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University of Glasgow

School of Social and Political Sciences

Urban Studies

Freelance creative workers' adaptation to the international mobility. Case of  
professionals from Belarus

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## **Abstract**

This dissertation work was an attempt to clarify the benefits and effects of the freelance creative work in the context of the international mobility. The author also tried to uncover the strategies applied by the creative freelance workers to cope with the negative consequences caused by the freelance type of the work and their motivations towards being active in global mobility. The research was focused on professionals originally from Belarus that allowed to examine the influence of the national and/or post-Soviet background on the professional success. The dissertation methods included interviews with creative professionals and focus groups with students from the Belarusian universities. The findings showed a strong influence of the origin of the creative freelance workers on their professional pathways. The work nuanced existing literature about the role of the city amenities as determinants of the creative class representatives' international mobility and dependence between mobility and creativity. This also contributed to the debates about migrating creative workers as a resource of investments into a country of origin.

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# 1. Introduction

The research's aim is to uncover the benefits and negative effects of freelance employment for creative workers in the conditions of international mobility. The author is also interested in the reasons and influences that contribute to the creative workers' choice towards the freelance type of employment and active international mobility.

The focus of the study is on the people brought up in Belarus – a post-socialistic and post-Soviet Eastern European country with a current non-democratic political regime. Apart from the themes of **'freelance employment'** and **'international mobility'**, this situation adds the third theme of **'national background'** with an attempt to find out how such a specific origin impacts on the professional self-realisation of the creative freelance workers. The research examines how they make the transition from educationally, professionally and socially limited post-Soviet conditions to the status of global workers.

The growing role of freelance work demands more attention to this type of employment. Creative highly-skilled work has a long tradition of independent and 'non-standard' employment. The knowledge obtained in the research can be applied to current creative professionals. The research will help students and university alumni enter the profession less stressful or decide whether they are able to start independent working after the university. The international freelancers' mobility is perceived as one of the resources for the city developments and attracts more attention from the governments. So the work can be useful for the policy-makers trying to deal with the growing number of international creative freelance workers and opportunities they can bring with themselves.

The research will prepare educators to provide students with techniques for the freelance adaptation. Employers can take the results of the research in order to organize collaboration with freelancers more effective, especially what concerns employees with a post-Soviet background. Participants of the research are current or future creative professionals. The outcomes of the research will help them to understand how to cope with this effects of the freelance employment better.

Undertaking this study the author was inspired by the growing role of freelance work at a global level that suggests the need for greater academic attention to this type

of employment in the context of the global mobility of new and future generations of workers from post-Soviet countries such as Belarus. Creative workers, engaged in visual arts and design appear to be early adopters of this emerging form of employment. Moreover, they are able to switch from standard to freelance type quite promptly or even combine them successfully. The second reason for the study emerged from the potential of creative freelance workers to be highly mobile professionals and the image of them as very global people who migrate internationally due to work or use their mobility as a source of creativity. The last, third point of inspiration, related to the personal connections of the author with a number of creative freelance workers from Belarus who migrate internationally and realise their working opportunities despite, or perhaps, thanks to, their Eastern European post-Soviet origin.

The mobility of creative professionals attracted academic attention in recent decades. It was greatly contributed to the popularity of the concept of ‘creative class’, developed by Richard Florida (2002). Authors are focused on motivations of the creative workers and different factors that contribute to the decision to migrate internationally (Hansen & Niedomysl, 2009; Martin-Brelot et al., 2010; Sánchez-Moral, 2017). Highly mobile creative freelancers are analysed within the categories of ‘digital nomads’ and ‘Eurostars’ (Favell, 2008; Reichenberg, 2018) that can be intriguing to apply to our sample of the creative freelance workers from Belarus. The country is nearly out of focus among the academics researching the migration of the creative freelance workers. The data mostly concerns Russia and Ukraine as the most significant migration origins (Bronzino, 2015; Fedyuk & Kindler, M., 2016; Pikulicka-Wilczewska & Uehling, 2017). Recent analyses are mainly based on quantitative data from the open sources and our research, which is based on qualitative methods, can make a contribution into a more detailed picture of the motives, circumstances, effects, that are shaped by the Belarusian origin of freelance creative workers.

The study comprises a literature review, where the author analyses the works describing highly mobile workers, creative freelance workers and creative class migrants from the Eastern European region. The methodology of the study is based on a qualitative approach and includes semi-structured interviews with the professionals and online focus groups with current or recent students of design and fine art studies at Belarusian universities. Thematic analysis is applied to three main themes of the

research and its results are presented in three subchapters of the Findings. The results' correlation with the literature on the freelance type of employment, creative workers' international mobility and Eastern European migration are presented in the Discussion. The last chapter describes the main conclusions of the work, its limitations, implications and potential development in the future.



## **2. Literature review**

The primary contribution of this research is to describe the conditions and effects that spatial mobility shapes for creative freelancers from Belarus. This question has not been examined previously, so this review describes literature in the relevant fields of sociology, migration and urban studies.

The research is focused on several topics within the themes of ‘freelance’, ‘mobility’ and ‘national origin’. Particularly we are interested in personal reasons for the choice of a freelance type of employment and migration to new cities, even though this type of employment, in theory, allows freelancers to work from anywhere. Also, we are focused on the effects that freelance work combined with spatial mobility have on the lifestyle of the creative class. In this case, the term ‘lifestyle’ refers to work-life balance, possibilities for professional self-development, creativity and personal financial sustainability. As the sample for the research consists of people from Belarus, we are also interested if their national origin has an effect on their work which is international.

Thus this review consists of three sections – the nature of creative class mobility, the effects of freelance work on people’s well-being and professional self-development and the Eastern Europe theme in studies on creative class migration.

### **2.1. Mobility as a resource**

Human mobility is strongly linked with the notion of freedom. Higher levels of mobility are associated with economic growth, stronger civil rights and social equality (Urry, 2007, p. 203-210). The nature of this dependence is embodied in the Article 13 of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights and in four freedoms of movements of the European Union.

Knowledge worker with higher spatial mobility is the object for analysis in several categories. One of the most recent is the term ‘digital nomads’. Reichenberg (2018) claimed that one of the defining features of digital nomads is the perception of having the freedom to work anywhere as a key characteristic of successful work and happy social life. The phenomenon of ‘digital nomads’ was predicted more than 20

years ago (Makimoto & Manners, 1997), but not developed as an academic topic until recently and could be still considered as a buzzword (Müller, 2016). The phenomenon has been actively discussed in the mass media (Chayka, 2018; Harris, 2018), as digital nomads create a visible and big international community with distinct websites, city ratings and a range of services such as a special private medical health insurance ‘made for nomads by nomads’. They also influence businesses and service developments from new computer software to cafés (The Economist, 2008; Mok, 2015) and even state policies. For example, the Estonian government initiated a 12-months visa for nomadic freelancers from 2019 (Beech, 2018). Despite the growth of attention to this new phenomenon, its analysis within academic standards is still not very rich.

Reichenberg (2018) attempted to give a clear academic definition of contemporary digital nomads as ‘individuals who achieve location independence by conducting their work in an online environment’ (p. 371). Levels of digital nomadism vary according to the possibility of working and travelling simultaneously. The highest level of nomadism is the absence of permanent residence. Although the Reichenberg’s research was not focused on professionals in creative industries, 7 of 22 interviewees were designers and photographers. They showed, that digital nomadism is based on three ‘freedoms’: professional, spatial and personal. The positive effects can be found in any kind of mobility, not necessarily on the international scale or even physically but virtually when working for the clients overseas is perceived as relocation. ‘Technically, you don’t need to travel at all, you can just go to a café in your city, as long as you move’ (Reichenberg, 2018, p. 370).

The Reichenberg’s sample was based on the self-identification of participants as nomads. Czarniawska (2014) tried to define the concept in broader terms, based on her own definition of digital nomads or digital migrants as international travellers working online. As a result, some of the interviewees included sociologists, anthropologists, business consultants who did not admit being nomads and such an approach was criticised (Büscher, 2014). On the other hand, digital nomadism could simply be another word for the old phenomena of travelling workers. Southerland (2017) showed that self-identification of the person is very important as some sort of banner and that professional identity plays a crucial role in nomadic community

building. And that one of the digital nomads' key qualities is the skill to convert freedom of mobility into a source of successful work.

