance. On the one hand, living in a region where three language groups are settled can influence the decision to migrate and can be decoded in the following statements:

"I come from a mixed-language household, we speak Italian at home, and this political atmosphere got on my nerves at the time and this perceived segregation." (Interview, male, A8)

On the other hand, immigrants assess the coexistence of the three language groups as divergent. By assigning language groups in educational institutions, linguistic group assignments are already formed. It can be critically stated that the social inclusion of immigrants is deficient.

"Normally they are groups of German-speaking or Italian-speaking friends and you have to make enough effort to get in, to socialise, because these groups are already formed." (Interview, male, Z6)

Even if immigrants have been living in the Euregio for more than a decade, society calls them "Straniero"(Stranger/foreigners) (Interview, male, Z6).

"you arrive as an outsider and I think for many foreigners this is a problem an obstacle". (Interview, male, Z6)

"This division between groups is still there and then if you arrive, as I said, as a foreigner, from outside." (Interview, male, Z6)

It becomes apparent that

"the welcoming culture is difficult (Interview, male, Z4) or

"The welcoming culture is very young" (Interview, male, A3)

"In any case, one must somehow see to it that one promotes the social willingness for integration and understands that society cannot function here without the integration of workers from abroad, because otherwise the system cannot be kept alive, it must simply be clear to people." (Interview, male, Z4).

Return migrants confirm these statements

"we make it difficult for them to come in, instead of saying great that you are coming, we need this exchange, they are always called strangers. We need these qualified people and we treat them as if they were strangers and that's what I see, yes, but that's a long story here in South Tyrol, we really, really, really have a problem (laughs) with the attitude, that's an attitude in South Tyrol, now you may still be happy that you get a job here in South Tyrol". (Interview, female, R2)

The attitude towards immigrants can be seen as discriminatory and is congruent with the following interview excerpts:

"also sometimes feels like a second-class citizen here." (Interview, male, Z4).

"You are a third for this group." (Interview, male, Z6).

Measures for integration should be

"an honestly conceived welcome culture based on solidarity, which takes into account the humanitarian emergencies throughout Europe and where the political and social will really apply, i.e. to integrate people and not to assimilate or not to tolerate them, but to really understand them as part of society." (Interview, male, A3).

Language communities offer the possibility of constructing language ideologies and social identities (Morgan, 2014, p. 2) and have grown historically in the province of South Tyrol, they can be described as particularly pronounced. Language communities can be defined as an advantage, as they describe the high identity with the land. The sample has shown that a closed language community can be seen as a disadvantage if the community allows little inclusion. This finding is described by emigrants, return migrants, but especially by immigrants who experience insufficient integration in the community. However, the disintegration of highly skilled immigrants has resulted in the positive development of communities of practice in some areas of work. Communities of practice are groups of people who share a common concern or passion for something, learn together, and aim to develop something by interacting regularly (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner 2015).

The lack of inclusion of immigrants is not only attributed to the language group assignments but also to a fundamental attitude toward immigrants. Critically, discrimination and marginality could be assumed.

"These are almost like two parallel worlds and these parallel worlds, there are not so many borders drawn in the sense of Italian and German, but rather native South Tyrolean and not native South Tyrolean, the rest of the world I would describe the two groups and how I perceive them." (Interview, male, Z4)

The sample has revealed, that not all disciplines and fields are offered on the labour market in the Euregio and highly qualified professionals make the decision to leave the Euregio due to this fact in order to get an adequate job opportunity for their skills and talents.

The fact that the foreign labour market, on the one hand, provides "several different offers" (Interview, female, A7) and "opportunities" (Interview, male, A10) is another determinant for emigration, but in contrast, it is a reduction for immigrants to the Euregio and influences the career opportunities of immigrants to the Euregio.

Thus, the analysis of the qualitative data material shows that:

"it is easier to make a career abroad" and "there are few job offers or opportunities for promotion in certain areas." (Interview, female, A7), and

"so, if someone wants to make a bit of a career and doesn't have a party card, then you just have to go somewhere else, don't you?" "When I look back, I would not have achieved that in Euregio." (Interview, male, A8).

The assumption that it is advantageous for career advancement in the region to have political network connections can also be decoded by the following interview excerpt,

"There is still a certain "friendship economy" involved" (Interview, male, A2)

### 3.3 Reasons for immigration and return

The sample has shown that the reasons for immigration and return migration are very homogeneous. For example, potential or an existing job offer is a primary factor for the immigration of highly skilled professionals, which is related to the possibility of a new work experience and is often used as a "stepping stone" (Interview, male, Z4) to international job opportunities.

