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*Research Article*

**Return intentions over the life course: Evidence on the effects of life events from a longitudinal sample of first- and second-generation Turkish migrants in Germany**

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# **Return intentions over the life course: Evidence on the effects of life events from a longitudinal sample of first- and second-generation Turkish migrants in Germany**

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## **Abstract**

### **BACKGROUND**

Although a growing body of migration literature has focused on the determinants of migrants' plans to return to the home country, the role major life events play in return migration intention – including transitions and turning points, key concepts of the life course approach – has barely been examined.

### **OBJECTIVE**

We address the following research question: What are the effects of family, work, and health events on the return intentions of first- and second-generation Turks living in Germany?

### **METHODS**

We answer this research question using longitudinal data of first- and second-generation Turkish migrants who participated in the German Socio-Economic Panel (GSOEP) study between 1984 and 2012.

### **RESULTS**

The results for first-generation Turkish migrants show that entering the empty-nest stage, becoming unemployed, and becoming employed in Germany increase the likelihood of intending to return, while partnership dissolution and childbirth act as a deterrent. Partnership formation, entering retirement, and health deterioration neither trigger nor deter the intention to return. For the second generation, becoming unemployed increases the intention to return, while partnership formation has the

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opposite effect. Partnership dissolution, childbirth, becoming employed in Germany, and health deterioration have no impact on the likelihood of intending to return.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

Our study shows that a number of key life events are important triggers of international relocation, although differences emerge when comparing first- and second-generation migrants. Further research could reveal whether these results are specific to the Turkish community.

## **CONTRIBUTION**

The paper proposes several ways in which the life course approach could be developed in return migration research. It is also one of the first attempts to quantitatively assess the role of crucial life events in the family, work, and health domains in the return decision-making process of non-Western first- and second-generation migrants.

## **1. Introduction**

Turkish migration to Germany is one of the major migrations of the last 60 years. According to the 2014 German microcensus, of the five million people with Turkish background living abroad, nearly three million reside in Germany (Aydin 2016). The large-scale migration from Turkey to Germany was first and foremost the result of the bilateral recruitment schemes that started in the 1960s (Hatton and Williamson 2005), when Turkish unskilled and low-skilled male workers were recruited to fill vacancies in the German industrial sector. They were considered ‘guest workers’, reflecting the assumption that returning home was the logical outcome at the end of their short-term labour contracts (King and Kılınç 2013). This did not happen to a large extent, however, despite the economic recession of 1973 and the in-cash and in-kind incentives implemented in the 1980s to encourage return and facilitate re-adaptation to Turkey. Instead of returning home, the ‘guest workers’ started bringing their families (mostly wives and young children) to Germany, resulting in a native-born second generation (King and Kılınç 2013).

Although the vast majority of first-generation Turks settled in Germany many decades ago, it is not a given that they will not return at some point in their lives. Despite postponing the actual return, the idea of going home remains in the imagination of many first-generation Turkish migrants (Baykara-Krumme 2013; Diehl and Liebau 2015; Kunuroglu 2015). For the second generation, considering a move to Turkey is less obvious. Strictly speaking, it would not be a return but a move to a country that they were not born and raised in, yet many retain and perpetuate their Turkish heritage

and identity through intergenerational transmission of the culture, by participating in ethnic organisations and social networks, consuming ethnic media, and regularly visiting their parents' homeland (Bachmeier, Lessard-Phillips, and Fokkema 2013; King and Kılınç 2014).

In the present study we analyse the return migration intentions of Turkish migrants through the lens of the life course approach. More specifically, using German Socioeconomic Panel (GSOEP) data over the period 1984–2012 we focus on key life events, addressing the following research question: What is the effect of family, work, and health events on the return intentions of first- and second-generation Turks living in Germany? We focus on return intentions instead of actual behaviour for two main reasons: GSOEP data does not allow researchers to distinguish return migration from migration to another country (Kuhlenkasper and Steinhardt 2012), and the number of Turkish migrants who left Germany over the period 1984–2012 is extremely low, particularly among the second-generation sample (Diehl and Liebau 2015). However, the intention to return and actual behaviour are two sides of the same coin, interrelated but not necessarily equally influenced by the same factors. Actual return is usually preceded by the intention to return, although not all those who plan to do so end up as returnees because they lack the ability, which is conditioned by obstacles and opportunities in the macro-level context (Carling and Schewel 2018).