The EU's famous 'four freedoms', i.e. free movement of goods, services, capital and persons within the EU created opportunity for blurred kinds of migration. Favell (2008) analysed migrants from the 15 pre-2004 European Union states giving them the name 'Eurostars'. They present a not-so numerous group of professionals who change their place of residence for a longer time than digital nomads do. They usually have a job in the city where they stay. 'Eurostars' also perceive freedom of movement not only as a right but as a resource for development. However, they are more emotionally bound up with their original city or another place that is treated as a 'home'. More often they come from provinces as moving to other places within EU opens more job opportunities than to their own national capitals (Ibid., p. 93).

Creative freelance workers can be included in the category of 'creative class', composed of a wide range of occupations from engineers to designers and poets whose main job is to create new forms. Attention to the role of the creative class in the world economy boosted after the publication of Richard Florida's research (Florida, 2002; 2005; 2008). He claimed that creative or knowledge workers are a highly mobile group of professionals and that their mobility is innate to the need to express themselves. Creative class representatives choose different places to move to and live because they are not strictly attached to a certain place. Some of them can have a standard type of employment and change cities with the employers, but the others can be freelance workers. Creative class representatives can find a job in any city and, thus, the 'quality of place' they move to plays a determining role in the choice of the city (Florida 2002, p. 231). Florida argues that the combination of the built and natural environment, the diversity of people and vibrant street life (e.g. music and arts amenities, coffee shops, street food) are expected to attract high skilled creative professionals to move to new places (Ibid.).

Florida's publications created a new body of literature and research in response to his statements on the motivation for creative class mobility. As Jung (2011) explained creative professionals have a high risk and probability of involuntary displacement and only a small portion of super talents can enjoy the benefits of horizontal mobility among different companies. Hansen & Niedomysl (2009, p. 198) confirm the high mobility of the creative class using the data from Sweden. But,

again, the Florida's findings are true only if highly educated people are used as a proxy for the class. So the mobility of the creative professionals beyond the top group is not the part of their professional self-expression but rather an involuntary necessity.

Some empirical studies have revealed the insignificance of the 'quality of place' as an important motive for the mobility of the creative class. Hansen & Niedomysl (2009, p. 200) demonstrate that creative class participants in Sweden prefer to move to regions with the fewer city amenities but better employment opportunities. The only group who are deliberately driven by interest in the quality of cities are young people in their twenties, explained by their movement to university centres. Similar conclusions are presented by Martin-Brelot et al. (2010), who studied samples of creative workers from 11 cities in different parts of the European Union. They found them significantly less mobile than North Americans, the sample mainly analysed by Florida. Furthermore, even Europe is not uniform having less cosmopolitan and more autochthone/ ethnically homogenous Southern and Eastern regions and more mobile creative workers locating to the North and West (Ibid., p. 859; Sánchez-Moral, 2017). In a choice of residence Europeans are more affected by their personal trajectories, i.e. place of birth or where they studied, followed by 'hard factors', such as a new place of job. The 'soft factors' such as attractiveness of the place, tolerance of the city, the diversity of the built and natural environment, were indicated by the smallest number of respondents in the studies by Martin-Brelot et al. (2010, p. 863) and by Darchen & Tremblay (2010).

However, as Houston et al. (2009, p. 147) noted, Florida contributed to the important discussion on encouraging the mobility of creative workers as a strategy for the regional growth. His work raised an important issue of the return migration - the potential of attracting creative workers back home as entrepreneurs and creative self-employed people, who can contribute to the redevelopment of post-industrial areas (Ibid.).

Started by Florida this discussion makes an important contribution to the understanding of motives for the mobility of creative workers. Further research has debated the reasons for migration/ mobility and the preferences creative people have about the places they move to. Mobility is considered to be one of the benefits that knowledge workers and creative professionals possess, as they are not bound so strictly to a certain local enterprise as labour workers. However, some authors argue

that creative professionals do not participate in migrating processes as actively as it is assumed. The evidence shows that the number of the creative workers using this beneficial mobility option is not so high and that the significance of mobility for creative workers can be overestimated by some academics and officials (Bennett et al., 2009; Bloomberg, M., 2012).

The literature emerges a range of key questions with regard to creative freelance workers' mobility. Is the freedom of movement real or perceived? Mobility can differ according to the distance, period of stay, level of integration. What types of mobility do creative freelance workers choose and why? And can we think about the free choice as mobility can be either voluntary so involuntary?

The category of 'digital nomads' raises the question if the migration of creative freelance workers should be seen as working mobility or this is to be analysed in travel studies? The theme of translocal attachment is key in the case of 'Eurostars'. The point is what are the feelings of the mobile workers towards international places they migrate to and how do they perceive themselves in these places.

Cities can be purposefully designed to attract creative class and contribute to their mobility. There are still debates on what factors of the cities are more crucial for the creative class to move internationally. The other point is to what degree home cities of the creative class representatives can be successful in attracting them back as investments to the local social capital.

## **2.2. Effects of freelance employment**

The health and wellbeing impacts of non-standard types of employment have become an object of numerous studies in recent decades (Aronsson et al. 2002; Benach et al. 2002; Lewchuk et al. 2008; Scott-Marshall & Tompa, 2011). The premise of these studies was that non-standard employment is more insecure and poses a greater risk than 'traditional' forms of employment. However, the conclusions exposed an inability to trace a direct relationship between atypical employment and worker's health. This led to a growing literature highlighting the importance of dissection of non-standard employment and isolation of different types and their effects (Cranford & Vosko, 2006; Clarke et al., 2007). For example, Aronsson et al.

(2002, p. 170) claim that standard jobs have a lot the same insecurities as freelance. Non-standard jobs yield poorer health outcomes if they are characterised with scheduling uncertainty, efforts keeping employed and constant evaluation rather the earnings insecurity (Lewchuk et al., 2008).

Attitudes towards freelance vary widely. For example, Fraser & Gold (2001) demonstrate that freelance translators accept their type of employment with a high level of enthusiasm. They value autonomy, control of the workflow, comfortable communication with the clients, flexibility in earnings. However, these positive effects are not relevant to all professionals on the same scale. For example, independent editors are less autonomous, free and strong in their executor-client position (Stanworth & Stanworth, 1995).

One of the most relevant to our study is the recent qualitative research on industrial designers in Turkey. Kaygan & Demir (2017) attempted to uncover a number of reasons determining why most young people to choose freelance employment. The findings show that most would like to focus on pure design, stay away from the organisational hierarchy and avoid repetitive work. The values of autonomy and self-satisfaction are prioritised over the money. However, a closer focus, undertaken by the authors, revealed common freelance issues that eliminate or even contradict the prospective advantages of being an ‘independent’ designer. In fact, most of the time they have to accept any sort of low-paid work. The freedom of doing a job anytime anywhere means working without schedule and weekends. Employment in the companies helps to avoid risks of unfair clients. Thus, the freelance industrial designers often work with the negative effects that are widely spread among other creative and cultural professionals: isolation, fragmentation and insecurity (McGuigan, 2010) and uncertainty in the workflow. Avdikos & Kalogeresis (2017) showed that co-working spaces and work collective conception assist freelance designers to cope with isolation and loneliness, detachment from the market, loss of boundaries between workspace and home, work time and non-work time. However, this does not solve a range of other issues, such as guarantees of social security and preventing the development of a black economy (Ibid., p. 40-41).

Uncertainty was in the centre of the research by Dex et al. (2000) about the creative professionals in the British television industry. The researchers examined responses to the uncertainty experienced by the wide range of television workers, such

as producers, directors, designers, editors, cameramen. Only one-fifth of the examined audience liked uncertainty and thought that stress spurs more creative work (p. 288-289). The authors found that among the most significant determinants of dislike for uncertainty were the workers' age, mainly people in forties, and monthly income, i.e. the lower are wages the higher is stress. The city of employment, marital status, gender, scarceness of the skills did not influence the level of uncertainty greatly. The workers coped with uncertainty with a standard range of strategies, including extending sources of incomes, diversifying their portfolio, building informal contacts, collecting information, thinking of exit (p. 303). However, the authors conclude, that in most cases the participants were struggling to balance demands, rather coping with the uncertainty.