"the vast majority are people from outside the European Union, because they are the only ones who are interested in creating a stepping stone to the EU in the first place, so to speak". (Interview, male, Z4)

"The springboard was the position offered here, which appealed to me as a leadership position, so to speak, which is an area where I have actually worked for years, where I also had the corresponding expertise" (Interview, male, Z2).

The sample showed that the immigrants had neither known nor seen the country and the place of work before the job offer.

"there was a vacancy at the institution 1 (anonymised) [...] I had never been to the country before. My parents don't walk, so I didn't know how beautiful it is here." (Interview, female, Z3)

"By chance, I discovered an advertisement from a named institute (anonymised). At that time, I didn't even know where the place (anonymised) was called and I first had to find out what this place was all about and then I came here physically to understand what the region was like because I really had no idea at all." (Interview, male, Z4).

The secondary reason for immigration is relationship reasons

"I came here because of my boyfriend." (Interview, female, Z1).

The sample showed that the primary reasons for return migration are social-family relationships.

#### 4. Discussion-Conclusion

The global project of the 2030 Agenda with its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to promote sustainable peace, prosperity, and protection of the planet requires a holistic view and requires individual, societal, organizational, and political interventions to promote a decent life in an appreciative society today and in the future (Caradonna, 2014 p. 31-33). The present microanalysis has shown that the phenomenon around brain drain, brain gain, brain circulation, and brain return can influence the achievement of the SDGs. Talented and creative individuals are a crucial resource for the knowledge transfer process and a key element for regional sustainable and innovative growth (Giannoccolo, 2015). The sample has shown that the highly rated quality of life and well-being in the Euregio is neither a decisive determinant for the out-migration, nor for the in-migration of highly qualified professionals for the choice of location. The economic aspect is not clearly decisive for the decision to leave the Euregio, nevertheless, more detailed economic comparisons and analyses should form the basis for future local research. However, the economic factor is a significant factor in the decision to immigrate and must be taken into account due to the high cost of living and housing (especially in the province of South Tyrol). Cultural conditions, tradition, and an associated closed mentality of society have a remarkable influence on the emigration of highly qualified professionals. The country, which is described as "conservative in character", influences the diversity of social structures and does not allow much for alternative life plans or alternative sexuality or diversity. Stigmatisation, stereotyping, and social inequality are among the causes of the emigration of highly qualified professionals. It is necessary to launch targeted studies on the migration of sexual minorities and to set socio-political, educational, and social interventions. In a time of globally unequal sexual landscapes, the question of what the consequences of non-inclusive policies and practices at the societal level are on the retention or migration of highly skilled professionals from sexual minorities needs to be addressed. This question is particularly topical as the global development of sexual rights is very uneven. The question should be explored what consequences such migration has for the economy of the country of origin and the host country. Last but not least, the question of what should happen when and if sexual minority migrants would return to their country of origin should be addressed. There is an urgent need to integrate demographic and gender approaches in migration studies (Suen & Chan, 2021). One determinant of emigration is the often deficient career opportunities. It must be recommended that highly qualified professionals be offered career opportunities in the Euregio. There is no doubt that talent must be promoted, especially as Euregio is undergoing significant demographic change. Current and future socio-political challenges also include combating poverty and promoting the participation of the population in the social community. The study shows that urgent interventions in bio-based agriculture are needed. Regional social policy and targeted interventions are highly needed in the inclusion of highly skilled immigrants (immigrants in general). A welcoming culture should be promoted. Strengthening the community dimension and building welcoming communities are needed in rural areas to promote social participation (Sampedro & Camarero, 2018). In terms of regional policy, the positive effects of "brain circulation" should be viewed and exploited. Locating talent in advanced countries could help improve a country's

productivity by sharing advanced technologies and skills with their counterparts in the motherland. Therefore, policymakers are required to consider strategies to harness talent located abroad (Woosik, 2021). It is recommended to continue to monitor and research the phenomenon around brain drain, brain gain, brain return, and brain circulation. The implementation of sustainable and coherent strategies is crucial at the local, institutional, societal, political, and individual levels. A high level of participation of all stakeholders could be supportive of the implementation of interventions to make Euregio resilient, competitive, attractive, and sustainable.

### Limitations

However, the present qualitative study also has limitations, so it must be noted that the findings and conclusions drawn from the qualitative data may not be fully transferable to all highly qualified professionals migrating from or to the Euregio and the specific experiences and motivations of the interviewees may not reflect the general dynamics or experiences of other highly qualified professionals. The quantitative evaluation of the questionnaire currently being analysed may provide further specific results.

The interviews were conducted in German or Italian and translated by the author.

### Acknowledgments

The research project was realised with co-funding from the European Union - ESF REACT-EU, PON Research and Innovation 2014-2020' and with the kind support of "Südtiroler Sparkasse"

### Conflict of interest

The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest.

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