The present study contributes to the ongoing debate on international migration in three ways. First, we adopt a life course approach, which has been widely employed in the fields of residential mobility and internal migration<sup>4</sup> (e.g., Bernard, Bell, and Charles-Edwards 2014; Bloem, van Tilburg, and Thomése 2008; Clark 2013; Kley and Mulder 2010; Kulu and Milewski 2007) but is still little used in international migration literature (Wingens et al. 2011). Indeed, as de Valk et al. (2011: 284) state, “Little is known about the background and consequences of life course transitions for migrants and their families.” Second, and related to the first point, in contrast to previous studies examining the effects of life domain statuses (see e.g., Diehl and Liebau 2015, who also study the return migration (intentions) of Turkish migrants using GSOEP data), the present study looks at the effects of life events, including transitions and turning points (e.g., getting married instead of being married, becoming unemployed instead of being unemployed, health deterioration instead of being in poor health).<sup>5</sup> Lastly, as well as

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<sup>4</sup> Although some researchers refer in general to migration, without any further clarification in terms of either internal or international migration, they are actually concerned with internal migration. As Mulder and Hooimeijer (1999: 160) say in relation to topics the life course approach has been applied to, “In the distinction between short-distance and long-distance moves the crossing of administrative boundaries is sometimes used as a criterion, but only to serve as a proxy for distance. International migration has remained a separate research topic.”

<sup>5</sup> Transitions and turning points are both life events marked by a significant change in stages or roles. Although all turning points are transitions, a transition only leads to a turning point when the event redirects a person's life.

family- and work-related factors, our focus is the health domain, which has rarely been considered in prior work (some exceptions are Razum, Sahin-Hodoglugil, and Polit 2005 and Sander 2007).

We rely on the extensive literature on residential mobility and internal migration, which may provide theoretical arguments as to how the life course also matters in the context of international return migration. Differences are to be expected, as in several respects international return migration is more far-reaching than moving a short or long distance within a country. First, for those who do not hold German citizenship, return migration is not just a turning point but possibly also an irreversible event<sup>6</sup> with severe consequences for the migrants, their families, and their broader network. Second, in this specific case, crossing borders implies re-adaptation from a country with more generous social security benefits to one with less generous benefits (Razum, Sahin-Hodoglugil, and Polit 2005), and from a more gender-egalitarian and meritocratic society to one which is more family-oriented and collectivist (King and Kılınç 2014), with different norms and values to Western countries (Kunuroglu et al. 2015).<sup>7</sup> Finally, migrants' perception about their (or their parents') home country might be outdated, idealised, and nostalgic (King 2000; Kunuroglu et al. 2015) and may no longer match that country's reality, especially if they have been abroad for a long time (first generation) or their memories are based on short-term holiday visits during childhood (second generation).

## **2. Theoretical and empirical background**

Over the years, several quantitative studies have attempted to identify the key factors that lead to return migration (intention and behaviour) among migrants of Turkish descent in Germany. Initially the focus was only on the first generation of all ages (Kuhlenkasper and Steinhardt 2012) or of a particular age group (e.g., those of working age, see Schmidt 1994; those in or near retirement, see Baykara-Krumme 2013; Cela and Bettin 2018; Yahirun 2014). More recently the interest has also been in the second generation (Diehl and Liebau 2015; Fokkema 2011; Groenewold and de Valk 2017). To identify possible predictors of return migration, these studies often refer to general theories of migration (Diehl and Liebau 2015; Kunuroglu et al. 2018) such as neoclassical economics (NE), the new economics of labour migration (NELM), structuralism, transnationalism, and social network theory (Cassarino 2004). Based on

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<sup>6</sup> If a foreigner leaves Germany and fails to re-enter the federal territory within six months or within a longer period set by the Foreigners Authority, he/she loses resident rights in Germany. For a detailed description of the Residence Act, see: [http://www.gesetze-im-internet.de/englisch\\_aufenthg/englisch\\_aufenthg.html#p0728](http://www.gesetze-im-internet.de/englisch_aufenthg/englisch_aufenthg.html#p0728).