Gandini's (2015) work on self-branding among the freelancers is a reminder of the high demand for self-promotion and positioning. Even though permanent workers need to promote their experience and skilled reputation from time to time, especially while looking for a new work opportunities, freelancers think about their image in social media and self-marketing all the time, as they are constantly in the situation of job searching.

The literature hardly identifies the direct relationship between a freelance type of employment and worker's health. The range of negative effects and insecurities is also wide and sometimes similar to the effects of the standard job. Attitude towards freelance employment and the reasons for choosing this pathway depends on the occupation greatly. The labour market for creative freelance workers can vary from country to country. So the conditions of creative freelance workers from certain geographical areas can be influenced by specific local threads and benefits despite the image of 'globality' the freelance employment possesses.

### **2.3. The creative workers migrating from Eastern Europe**

The motives of creative professionals, moving from one country to the other are comparatively well understood in the literature on migration. Eastern European residents are very dynamic in migration. In 2000, Russia and Ukraine was one of the largest high-skilled migration corridors in the world having more than 600,000 high-skilled people moving from both sides (Özden & Parsons, 2017, p. 44). Since the

collapse of the Soviet Union, the region has also been known as a source of high-skilled migrants to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development countries. For example, in 1991–2010 Russia was represented in the top ten sending states of migrant inventors with a growing trend (Fink et al., 2017, p. 168).

Push- and pull-factors determining the mobility of professionals from the Eastern European post-Soviet countries have come into the focus of academic research in recent decades. Russia, the most influential and populated player of the region and Ukraine due to a rapid growth of migration from the country to the EU in recent years, were the main objects of analysis (Borshchevska's, 2012; Strielkowski & Bilan, 2016). The most recent books on migration from Ukraine analysed a dramatic workflow to the EU since 2014 after the Russian annexation of Crimea and eruption of the war in the Eastern part of the country. They pointed to decreases in economy and security as the main push-factors of moving from the country (Fedyuk & Kindler, M., 2016; Pikulicka-Wilczewska & Uehling, 2017). The pull-factor of visa policy simplifying for some Eastern European countries is analysed by Čajka et al. (2014). The other researchers find international education, training and employment in corporations abroad as the most significant pull-factors, that encourage migration of young and talented people from Eastern European countries (Semiv & Hvozdo vych, 2012; Stuzhinskaya, 2013).

In recent years decreasing democratic freedoms, accelerating corruption and economic hindrances have also increased the emigration of highly-skilled professionals, especially from Russia (Panda, 2014; Ansley, 2017). Bronzino (2015) claims that middle-class flight can be described as a 'protest against contemporary Putin's policy' (p. 201). The rapid growth of emigrating people is reflected in quantitative reports and the analysts agree that the numbers are mainly shaped by the middle- or creative class professionals (Semenova, 2015; Stratfor, 2016). Quantitative research describes trends of migration, countries, motives of the professionals and attempts to forecast consequences for future migration. Personal trajectories, effects of migration on the workers, phenomena of international mobility without a permanent place to stay or work and individual cases of creative freelance workers have not been examined in depth in the literature on the creative class from Eastern Europe.



The literature on migrating processes from Eastern Europe exposes a gap in knowledge concerning mobile creative freelance workers, migrating internationally. The mostly quantitative studies are not sufficient in providing details of individual push-pull factors for the mobility of the creative freelance workers. They rather describe trends of creative class migration on the background of changing social political and economic situation. The literature also misses how national background, including education, working experience, cultural code impacts the creative freelance workers' success in the more global market and whether we can think about some sort of 'global market' for the creative freelance workers at all.

## **3. Methodology**

### **3.1. Methods feasibility**

This dissertation is aimed at getting deep empirical data from freelance creative workers and students on design and fine arts from Belarus. One of the better ways to generate information about the human world is by simply asking people about their lives (Holstein & Gubrium, 1999, p. 105). This study undertook a qualitative approach in order to get rich data. The data is derived from interviews and focus groups.

The interview is highly recognised and one of the most widely employed methods in social investigations (Bryman, 2016, p. 466). The author is interested in the experience of the creative freelance workers from Belarus. The topic is not developed and represented in media, reports, academic papers. The situation of highly mobile creative freelance workers from the post-Soviet country is novel and did not have a place just a couple of decades ago. We need to turn to the participants to obtain data about their experience which is hard to be standardized. Semi-structured interviews allow a researcher to deviate from the scheme to follow up on the answers just given and emerge new topics on the go. The author of the study is quite close to the culture of the participants and understands them being nevertheless out of their strictly occupational realm. An understanding of the culture is one of the crucial moment for the producing successful results in the qualitative study.

Focus groups with current students were conducted as the literature shows that the perception of the creative freelance work and mobility differs from the reality. So we intended to compare the expectations of students from their future careers with the conditions of the current creative freelance professionals. The method of the focus group was chosen as it does not demand great expenses for an interviewer and much time for the participants. Nevertheless, focus group allows eliciting a variety of important views in relation to the issue (Bryman, 2016, p. 518). Focus-group is a highly relevant method for the participants of the same age and occupation as they can feel comfortable during the conversation, communicate in their usual vocabularies and style of behaviour. It produces novel data in the atmosphere of the real life (Braun and Clark, 2013, p. 110-113). Individual interviews with students could provide with deeper information but would be more time-consuming and more stressful for the inexperienced in face-to-face interviewing young people.

### **3.2. Semi-structured interviews: Sampling and recruitment**

Seven semi-structured interviews were organised with professionals engaged in creative jobs in the visual sphere, such as designers, illustrators, typographers, artists as they distinguished themselves at the beginning of every interview. The age of participants varied from 28 to 35. Two were male and five were female. The participants were chosen according to three main characteristics. Firstly, they must have an experience in creative freelance work. The second quality was Belarusian origins, that means a significant part of a life spent in the country, graduating from the secondary school, studying in the Belarusian university or college. The third precondition was the international mobility, represented by doing creative work in different countries apart from Belarus.

The initial participants for interviews were recruited via a gatekeeper, a professional designer and freelancer, and a friend of the researcher. Further, the interviewees were contacted through the recommendations. It caused the different levels of their involvement with mobility and freelance work. Nine people were contacted and two of them rejected the opportunity to participate explaining, that they did not meet the criteria for participation. Seven interviews were conducted and formed the sample. Among them, four people (p01, p04, p05, p07) represented the highly relevant group with rich experience in freelance and remote work with continuous movements across Europe. Participant p02 works from one location but has recent experience of one-time international migration from Belarus and unique and rich freelance activities as the main source of profits. Participants p03 and p06 are full-time contracted workers, living in the EU countries permanently after one-time migration from Belarus but has some experience in ‘work on the move’ related to their employment and part-time freelance work.

All the participants have Belarusian origin and educational background, however, there are some peculiarities at the university level to be mentioned. Four interviewees studied at EHU (European Humanities University), considered to be a ‘Belarusian university in exile’ relocated in the 2000s from Minsk to Vilnius due to the unfavourable political environment in the country. Five people studied at ‘mainland’ universities or have mixed educational experience with a university in

Belarus and EHU. Three participants studied at the institutions in other countries of the EU. The details on experiences in education, work and mobility are combined in Table 01.

| <i>N</i> | <i>Participant</i> | <i>Higher Education</i> | <i>Current type of employment</i>               | <i>Degree of international mobility</i>                |
|----------|--------------------|-------------------------|---|--|
| 1        | p01                | Belarus                 | Freelance                                       | Permanent and active                                   |
| 2        | p02                | Belarus                 | Freelance                                       | One time relocation to EU                              |
| 3        | p03                | EHU, EU                 | Permanent full-time staff in office + Freelance | One time relocation to EU + Permanent short time trips |
| 4        | p04                | Belarus, EHU, EU        | Remote part-time permanent staff + Freelance    | Permanent and active                                   |
| 5        | p05                | Belarus, EHU            | Freelance                                       | Permanent and active                                   |
| 6        | p06                | EHU                     | Permanent full-time staff                       | One time relocation to EU + Permanent short time trips |
| 7        | p07                | Belarus, EHU, EU        | Freelance                                       | One time relocation + Permanent short time trips       |

*Table 01. Semi-structured interviews participants*

### **3.3. Semi-structured interviews: Limits and strengths of online mode**

Interviews were conducted from the end of June till mid-July 2018. Each lasted 40-60 mins and were conducted online via skype/ video conferencing or by telephone. The online option has been treated as equal to face-to-face interviews for at least several years (Deakin & Wakefield, 2013; Janghorban et al., 2014) and the author did not see crucial limitations not to apply Internet-based communication.