<sup>7</sup> Several qualitative studies show that Turkish returnees, both first and second generation, experience readjustment and re-integration difficulties in Turkey at both the community and the family level (Grasmuck and Hinze 2016; King and Kılınç 2014; Kunuroglu et al. 2015; Razum, Sahin-Hodoglugil, and Polit 2005).

these premises, Turkish migrants' return or return intentions are hypothesised to be mainly the result of their economic failure (NE) or success (NELM) in Germany, their social and economic ties in Germany and Turkey, and social and economic contexts in both countries. Like studies related to different migrant groups and/or destination countries (Constant and Massey 2002; de Haas and Fokkema 2011; de Haas, Fokkema, and Fassi Fihri 2015; Fokkema 2011; Sander 2007), the findings are often ambiguous or conflicting (e.g., support both the NE and NELM hypotheses).<sup>8</sup>

As noted in the introduction, we deviate from previous studies by using the life course approach. The life course approach analyses life events, which are transitions and turning points embedded in life trajectories that bring about changes from one status to another, with the purpose of explaining human actions and social phenomena (Kulu and Milewski 2007). Life trajectories of individuals may evolve simultaneously or in parallel and be interdependent when an event in one trajectory brings changes in other trajectories, as is likely to happen with migration projects (Köu et al. 2015; Kulu and Milewski 2007). Changes in life domains other than migration affect the economic, social, and psychological costs and benefits of living in one specific place, generating changes in the strength of attachment to and perceived differential opportunities of different locations (Kley and Mulder 2010). Accordingly, individuals might decide to move to bring their location in equilibrium with their perceived need for specific locations and housing (Clark 2013). However, moving or staying is not simply an individual decision: it also takes into account the potential effect on the lives of significant others, individuals with whom migrants have strong relationships.<sup>9</sup> Life events can occur in several domains. As mentioned in the introduction, we focus on three principal life domains – family, work, and health – and investigate the impact events in these domains might have on shaping the intention to return of first- and second-generation Turks in Germany.

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<sup>8</sup> Researchers often justify these ambiguous or conflicting results by stressing that return migration is a complex process and that migrants are a heterogeneous population (see, e.g., Constant and Massey 2002, who show different determinants for remitters and non-remitters).

<sup>9</sup> The concept of 'significant others' has its direct correspondence in that of 'linked lives', identified by Elder (1994) within the life course approach as one of the main dimensions that determine and shape individuals' life course: "No principle of life course study is more central than the notion of interdependent lives" (Elder 1994: 6). The other relevant dimensions are: historical and geographical context, reflecting the time and space within which the individual life course is embedded; timing, i.e., the chronological order of life events; and human agency, in terms of individual choices (Elder 1994).

## **2.1 Family**

Within the first domain of our analysis, the family, we focus on four life events. The first two are related to migrants' civil status and are partnership formation (marriage/cohabitation) and partnership dissolution (separation/divorce/ widowhood). The two others are childbirth and children moving out of the household (entering the empty-nest stage); given the relatively young age of second-generation Turks in Germany the empty-nest event will be considered for the first generation only. According to life course theory and confirmed by research in the fields of residential mobility and internal migration, family-related life events trigger movement because of changes in lifestyle and living conditions (e.g., the need for a smaller house or returning to live at the parental home in case of partnership dissolution; Feijten and van Ham 2007; Michielin, Mulder, and Zorlu 2008), housing needs (e.g., wanting a bigger house in the case of family formation; Clark and Withers 2007; Mulder and Wagner 1993), and neighbourhood preferences (e.g., preferring a less urban dwelling in a child-friendly environment in the case of childbirth; Clark 2013; Clark and Withers 2007). There is less consistency about the type of movement, be it short-distance (residential mobility) or long-distance (internal migration): this has to do with the crucial role of 'location-specific capital' (DaVanzo 1981) and 'linked lives' (Elder 1994) in individuals' decision-making process and, accordingly, significant others' place of residence. Close social ties like family and friends that are present in a particular place are important not only for making people feel at home but also because of the support they provide (Bengtson and Roberts 1991). As family ties are unique and it requires a large amount of time and effort to build a friendship, they are not transferable to another place. A long-distance move will thus result in the loss of location-specific capital in the place the individual leaves behind, while ties in the new place of residence, if any, will be strengthened over time. Because of these opposite effects, it is not surprising that the literature shows conflicting results (Feijten and van Ham 2007; Michielin and Mulder 2007).

As addressed in the introduction, international return migration differs from other types of long-distance move (internal migration). It is a major step, with sometimes-irreversible consequences for the migrants and those who accompany them, as well as for those who stay behind. In other words, the threshold level of returning will be higher, especially for those who are dependent on the presence of significant others in the host country, or vice versa, and when others are forced to migrate as well. This is often the case with partnership dissolution and childbirth. Widowhood leads migrants to stay close to their children and grandchildren (Fokkema, Cela, and Witter 2016). While getting divorced/separated might increase the first generation's need for family support from the home country, and for family migrants the initial reason to migrate may no longer constitute a reason to stay (Bijwaard and van Doeselaar 2012), the more likely

scenario for both the first and second generation is that partnership dissolution discourages return because of the need to maintain frequent contact with children (non-coresident parents) or to avoid more major changes in children's lives (coresident parents). Moreover, a more negative attitude towards divorce/separation in the home country (Akpınar 2010; Kavas and Gündüz-Hoşgör 2010) as well as better opportunities and benefits for divorced people in the host country (Bijwaard and van Doeselaar 2012) might also restrain first- and second-generation migrants from returning. Childbirth, in particular second or higher-order births when the first child is already enrolled in school, is likely to hinder first- and second-generation migrants from returning because of better educational opportunities and school environments in the host country and in order to avoid adaptation problems (Kuhlenkasper and Steinhardt 2012; Senyürekli and Menjívar 2012). Once all children have left the parental home the parents enter the empty-nest stage and are free from daily care and responsibility, which will likely increase the intention to return.

The impact of partnership formation on return migration intentions can be ambiguous for both the first and second generation. First-generation migrants of Turkish origin are more likely to marry someone from the country of origin (González-Ferrer 2006; Kalter and Schroedter 2010): the strong location-specific capital and orientation towards the home country of the new partner might trigger a return (Yahirun 2014), especially if the couple are planning to have children and want to raise them in their home country and culture (Tılıç-Rittersberger, Çelik, and Özen 2011), or simply if they intend to invest and build their future in Turkey. However, marrying someone in the home country sometimes also serves as a legal way to enter the host country (Bijwaard and van Doeselaar 2012). Second-generation migrants of Turkish origin are also likely to marry within their ethnic group, but particularly someone from the second generation (Huschek, de Valk, and Liefbroer 2012), which could either reinforce a joint return project or decrease the likelihood of returning.

In sum, we expect that partnership dissolution and childbirth lower the intention to return of first- and second-generation Turkish migrants in Germany (H1 and H2, respectively), while entering the empty-nest stage increases the first generation's return migration intentions (H3). No hypothesis on the effect of partnership formation is formulated in advance for either generation. Given their young age, we do not examine the empty nest effect for the second generation.

## **2.2 Work**

The second domain we consider is work, and our focus is on three life events: becoming employed, and exiting the labour market towards either unemployment or retirement.

Given the relatively young age of second-generation Turks in Germany the effect of retiring will be considered for the first generation only. Residential mobility and internal migration literature assert that becoming employed diminishes the opportunity to relocate if the new job is in or close to the current place of residence, as it increases individuals' economic attachment to that place. On the other hand, if the accepted job is located elsewhere the individual is forced to relocate (Fischer and Malmberg 2001; Geist and McManus 2008; Mulder and Hooimeijer 1999; van Ham 2001). Empirical studies generally confirm these opposite effects (Clark 2013; Clark and Withers 2007). As employment is one of the most important means by which individuals socialise, exiting the labour market implies not only less economic attachment to the current place of residence but also less social and emotional attachment. In other words, the cost of moving becomes lower when one quits the labour force. Research shows that retirement triggers internal migration, particularly to regions with attractive environmental and leisure activities and lower living costs (Bijker, Haartsen, and Strijker 2012; Stockdale 2014). Whether inactive or unemployed non-retirees will be triggered to relocate depends on the actual and perceived job opportunities elsewhere and on their occupational aspirations (Clark and Withers 2007; Michielin and Mulder 2007; van Ham 2001). In general, however, prior studies show that quitting the labour force before retirement age reduces the likelihood of staying (Clark 2013; Fischer and Malmberg 2001; Stockdale 2014).