Only one interview was held in video mode. Three interviews were conducted on a computer via Skype, the other four participants asked for the conversation via WhatsApp and Telegram mobile applications. The mobile software for recording

VoIP calls on both sides, like Cube Call Recorder ACR and Automatic Call Recorder were tested but did not achieve a high-quality recording. The conversations were provided in speaker mode from the side of the researcher that could diminish the atmosphere of privacy for the interviewee. However, it enabled the external recording. The inbuilt Mac OS Quick TimePlayer provided a sufficient quality of the recording and could be monitored all the time contrary to the mobile recording applications that can not be checked while speaking in the phone mode.

The quality of connection and internet-speed was good enough, however, two interviewers asked for a conversation while they were walking outdoors after the work. Blowing wind and voices from the pizza cafe interfered with the conversation but the researcher could not insist on a private location near a computer for the conversation from people who spend most of their time in such regime.

### 3.4. Focus groups: Sampling and recruitment

The focus groups were organised with students of design and fine arts at the universities in Vitebsk and Minsk in Belarus. The meeting with 5 participants was planned in Vitebsk, Belarus, however, 2 persons did not attend the information derived from the focus group in Vitebsk was insufficient so an additional meeting was organised with 3 more recent alumni in Minsk, the capital of Belarus. The participants' age was between 20 and 23, 4 females and 2 males in two focus groups. Participants of each group knew each other before the meetings. The details on universities, programmes and age are combined in Table 02.

| <i>N</i> | <i>Participant</i> | <i>Current university, City in Belarus</i> | <i>Programme</i>          | <i>Year of birth</i> | <i>Number of focus-group</i> |
|----------|--------------------|--|---------------------------|----------------------|------------------------------|
| 1        | fg01-01            | Vitebsk State University, Vitebsk          | Object and spatial design | 1997                 | First focus-group            |
| 2        | fg01-02            | Vitebsk State University, Vitebsk          | Object and spatial design | 1996                 |                              |
| 3        | fg01-03            | Vitebsk State University,                  | Object and spatial design | 1996                 |                              |

| <i>N</i> | <i>Participant</i> | <i>Current university, City in Belarus</i> | <i>Programme</i> | <i>Year of birth</i> | <i>Number of focus-group</i> |
|----------|--------------------|--|------------------|----------------------|------------------------------|
|          |                    | Vitebsk                                    |                  |                      |                              |
| 4        | fg02-01            | Belarusian State University, Minsk         | Design           | 1996                 | Second focus-group           |
| 5        | fg02-02            | Belarusian State University, Minsk         | Design           | 1996                 |                              |
| 6        | fg02-03            | Belarusian State University, Minsk         | Design           | 1996                 |                              |

*Table 02. Focus-groups participants*

Vitebsk is a native town of the researcher and known in Belarus for its art scene, nourished by the students of the local universities with programmes in fine arts and design. The participants of the focus group in Vitebsk took part in social projects organised by the researcher two years before. They are currently in the middle of their studying period.

The Minsk participants were recruited via a gatekeeper who is a relative of the researcher. They have just graduated from the graphic and interior design programmes at Minsk university. Apart from the sample increase, Minsk recent students were targeted to test an image of differences in views and aspirations the students from metropolitan and province universities have.

### **3.5. Focus groups: Limits and strengths of online modes**

Synchronous and asynchronous online focus group are used intensively in academic research for a while (Boydell et al., 2014). However, synchronous multiple users video conferencing has become more common just in recent years thanks to improvements in software and wider access to high-speed internet (Tuttas, 2015). Two online focus groups in this study were organised in different modes. The Vitebsk focus group was provided via Skype video-conference with young people sitting all

together in an office of the Association of Life-Long Learning and Enlightenment. The researcher collaborated with the Association while working in Vitebsk. The space with laptop and software, internet, tables, chairs were organised by the researcher's colleague based in Vitebsk.

The second focus group was held with Minsk recent students speaking from their homes via Skype in video-conference mode each. There were no serious issues with the speed of connection, the participants used both Windows and MacOS systems. The researcher insisted on Skype as an application based on its reliability in multiple video-conferencing. However, younger people explained that Skype is not a popular application nowadays and some of them needed to install it again and re-activate the account. Each focus group lasted about an hour. An external audio recording was applied.

The first of the online focus groups presented a more energetic atmosphere with deeper interaction among the participants, contradictions and interruptions. The second meeting was closer to a group interview, rather than a focus group method. Interviewees from Minsk, separately portrayed in Skype window, tended to answer questions one by one and were not so spontaneous and responsive to the opinions of the others. For example, gradually they built an order of giving responses and followed this until the end even after the moderator's attempt to break the sequence. So, if a researcher works remotely but has an opportunity to gather participants in one place this could be more favourable than speaking to participants in sequenced Skype windows. However, the first type of interview showed a serious technical limitation. The larger amount of participants demanded more space and that led to a greater distance from the computer recording the conversation. This affected the quality of the sound. A conference 360-degree pickup microphone in the centre of speaking participants would be a solution for future application of this method.

### **3.6. Data interpretation**

The participants of the interviews and focus-groups were quite favourable towards the research and were interested to read the results of the study. This resulted in conversations full of content and detail. All the conversations were conducted in the Russian language. The recordings were not transcribed word for word. The author

transcribed and translated into English certain data sets relevant for the further analysis.

Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was applied to the derived data corpus. The ‘theoretical’ approach determined the certain pre-conditioned topics chosen by the author before the study. The key themes were ‘**freelance**’, ‘**mobility**’ and ‘**national background**’. They were analysed in order to identify the influences of these phenomena on the experiences of freelance creative workers.

Motivations and experiences of the participants were interpreted in a more straightforward way, making the study less constructionist, but more realistic (Ibid., p. 84-85). Initially, the researcher tried not to theorise on the influence of the social context of the participants and to focus mainly on their experience and language. However, the participants presented their positions as strongly embedded in their social, cultural and political context and continually referred their personal experience to these contexts during the interviews.



## 4. Findings

### 4.1. Determinants and effects of creative freelance work

The interviews were conducted chronologically and the participants spoke about their experience since the university until the present. They claimed that university studies were helpful in preparation for future freelance employment. Freedom, independence, individual activities were inherent in the study courses in all the represented universities: Belarusian, EHU and EU ones. The same observations were made by current and recent students during the focus groups. The only different view on individual work in a Belarusian university was given by a professional with an experience of studies at Belarusian provincial city: ‘In EHU you work a lot individually contrary to Belarusian universities. Essays, conclusions... Maybe this pushed me to examine everything personally’ (p04).

Some of the participants started to work as freelancers while they were attending university, mainly informally for friends and/or without payments in order to obtain practical skills. However, all the interviewed professionals had a period of standard employment in a corporation or a state institution after studies or while studying. Standard work in office affected participants to start freelance work. However, they could allow participation in projects with office activities for a while: ‘Last month I had a project that demanded my permanent presence in an office. As it was just a one month project I persuaded myself that’s ok. Full-time for a month suits me’ (p05). The other participant who had part-time freelance projects claimed to be not against working in an office but with flexible hours: ‘I spend some time now in an office because I am in Minsk, but they do not demand it. Honestly, it is easier for me to work in an office. It brings some sort of satisfaction.’ (p04). Participant p03 highlighted the importance of 32-hours 4-days week for satisfaction from a full-time job in an office. The company allows employees flexible working days, so a worker can accumulate enough free time. Participant p02 found the experience in a state educational institution useful for later freelance online teaching. Interviewee p07 mentioned that an office period was important to obtain strong practical skills after the university. During the focus groups, this was also the main motivation for current students to enter corporations after finishing studies: ‘I would like to obtain some initial sufficient experience in a private company. In the future, I do not want to depend on anybody.