At first glance, similar arguments regarding the effects of becoming employed and leaving the labour market are likely to apply in the case of return migration among first- and second-generation migrants of non-Western origin: the attachment to the host country gets stronger when becoming employed and weaker when becoming unemployed or retiring. Yet returning to the home country when becoming unemployed will only be considered when the perceived benefits in terms of job opportunities in the home country outweigh the costs in terms of losing unemployment and other social benefits and job opportunities in the host country. This might be the case for Turkish migrants in Germany, given the continuation of economic growth in Turkey after the 2001 financial crisis (Diehl and Liebau 2015) and the persistent labour market discrimination against Turkish migrants in Germany (Aydin 2016; Diehl and Liebau 2015). The positive effect of job loss on return migration could be even greater for the second generation, as they are generally more educated than their parents. In Turkey they can utilise their human capital (qualifications and language skills in German, Turkish, and English), cultural capital (home and host cultures and customs), and social capital (networks) and aspire to higher-skilled and better-paid job opportunities than in Germany (Grasmuck and Hinze 2016; Kılınç and King 2017; Tılıç-Rittersberger, Çelik, and Özen 2011). A return to the home country when retiring also has negative economic consequences. Although pension portability between Germany and Turkey is

guaranteed, retired return migrants lose non-contributory benefits such as non-portable pension top-ups and other local benefits and services that old-age residents below the minimum income guarantee typically enjoy, such as those for housing, transportation, and leisure activities (Holzmann 2016). Without doubt, these costly losses will play a role in the return decision-making process, yet it is questionable if the lower cost of living in Turkey will outweigh the loss of benefits.

Based on the above, we expect that becoming employed decreases the intention to return of first- and second-generation Turkish migrants in Germany (H4), while becoming unemployed increases return migration intentions for both generations (H5). For the first generation, no hypothesis on the effect of retiring is formulated in advance. Given their young age, we do not examine the effect of retiring for the second generation.

### **2.3 Health**

The last domain we consider is health, by taking into account health deterioration.<sup>10</sup> Health deterioration includes the start of long-term illness or irreversible events like chronic illness and disability, which are likely to restrict individuals' ability to perform daily activities and thus increase the need for support. According to the frameworks developed by Wiseman and Roseman (1979) and Litwak and Longino (1987), health deterioration triggers two types of move among older people: moving close to their children, especially when facing moderate disabilities (comfort moves), or moving to an institution in case of severe chronic disabilities (care moves). The empirical literature on within-country moves finds evidence for both of these types (Bloem, van Tilburg, and Thomése 2008; Choi et al. 2015; Longino et al. 1991).

It is questionable whether health deterioration will push migrants to return, particularly those of non-Western origin. Potential caregivers outside the household (children for the first generation, parents for the second generation) often also live in the host country. Then there are the differences between the host and the home country in terms of healthcare quality, which people appear to be aware of (Böcker and Balkir 2012; Razum, Sahin-Hodoglugil, and Polit 2005). In the specific case of Turkish migrants in Germany, several studies show that although Turks consider the German lifestyle unhealthy because of the weather, high workload, and loneliness (Razum, Sahin-Hodoglugil, and Polit 2005), better financial and geographic accessibility to healthcare deters (unhealthy) migrants from returning (Baykara-Krumme 2013; Bönisch, Gaffert, and Wilde 2013; Razum, Sahin-Hodoglugil, and Polit 2005; Sander

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<sup>10</sup> To the best of our knowledge, no prior research has examined the effect of health improvement on relocation.

2007). However, studies also show a strong resistance to residential care among older Turkish migrants (Denktaş 2011; Liversage and Mirdal 2017), and a common belief that doctors in Turkey understand their illnesses better than German practitioners, particularly when psychological problems related to cultural difference, work ethics, and the general situation of being a foreigner in Germany are involved (Razum, Sahin-Hodoglugil, and Polit 2005). In other words, the absence of language and cultural barriers might outweigh the lower quality of healthcare in the home country. Moreover, among both first- and second-generation Turks there is a strong preference for ‘returning home to die’, because they fear being buried in the host society without certain religious funeral rituals being respected (Guveli et al. 2016).

Given the opposing factors that could play a role in health deterioration, no hypothesis is formulated in advance regarding the effect of health deterioration on the return migration intentions of first and second-generation Turkish migrants in Germany.

### **3. Methods**

#### **3.1 Sample**

To analyse the hypotheses we used data from the German Socio-Economic Panel (GSOEP) for the period between 1984 and 2012.<sup>11</sup> The GSOEP is a longitudinal survey carried out yearly by interviewing a large representative sample of households in Germany (Wagner, Frick, and Schupp 2007). Information is collected on the basis of both individual- and household-level questionnaires, so that demographic and socioeconomic individual characteristics can be matched with variables related to household composition and budget decisions. Turkish households were included in the sample from the very beginning of the study in 1984 as part of those nationality groups with a longer tradition of immigration to Germany.<sup>12</sup> The response rate among Turkish migrants in the first wave in 1984 was around 60%, slightly lower than the response rate for the overall migrant subsample of over 70%. These rates decreased afterwards, for different reasons: unsuccessful interviews, ineffective tracking of individuals throughout the survey, mortality, and migratory movements. However, according to the evidence from the most recent GSOEP waves, the response rate of Turks is the highest among surveyed migrants (Kühne and Kroh 2017).

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<sup>11</sup> The data used in this paper was extracted using the Add-On package PanelWhiz for Stata. PanelWhiz (<http://www.PanelWhiz.eu>) was written by Dr. John P. Haisken-DeNew (see Haisken-DeNew and Hahn (2010) for details). The PanelWhiz-generated DO file to retrieve the data used here is available from us upon request. Any data or computational errors in this paper are our own.

<sup>12</sup> The other migrant groups surveyed from 1984 were Greeks, Italians, Spaniards, and Yugoslavians.

The GSOEP defines first-generation migrants as foreign-born individuals who have been immigrating to Germany since 1948 (see also Bauer and Sinning 2011). This definition also includes individuals who became German citizens after immigration. Second-generation migrants are defined as children of migrants born in Germany. We restrict the sample to first- and second-generation migrants aged 18 years and over who have been in the GSOEP sample for at least three consecutive years.<sup>13</sup> Thus we exclude children whose return intention might depend on their household's return strategy, short-term temporary migrants, and recently arrived immigrants who are still in the process of settling into a new country. The estimation sample for the first generation consists of 10,387 observations related to 909 individuals, and the second-generation sample consists of 1,625 observations related to 248 individuals.

## **3.2 Measurements**

### **3.2.1 Dependent variable**

Respondents of the GSOEP individual questionnaire were asked about their intention to return to their (parental) country of origin and had to choose between three possible answers: return within 12 months, return after a few years, and staying in Germany. Response rates were high: 88% among first-generation migrants and 95% for the second-generation sample. Hence, the possibility of non-response bias is limited.<sup>14</sup> Given that less than 2% of the sample was willing to return within the following 12 months, we recoded the intention to return as a dummy variable equal to 1 if individuals stated intending to return to Turkey either within 12 months or after a few years, and 0 if they stated wanting to stay in Germany. We obviously need to take into account that the nature of the data prevents us from investigating what happens to those migrants that experienced a life event and indeed returned within one year.

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<sup>13</sup> In our estimation sample, after controlling for missing information in the independent variables, the share of individuals observed for less than five periods is 7%. On the other hand, 80% of individuals are observed for at least 10 periods. To test the robustness of our results, estimates were also computed with individuals that had been in the sample for at least 6 or 10 consecutive years, with no significant qualitative or quantitative differences in the estimated parameters. Results are available from the authors upon request.

<sup>14</sup> We conducted a number of balancing tests for available observations of explanatory variables in order to detect systematic differences in observables between respondents and non-respondents to the question on return intentions. For the vast majority of these tests the means of the two groups did not differ systematically.