Working by myself and taking what I want' (fg01-02). 'I agree with <participant fg01-02>. You need the experience after the university. You need a job. <...> After that, I would like to be a freelancer and just work for myself and on my own' (fg01-03).

Creative workers chose freelance work due to a range of specific effects from the standard job they had. They wanted to have more freedom of mobility (p01, p05, p04), to manage time personally and to have higher earnings (p02), not to waste time on office-related activities like daily commuting (p02, p05), to have feedback on and more control over results of the work (p07), and to avoid irritation from corporate culture (p05). Freelance work was one of a few types of employment that could be combined with studying abroad, so for one participant it was an economic necessity: 'If I had some supporting, scholarship, I would not even think about work. It was just a way to survive' (p04). Some participants chose freelance work due to reasons which are specific for Belarus or Eastern European region: 'In Belarus, you know what to do after the university, but do not know where. <...> Freelance is the only way to <work as an illustration artist> <...> Belarusian 'illustrator' vacancy means working in <Adobe> Illustrator. All the illustration artists I know and follow are freelancers' (p02). 'There was no such work I wanted to attend regularly <in Belarus>' (p01). The other 'local' reason was financial. Full-time freelance work could earn a better income (p01, p07), sometimes with a significant difference (p02).

The interviewees obtained a number of freelance work benefits, corresponding to the reasons that pushed them out of standard types of employment.

*'Now I feel good as I have started steady freelance work. I have projects. When I want to have a rest I don't take projects. I am free in movement' (p05). 'When I work by myself I can earn significantly more money. I spend time on what I want. <...> I do not need to communicate with anybody when I do not want to. I do not need to force myself' (p02). 'I can refuse an offer from a <certain> client <...> I've got more free time. I have started to work more effectively. <...> You can do your own thing and then you do the job in a more concise and concentrated way. So it is good for finances' (p07).*

The interviewees claimed they were freer to switch between different specialisms and roles. For example, from graphic designer to media illustrator (p05).

Or to change their sphere of work from commercial ads to projects within civil society (p05), or to combine roles in illustration and online-teaching (p02), or to change the environment from concentrating home to socialising co-working space (p07).

Although the whole picture of creative freelance work looks more positive than negative, some participants highlighted uncomfortable effects. Interviewee p01 pointed out that ‘Every project is unique, like doing it for the first time. <...> Every time you build a communication, every time you teach people some mode of communication. Some projects are made <very quickly> <...> and everybody is happy. Some projects cause sadness and dullness, when nothing happens <...> communication is in chaos, nobody gets sufficient information and understands what is going on’ (p01). Participants mentioned problems of isolation, weak work-life balance, unscheduled workflow, and lack of socialising: ‘You are sitting in front of computer alone and do tasks, being in the <...> alienated mode, when you do have minimum aspects of socialisation. You just communicate with a manager and that’s all’ (p04). ‘If you spend too much time lonely some unhealthy processes can start in your head. You can be harried by one idea many times. Or you cannot assess the results of your work’ (p02). ‘Sometimes I work hard during a long period. And then I have a long rest. It’s difficult for me to find a balance <...> Usually, I drop out of the normal schedule. I cannot see people because I work the whole night and then I sleep a half day. In the evening I work again’ (p05). Participant p05 mentioned the seasonal irregularity of the work, that was also mentioned by two students in a focus group, who had practical experience of creative freelance work (fg01-01).

Freelance work causes insecurities and concerns in comparison to standard work: ‘Working in an office means you have a buffer. No matter how you work you will obtain your salary. I do not have this buffer. <...> This is anxious’ (p02). Unlike a full-time standard employee, a freelance creative worker assesses his/ her skills personally to realise the price she/ he can claim for the work. This can be an issue and lead to lower payments and overwork (p01, p07). Full-time standard work employee avoids the administrative work (p03).

The interviewees worked out different strategies to cope with the effects and insecurities provided by freelancing. A number of undesirable clients can be diminished or avoided by entering alternative international or professional markets (p02, p05). Complexities in communication or in what interviewees described as ‘the

need for teaching clients' are paid for by an additional phase of project research in agreement (p07). Professional networking can be realised via involvement in workshops (p05), co-working spaces (p07), group projects (p01), competitions (p02). With regard to isolation, several participants expressed they do not see such problem. 'I don't feel lonely or abandoned' (p02). 'If I need conversations I find it by myself' (p05). Participant p04, having been a postgraduate student in the EU and part-time freelancer, switched from freelance work to serving in a student café to have enough money and social experience. However, it was not continuous: 'I have worked for 2 months and realised that no, guys, I would probably return to design (*laughing*)' (p04). Overwork effects were reduced by collaboration with permanent clients (p04), engagement in a smaller number of bigger projects (p05), ability to say 'no' (p07). The difficulties of urgent and large-scale projects, when interviewees had to work whole days long were awarded by a longer period of rest after (p02, p05). A clear working schedule brought to the client helped to oppose the potential for the freelancer to work on weekends and round the clock (p07). Scheduling and project management techniques assisted in dealing with huge pieces of work (p02).

## 4.2. Mobility

Most interviewees were positive about the effects of changing places on creativity and productivity. 'Relocation to the other country <...> impacts greatly on a person's growth. <...> I need to change places. I felt permanently restricted by the fact I had to work at the same table and in the same environment. <Now> I work in a cafe, mostly from co-working spaces, sometimes at home' (p07). 'Ideally, I would like to achieve the level when I am comfortable to work anywhere. I'd like to go somewhere for a long time and work from there' (p05). 'When you're on one place <...> it is difficult to oppose the routine, the scenario is the same, and you are like sleeping a little. The perception is less sensitive. <...> The change of environment refreshes' (p01).

Students from the focus groups perceived mobility as one of the crucial moments for the creativity: 'I just make a puzzle, something new is from the books, trips and somewhere else. New ideas emerge when you change the place and go somewhere' (fg01-01). 'Travelling means development. It's like a positive explosion

in your head' (fg01-02). 'I don't see any minuses in trips just pluses' (fg01-03). Some of them are also positive about permanent mobility: 'I would like to be very mobile so I could be anywhere I want. All you need is a good computer and internet' (fg01-02). 'Yeah, it's cool our occupation allows us to be mobile' (fg01-03). The others would like to travel much but feel comfortable having a job placement in one certain place: 'I would like to visit Europe, Germany, to see, to study there. But Minsk suits me well at least now' (fg02-03).

Freelance work is valued for the opportunity it affords to be more free in choosing where to migrate (see above). However, some participants treated this privilege with scepticism: 'Freelance employment allows <designer> to go somewhere to work. Some sort of illusion of freedom' (p01). One of the participants also expressed doubtfulness about mobility as a strong source of creativity and inspiration: 'I think this is a little superficial approach <...> that the opportunity of travelling changes you much... I don't really think so. <...> To travel or to live in a certain habitat are different things. So it depends on the time spent. <Trips to India> lead to the creation of some kind of capsule. A person immerses in the other world but is still in the capsule. It is very seldom, that person integrates into that culture' (p04). Migration can also have negative effects on freelance workflow: 'You're like hit in the head for 1-2 days <after the relocation>. The 'baggage regime' is unproductive.' (p01). 'New environment distracts your attention sometimes, you want to have a walk... ' (p05). A participant can also do not perceive mobility as a value by its own: 'I didn't have an aim to move to the other country. <...> The area of comfort is very important to me. But I am very happy that I moved, that I left this zone' (p02).

The participants have different self-perception of their status relating to mobility. However, none of them defined themselves strictly as 'migrants'. 'I am not a migrant. I am a digital nomad' (p05). 'I don't feel like a migrant in Amsterdam. Amsterdam is a wonderful place to be a migrant because all the people here are migrants. And you don't feel you are 'the other'' (p02). 'I do not consider myself <an immigrant>, but others may think that I am! (*laughing*)' (p03).

The participants with a more nomadic lifestyle answered the question about where they live in the following way: 'Warsaw, Minsk, <native town in Belarus>. In this way' (p01). 'Now I live somewhere between Minsk and Berlin' (p04).