### **3.2.2 Independent variables: Life events**

Our variables of interest are defined by exploiting the longitudinal structure of the GSOEP data, and represent life events in three principal domains: family, work, and health. Among family events, we take into account four dummy variables related to household composition. The first dummy, partnership formation, is equal to 1 if the individual got married or started to cohabit in the previous year and equal to 0 otherwise. The second dummy, partnership dissolution, takes the value of 1 in the case of separation, divorce, or widowhood in the previous year. Childbirth is equal to 1 if a child was born in the household; entering the empty-nest stage (for the first generation only) takes the value of 1 if all the children had left the household in the previous year. All these variables refer specifically to the situation in Germany.<sup>15</sup> Among work events, we include three dummies that refer to transition into or out of the labour market. Becoming employed refers to those who classified themselves as not working, unemployed, retired, or in education/training in the previous year, and were employed or on maternity leave during a regular job contract in the current year. By contrast, becoming unemployed refers to those who were employed or on maternity leave during a regular job contract in the previous year and were unemployed in the current year. Finally, retiring (for the first generation only) takes the value of 1 for individuals who had a regular job contract in the previous year and were retired in the current year. For health events we defined a dummy variable that refers to health deterioration, which is equal to 1 if the self-reported health status changed from either very good, good, or satisfactory to poor or bad.

### **3.2.3 Independent variables: Control variables**

We included a set of individual characteristics: gender (1 if male), age, number of years since migration (for the first generation), German citizenship (1 if yes), and number of years of education. We also considered two household-level economic variables: a dummy for home ownership (1 if yes) and the logarithm of household net income. The last set of controls accounts for family structure: number of household members in Germany, a dummy equal to 1 for households without any children (regardless of their location), and four dummies that refer to the presence of partner, children, parents, or

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<sup>15</sup> The sample included only a few cases of either marriage to or divorce from a partner who was living in Turkey, and in the estimates we were not allowed to distinguish between such events according to the partner's location because of collinearity issues. A childbirth event, on the other hand, can be defined only as far as the household in Germany is concerned, because although we are aware of the presence of children in Turkey we have no details regarding age and number.

siblings in Turkey.<sup>16</sup> Finally, we included a set of year dummies to take into account possible events related to contexts in both Turkey and Germany that may have an effect on migrants' return intentions. The description and summary statistics of all variables employed in our model are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1: Description of variables**

Variable	Description	First generation		Second generation	
		Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Intention to return	= 1 if the respondent intends to return to Turkey	0.56	0.50	0.31	0.46
Partnership formation	= 1 if the respondent got married or started to cohabit in the last year	0.00	0.06	0.04	0.19
Partnership dissolution	= 1 if the respondent became separated, divorced, or widowed in the last year	0.01	0.07	0.00	0.07
Childbirth	= 1 if a child was born in the household in the last year	0.11	0.31	0.10	0.30
Entering the empty-nest stage	= 1 if all the children had left the household by the last year	0.03	0.17		
Becoming employed	= 1 if the labour market status changes from not working, unemployed, retired, or in education/training in the last year to employed or on maternity leave during a regular job contract in the current year	0.05	0.22	0.13	0.33
Becoming unemployed	= 1 if the labour market status changes from employed or on maternity leave during a regular job contract in the last year to unemployed in the current year	0.06	0.23	0.09	0.29
Retiring	= 1 if the labour market status changes from employed in the last year to retired in the current year	0.01	0.10		
Health deterioration	= 1 if the self-reported health status changes from either very good, good, or satisfactory in the last year, to poor or bad in the current year	0.10	0.30	0.05	0.21
Gender	= 1 if male	0.52	0.50	0.55	0.50
Age	Age in years	44.17	12.81	25.06	5.48
Years since migration	Number of years since arrival in Germany	20.09	9.14		
German citizenship	= 1 if the respondent is a German citizen	0.06	0.24	0.03	0.16
Years of education	Number of years of education	9.10	1.88	10.09	1.88
Home ownership	= 1 if the respondent own his/her house	0.13	0.34	0.20	0.40
Household income	Logarithm of net household income	10.03	0.54	10.14	0.68
Household size	Number of household members	4.26	1.93	4.08	1.92
No children	= 1 for households without any children (regardless of location)	0.33	0.47	0.43	0.50
Partner in home country	= 1 if partner lives in Turkey	0.02	0.15	0.02	0.12
Children in home country	= 1 if children live in Turkey	0.06	0.24	0.01	0.09
Parents in home country	= 1 if parents live in Turkey	0.09	0.29	0.02	0.13
Siblings in home country	= 1 if siblings live in Turkey	0.02	0.15	0.02	0.15

Source: Own elaboration of GSOEP data. Descriptive statistics refer to the estimation sample in Table 4.