Interviewees expressed a range of factors pushing them from Eastern European post-Soviet countries. Participant p04 expressed a view that was similar to most interviewees:

*'I needed to leave Minsk. <...> The main reason was in cultural oxygen. <...> The education you got <in the EU> is not relevant here and the branch you specialise in is absent here. <...> <In Minsk> you must be a pusher, but this is not interesting for me. I want to have certain tasks and do them. <...> I do not have a circle of close people in Minsk. Just a few people. Most people can't find common points of interaction with me, because those people don't have the same experience. I can't say they are worse or better, they are just different. <...> I had a crisis in winter and I just went to Berlin. I have a girlfriend there. I spent 3 months <there> recovering after Belarus' (p04).*

The participant p02 paid more attention to technical limitations: '<Belarusian location> prevents collaboration with lots of clients. Because they do not know even how to transfer money to you. <...> They have lots of materials <to print books>, professionals who can say on which paper this is better to print.<...> Our <professionals> also have a taste but they don't have opportunities' (p02).

Personal life shapes the conditions for leaving Belarus and the reasons for having a highly mobile lifestyle are often personal. '<I moved to Amsterdam> because of my husband. We're both from Belarus but he moved there before, then we got married and I joined him' (p02). 'There is a set of personal links and friends in Minsk who (pull towards you like a ?)'magnet' all the time. There are family <parents> in <my native town>. <Warsaw> is personal life, professional... Also economy <i.e. cheaper>. Cultural wishes to see the other world. Emotional comfort' (p01). '<I returned to Minsk from Kyiv> because of a personal story. And it was before Maidan. So I didn't know whether to come back' <p05>. '<After university> I went to Kyiv to my future husband <...>. I was not going to stay in Kyiv but I have got a job offer <...> and accepted it' (p07). 'Nobody is waiting for me in Belarus. So I do not intend there' (p03).

Pull factors for migration from Belarus or Ukraine are also variable. ‘Having an experience of life in Europe you feel uncomfortable staying in a post-Soviet country’ (p07). ‘Warsaw has a more developed environment, visual culture <...> posters, theatres, people, printing houses, original technologies’ (p01). ‘I was drawn to the West after <EHU in> Vilnius, after possessing residence permit in the EU. When all the borders are open. The <wish> to move that direction was very clear’ (p04). ‘It is comfortable in Vienna for me for some reasons. <...> Drinking tap water. Living in accommodation with high ceilings. Going to the local market and buying tasty food. Swimming in the river. Going out to the mountains. <...> After 6 years at the university, I made some links. Moving to another place and starting from the beginning is very difficult’ (p03).

Students’ views on the importance of amenities and comfort differed: ‘I would like to live in a super comfortable city with even roads, good architecture <...> rich with nature. <...> Mixture of something very comfortable urbanistic and natural and warm’ (fg01-03). ‘I think <city amenities> does not influence me. The main thing is to have experienced people living nearby who can provide new ideas, new questions... better to stimulate you to study your chosen profession further. <...> I think the surrounding environment is something secondary’ (fg02-01).

Relocations demand from the participants' different techniques to become a successful freelance worker. ‘I feel good at home because I have a big screen <...> If you have a large project it’s better to sit <and work at home>. But if you need little amendments, editing, yes, it’s quite possible to do while travelling’ (p05). ‘We are going on holiday and like the last year, I know that during siesta you have 3-4 hours to work. Some more time you also have in the evening’ (p07). ‘<After the relocation> I try to do some sort of work that does not demand sitting near the screen in this period. It’s hard to work on the move just with a laptop, comparing with your place with a big monitor, speakers, table. And the most important thing is a comfortable chair’ (p01).

### **4.3. Effects of the national origin**

All the participants defined themselves as working successfully in the global market. Nobody mentioned difficulties with international collaboration. The effects, conditioned by the Belarusian and post-Soviet origin can be divided into ‘personal’

and 'working'. Personal effects, could be both negative and positive. 'Sure, we are traumatised, have lack of self-assurance, we communicate painfully, we trust people less' (p01). 'I like I have a <Belarusian background>. <...> It is in your head. You should not throw it away but you do not also need to be obsessed with it. <...> I like that I'm from Belarus. I have a completely another view' (p02).

All the interviewees highlighted that their national Belarusian origin and/or post-Soviet legacy influenced their working activities. 'European school is not so much about politics. <...> Our people are more preoccupied to make some sort of statement. <...> This is important for us to include some sort of sense' (p05). 'The Belarusian or post-soviet environment has a very technocratic character. <...> Local practices of design or engineering have more importance than in the West. In the Western countries, the humanist dimension of the life <i.e. non-technocratic, based on achievements of the social and humanities sciences> has a more significant value, it creates an active counterbalance to engineering, to some sort of mathematical perception of the world' (p04). One of the students in a focus group mentioned that post-Soviet legacy affected creative people from Belarus in their business skills and they were not good enough in selling their product (fg01-02).

Feelings of national uniqueness were often considered a benefit. 'I feel personally that I have some local cultural code. <...> This is the point why to work with me. People from other places on the planet can apply to me <with projects>' (p01). 'It makes some sort of authenticity in my style' (p02). Post-Soviet experience and Eastern-Europeans can also be viewed in a positive way for the creativity: 'Our generation stopped being ashamed of it. Just accept us as we are, and this is cool. Cyrillic is cool. I don't need the brand "Sport" in English on a t-shirt. We became more self-assured. Now we can claim openly: yes, we are from "post-sovok" <informal 'post-Soviet environment'>' (p05). 'We have some sort of USP <unique selling proposition> <...> Semachev, Rubchinsky, all these designers are from Eastern Europe. It is fashionable that we have this unique experience' (p01).

On the other hand, some participants were straightforward in their judgements about the negative effects of the Soviet past for contemporary societies in Eastern Europe and their profession particularly: 'In western countries, if you do a job you must do it well. It doesn't work in Belarus. <...> Publishers <...> are the same post-Soviet children. Or from the 1990s. They have something similar to gangsters' (p02).



‘All the current idiocy <in Belarus> I talked about has appeared from the past. This is a new monster that has crawled out from the previous one. Like Alien 2’ (p05).

The students also stated that their national origin had a valuable influence on their creative work (fg01-01, fg01-02). Participant fg01-02 was not sure if there is a demand <for Belarusian influence in creative work> on the global market: ‘What concerns Slavic soul (*laughing*)... I think our people are more sensitive. <...> <It can be valuable> in a creative way as well. But I think lots of work won’t be understood in the West’ (fg01-02).

The interview participants did not define a significant professional gap between themselves and colleagues from other, mainly EU, countries. However, they recalled that it had been different at the start of their global freelance career. ‘Now I do not <feel the gap>. I can compete with others. I have got some sort of acknowledgement from the West (*laughing*). From some respectful artists. I realise we can be good enough’ (p05). ‘I don’t feel <the gap in skills> much. <...> I observe how different people have the same enjoyment from a good product. If someone takes a magazine in Japanese with hieroglyphs he sees a well-made product and can say it is cool or not cool’ (p01).

On the other hand, some participants were quite critical of the standard of creative professionals from Belarus as unmatched to the demands of the global market. The feeling of backwardness was stronger in certain branches of the creative professions. ‘Why don’t we have highly professional animators? Animation products and festivals? Because we do not have a School of Animation. <...> Our Academy of Fine Arts doesn’t train anybody for a contemporary life. Our alumni can’t compete... Maybe, just in painting. Or just for those who travel a lot and are self-trained’ (p05). ‘Probably, <there is a gap> for designers. We do not have a design. There are designers, but no design. No school’ (p02).

The participants warned against exaggerating the notion of the ‘global worker’. ‘Every market has its special features. Even in Ukraine where I came from Lithuania <after EHU>, I needed to adapt <...> Cultural code is different. <...> I feel like I am a global worker but I still need to adapt’ (p07). ‘The more global you are, the more global your world is, and it is more difficult to keep feeling global in it’ (p04).

One of the most significant challenges in international migration and adaptation concerns the language. ‘My German language is not ideal yet. <...> I do not feel confident enough to write a long message to a client. I write a message and then I ask colleagues to check’ (p03). ‘I do not have a sufficient level of English to speak fluently. This is a real obstacle’ (p01). However, in some cases, the post-Soviet origin can be a benefit for a creative freelancer. Participant p02 provides online courses part-time: ‘I teach <online> people in the Russian language. I know their background so it’s easier’ (p02).

## 5. Discussion

We cannot say that creative occupations result in people choosing freelance employment. All the participants from interviews had experience of full-time standard work and some of them were employed in companies and only had freelance projects from time to time. However, the findings show that university programmes on design and fine arts equipped them with advanced skills in individual work because project-oriented and independent activities were an essential part of their educational process. Some of the interview and focus group participants tried creative freelance work while they were students. The nature of this individual project work allows designers and illustrators to be more autonomous than other sectors. These circumstances provided a pathway to becoming a creative freelance worker without a great deal of stress.

Most of the freelance work benefits for interviewees were consistent with the literature: individual time management, more comfortable and manageable communication with clients, control of the workflow, the value of autonomous, flexible earnings (Fraser & Gold, 2001; Born & Witteloostuijn, 2013; Gandini, 2016). Although a creative worker can also be pushed to a freelance regime because of lack of vacancies in the companies on the market or inappropriate corporate culture. One of the obvious reasons which are not mentioned in the literature is that creative freelance work can be very convenient to combine with studying at an advanced or postgraduate level when a student has previous knowledge and practical skills. A specific Eastern European factor in choosing creative freelance work is that even with a little experience after the university a professional can earn significantly more compared with standard wages in local companies and institutions.

On the other hand, there are some disadvantages to freelance work that are not nuanced in the literature (Aronsson et al. 2002; Benach et al. 2002; Lewchuk et al. 2008; Scott-Marshall & Tompa, 2011). For example, freelance work can hinder the integration of a mobile creative worker into a new society. Planning migration to the Western country, one of the creative freelance worker claimed it would make sense to seek employment in a company (p07) because this enables an easier option to obtain a working visa, it is seen as a better for social integration and there is no a huge difference in potential wages.

The findings from this study showed that creative freelance workers did not completely oppose working in an office. Some of them would accept a full-time standard job in an office or have already done so if a company is able to provide a flexible schedule, deeper integration into the project communication, and options for remote work at least from time to time. Some creative freelance workers had experience of temporary office work in certain projects or just worked in a client's space. They did not hate the situation and it leads to the notion that analysis of working effects within the opposition of freelance individual work vs. full-time employment in the office, currently presented in a significant part of the literature is an oversimplification. One of the creative freelance workers (p04) had part-time projects combined with studying at the university, then a period of full-time online remote work as an employee combined with part-time freelance projects, then an online remote employment in the same company with less hours but still being considered as a full-time employee, then an employment with the same full-time contract but working in the company's office every day and then again full-time online remote work. The astonishing combination and flexibility of working regimes demonstrate the completely new nature of employment which would have been unimaginable for previous generations. The participant's p05 Granny reacted to this 'disorder' in employment status with the notion: 'You must go somewhere for a job'. She did not treat her freelance work at home with regular overseas trips seriously as a 'job'.

Findings in this study supported the results of previous research, highlighting that the nature of freelance work depends upon the sector and the national context (Fraser & Gold, 2001; Kaygan & Demir, 2017). All the highly mobile creative freelance workers from this study collaborated mostly within projects, based in the country that was local or original for them, namely Belarus and Ukraine (p01, p04, p05, p07). Clients located within the European Union were more typical for the less mobile creative freelance workers based in the EU countries (p02) and for those who were part-time freelance workers living in the EU (p03). This supports the argument that creative freelance workers are not so global in their market of clients as suggested by the media (Wagstaff, 2012; Rosati, 2013).

The main thing, refuting the literature on freelance employment, was that participants of this study did not express the same level of uncertainty relating to their

work as presented in some studies (Dex et al., 2000; Watson & Beaverstock 2016). None of the participants mentioned that he or she had issues with searching for clients, lack of projects and earning shortages. The researcher interviewed people with confidence in their professional future regardless of the period of time they worked already as creative freelance workers.

The findings for why creative freelance workers tend to have a mobile lifestyle support the conclusions of different authors including those who argue with each other. We have examples of participants who have moved to another country because of personal or family reasons (p02) or educational trajectory (p05), that is described in some literature as the most significant reasons for the migration (Darchen & Tremblay, 2010; Martin-Brelot et al., 2010). Hard factors, promoted by some studies (Hansen & Niedomysl, 2009; Martin-Brelot et al., 2010) as the main reason/ motivation for creative class migration also played a significant role for a participant who stayed in the country where an attractive job opportunity was proposed (p07). Highly mobile creative freelance workers (p01, p04, p05) stated they were attracted by the factors described in the literature on creative class migration as ‘soft’: access to rich cultural and artistic activities, a higher level of city commodities, a friendlier social environment, etc. (Bennett et al., 2009). However, in the latter cases, the need for mobility was also accompanied by personal stories. The results on the reasons for the mobility of the studied creative freelance workers neither confirmed nor refuted the literature because in our cases the active international mobility among different was strongly influenced by the origin of the workers. Mobility is a necessary condition for the professional development and networking of creative freelance workers from Belarus, who can be significantly limited in access to the creative products, artistic environment and better means of production in a post-Soviet Eastern European country compared to more developed countries in the West. The unfavourable economic and political situation in Belarus motivates them to be more mobile and look for ‘cultural oxygen’ (p04). These reasons were also important to the students from the focus groups, who reflected them hypothetically without an experience of active international mobility.

The categories of ‘digital nomads’ or ‘Eurostars’, described in the literature (Favell, 2008; Czerniawska, 2014; Reichenberg, 2018), can be hardly applied to the participants of the study. The interviewees did not treat mobility or the act of

relocation as a condition of creativity in its own terms, rather they looked for cultural and creative products, inspiration and means of production so was therefore helpful to their particular area of work. Their mobile lifestyle was far from working in the same Starbucks cafes from the different parts of the world, rather related to the continuous residence with deeper integration into a new society while still maintaining a strong attachment to home. The only participant who claimed to be a 'digital nomad' (p05) considered staying in another country for a longer period and has recently entered a postgraduate course at an EU university. The participants were also sceptical towards the idea of mobility as a sort of special freedom, describing this as an 'illusion' (p01). This makes our findings consistent with the literature which argues that 'a digital nomad' is not a unique phenomenon or a specific category, but a buzzword (Müller, 2016). The category of Eurostars did not resonate with the experiences of the studied participants due to its focus on people who move to seek a standard job in other European cities where there are better labour market conditions than in their native countries. This was not so crucial for the creative freelance workers in this study.

We cannot fully join the corpus of literature criticising Florida's works (Hansen & Niedomysl, 2009; Darchen & Tremblay, 2010; Martin-Brelot et al., 2010). The findings in this research showed clear examples of voluntary international mobility by an optimistic creative class of people, who migrated to other cities not just because of 'hard' factors or personal trajectories. On the other hand, the findings did not strictly support the importance of Florida's 'quality of place' for the purposes of migration (Florida, 2002). While 'quality of place' was associated with tolerant cities with good amenities and rich cultural or rather bohemian activities, the creative freelance workers from Belarus tended to move to places where the results of their work could be produced in better quality, where they could present their work to a more receptive audience, where they could absorb artistic trends or local cultural codes not as a part of weekend leisure but for professional development, and where they could get access to better educational opportunities.

Nevertheless, the literature on digital nomads (Czarniawska, 2014) and permanently migrating workers (Favell, 2008) is consistent with results on how freelance creative workers perceive themselves. The interviewees' self-perception creates a complicated image, where nobody wants to be defined as an 'immigrant'. The major part of participants considers that they are global enough not to be

considered as migrants. However, they confirm that even their neighbouring countries have so many peculiarities that you need plenty of time for social, cultural and, what is crucial, professional adaptation even if you are a creative freelance worker working with clients across the border. As a result, the further you extend the frames of your world and, consequently, make yourself global, the more difficult it is to keep the feeling of being a global and easily adaptable person. So you tend to better known, well-developed and globalised places. This observation, made by the participant p04, had a support in thoughts of the participant p05. The participant would like to migrate temporarily to some European country or the United States. The only Asian country mentioned was Singapore, actually, one the most globalised place in Asia. So you can keep the feeling of being a global person in a significantly globalised place only.

The findings make a contribution to the debates (Houston, 2008) around the migration of a creative class as a potential investment of social capital for home countries such as Belarus. However, the outcome appears to be greatly affected by the Eastern European background. Belarus is not attractive for the interview participants to come back and stay there permanently due to its less favourable social and political environment, weaker opportunities for professional development and self-expression, fewer cultural activities and lack of qualified educational institutions. Nevertheless, the creative freelance workers with a higher level of mobility are mostly engaged in projects targeted for a local Belarusian audience. This means, that eventually, they transmit locally their unique skills and experience obtained from the different countries and societies they were integrated into. These findings are consistent with the literature claiming the need to re-assess perspectives on emigration resulting in ‘brain drain’ and its consequences (Semiv & Hvozdo vych, 2012). This case of creative skills and experience transmission shows there could be good outcomes if the Belarusian government implements policies to convert ‘brain drain’ into ‘brain circulation’.

The potential for ‘brain circulation’ is also possible due to the strong attachments the interview participants held with their country of origin. Some participants expressed the opinion that they (would) have more pleasure doing projects that could make a contribution to the development of Belarusian design and art. However, their ‘global’ success has demanded much effort and even periods of deprivation, so it would be too naive to think that mobile creative freelance workers

would concentrate all their work on projects at home just because of feelings of national belonging or a special invitation from the government. They did not mention any strong drivers, that would push them back to Belarus. They managed to remove the professional gap that could affect their international work and even their 'cultural code' shaped by their national background was used in 'global' professional activities as well as in Belarus. However, this condition could be specific and only relevant to certain occupations. As the interviewees stated the sphere of creative activities was one of those where peculiarities of national origin could be an added value of the work. It was just important not to be obsessed with it and to avoid a range of specific national features that can affect creative freelance work, for example, a working context that is over-technocratic, politicised, weak in foreign languages, affected by a perception of post-Soviet professional and educational backwardness.



## 6. Conclusion

The current study examined the benefits and negative effects that international mobility shape for creative freelance workers. Also, the author sought to analyse the reasons and influences that contributed to creative workers' choice of freelance employment and international migration. The research was conducted through semi-structured interviews with creative professionals and focus-groups with current or recent students of design and fine art studies. The sample consisted of creative workers and students originally from Belarus, a post-Soviet country which is native for the author and less represented in the migration studies compared to other Eastern European states.

The sample was reliant on gatekeepers, which contributed to the limitations of this work. The group of interviewees was over-represented by professionals with an experience of studying abroad. The research found education to be a strong driver of international mobility for this group of creative workers. Although there were some participants who had only been educated in Belarusian universities and had not experienced an international level of higher education, the sample affects the extent to which generalisations can be made on the international mobility of creative freelance workers from Belarus. In future, this limitation can be reduced by expansion of the sample and new approaches in the recruitment of participants. For example, they can be found through the closer collaboration with the universities alumni networks, publishing houses, IT-companies, etc.

There are no studies that cover precisely the theme of creative freelance workers from Belarus in relation to international mobility. The literature on creative freelance work is rich with research on the benefits and negative effects of freelance employment. The authors of this existing literature have analysed uncertainties, health effects and contexts that conditioned choices in favour of or against the freelance employment. Some papers tried to unpack strategies of how to cope with the negative effects caused by this type of employment. The international mobility of creative freelance workers was partly an object of studies within the categories of 'digital nomads', 'Eurostars' and 'creative class'. There were studies of mobility as a resource of creativity, of factors that explain the choice of a certain place, or geographical, occupational and other characteristics that impact on the activity of migration. The

literature on the migration of ‘the creative class’ from Eastern Europe mainly covers the cases of Russia and Ukraine as the most significant sources of emigrants in the Eastern Europe post-Soviet region. The works were mostly based on quantitative data and concentrated on how the political and economic environment in the region affected the choice of migration, what were the migrating trajectories and pull factors towards mobility and what policies could be applied to prevent migration which is perceived to be a process of ‘brain drain’.

This study revealed that in relation to the effects of freelance work, creative workers were better-adapted thanks to independent and project-oriented tasks at university and because of the part-time freelance jobs they started to do while studying at the university. A period of the office work was common for these creative workers, and negative effects of the standard job caused professionals to switch to freelance work. However, the study did not expose a clear feeling of opposition from creative professionals to working in a company and some of them were positive about it if this employment could provide the flexibility of working hours and presence in the office typical for the freelance work.

A more positive attitude towards creative freelance work was observed in professionals with Belarusian origin than in the established literature on professionals from the European Union and North America (Dex et al. 2000; Clarke et al. 2007; Süß & Becker, 2013). The participants in this research expressed the opinion that they were able to cope with the negative effects of freelance work successfully and those effects were not strong enough to force them to leave freelance work and go to some company. The creative freelance workers in this study could participate in very flexible schemes of employment where the features of remote freelance work were combined with certain elements of standard office work in a company. And it was natural for the participants of the study.

The chapter in this dissertation on international mobility showed a range of trajectories to explain why creative freelance workers chose a highly mobile lifestyle or migrated internationally. The findings did not support the literature on the insignificance of ‘soft factors’ (Hansen & Niedomysl, 2009; Darchen & Tremblay, 2010; Martin-Brelot et al., 2010), such as city amenities, tolerance of the city, diverse cultural life that influence the mobility of creative workers, although personal reasons and job-related ‘hard factors’ were also represented. This research showed the

influence of the Belarusian and post-Soviet environment on the decision to be a highly mobile person. What was crucial, was that creative freelance workers from Belarus were motivated by the opportunities to get access to a better means of production, such as publishing houses, to absorb new creative products and local cultural codes or to obtain ‘cultural oxygen’ that consequently could contribute to their professional development. So, their migration was characterised by the desire for deeper integration into cultures and societies rather than moving to different countries where they could have work from the same Starbucks cafés (Liegl, 2014). They were also quite sceptical towards the idea of freedom and inspiration gained simply by the act of relocation from one country to another and expressed a strong attachment to their place of origin - Belarus. That is why the categories of ‘digital nomad’ or ‘Eurostars’ seemed to be not relevant to the freelance creative workers.

The last thematic chapter in this study examined the significance of national background in the professional career of creative freelance workers. Creative freelance workers and those creative workers who migrated and were employed in another country claimed they did not have the cultural and professional gap claiming themselves to be ‘global’ people and not perceiving themselves as migrants. The specific feature of the creative sphere is that it allowed participants in this research to use the Belarusian background and cultural code as an additional resource for professional work. On the other hand, the findings in this study showed that creative freelance workers were ‘global’ in a specific way. It is easier to be global in highly globalised places and sometimes moving even to a neighbouring country demands an effort to adapt.

Despite the presumed opportunity to work globally, creative freelancers in this study tended to work on projects with a target audience in the same countries where they spent most of their time – in their home country Belarus or in the country where they live permanently after a one-time relocation. This suggests that this group of creative freelance workers can contribute to a process of converting ‘brain drain’ into ‘brain circulation’ (Semiv & Hvozdo vych, 2012). The implication is that this finding could be used as a pioneering case for the governmental structures in Belarus and other Eastern European countries to consider policies for dealing with internationally mobile freelance workers.

This study can be developed in some different directions. There have been recent attempts by Estonia and Vermont in the USA to adapt their visa and labour market policies for the needs of the international freelance knowledge workers. A study involving freelance workers, policy-makers, city managers could uncover more details and recommendations for governments trying to adapt their societies for the changing nature of the contemporary global labour market. The other perspective relates to a more nuanced examination of city amenities that are crucial for mobile creative freelance workers in their choice of migrating. As the finding showed city characteristics could play a significant role for the professionals, if they are more relevant for their working and self-development needs rather for the quality of free time spending. In relation with creative freelance workers, we need to think about the 'quality of place' not only as a comfort for the leisure but a place with good opportunities for advanced education and tools for the professional self-realization. In addition to green parks, bohemian cafes and walking areas they need high-qualified universities, well-equipped film studios, experienced publishing houses, cheap co-working spaces.

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