<sup>16</sup> Unfortunately, this is all the information we have from the GSOEP data about household structure in Turkey. We lack detailed information on the number of relatives in each category that are living in the home country. In our sample all transitions from 1 to 0 in the dummy for the presence of parents in Turkey refer to the death of the migrant's mother or father, as we do not have any case in which parents moved to Germany.

### 3.3 Procedure

We first present some descriptive statistics on the intention to return and its dynamics over time. Some statistics on the frequency of life events in our sample are also shown. In order to answer the main research question of our paper, the analysis consists of estimating a probit model which allows us to test whether return intentions depend on the life event variables, while taking the control variables into account.<sup>17</sup> Descriptive statistics and estimates are run separately for the first- and the second-generation samples.

## 4. Results

### 4.1 Return intentions and life events: descriptive statistics

Table 2 presents the cross tabulation of present ( $t$ ) and past (last year's;  $t-1$ ) intentions to return. Present return intentions are higher among first-generation migrants (55%, versus 30% among second-generation migrants). The pattern is nonetheless quite persistent across time for both generations. Almost 80% of first-generation migrants who want to go back to Turkey had the same intention one year earlier. The share is somewhat lower (66%) for the second generation. At the opposite end of the spectrum, the share of migrants who confirm that they wish to stay in Germany year after year is higher among the second generation (86%, versus 76% among first-generation migrants). It is also interesting to note that the 'yes-no' changes (20.34%) almost balance the 'no-yes' changes (23.88%) for the first generation, while for the second generation the 'yes-no' changes are twice as large as the 'no-yes' changes (34.39% as against 14.35%). In both cases, changes in return intentions involve a significant share of the sample. According to the hypotheses we formulated in section 2, these changes might be driven by different kinds of key events in migrants' lives, as we will test in our probit model.

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<sup>17</sup> Alternatively, we could have kept the original classification of return intentions in three categories and used it to estimate a multinomial logit. However, the frequency of the 'within 12 months' answer is too low to get significant results in such a model.

**Table 2: Persistence of Turkish migrants' return intentions over time**

	Intention to return <i>t-1</i>	Intention to return <i>t</i>		
		No	Yes	Total
<b>First generation</b>	no	3,628 (76.12%)	1,138 (23.88%)	4,766 (100%)
	yes	1,265 (20.34%)	4,954 (79.66%)	6,219 (100%)
	total	4,893 (44.54%)	6,092 (55.46%)	10,985 (100%)
<b>Second generation</b>	no	1,265 (85.65%)	212 (14.35%)	1,477 (100%)
	yes	217 (34.39%)	414 (65.61%)	631 (100%)
	total	1,482 (70.30%)	626 (29.70%)	2,108 (100%)

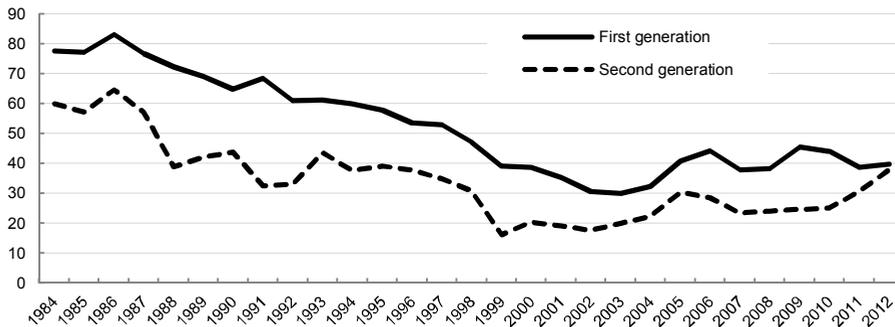
Source: Own elaboration based on GSOEP data.

The detailed time pattern of the intentions to return in our sample between 1984 and 2012 is depicted in Figure 1. Return intentions decline as the Turkish migrant community becomes well established over time (Waldorf 1995). While in the first years of the GSOEP almost 80% of first-generation Turkish migrants wanted to return, the share constantly declined to its minimum level in 2003 (about 30%). This negative trend over time during the first two decades is also common to second-generation migrants, among whom the share of potential returnees reached its minimum value (16%) in 1999. However, a rise in return intentions can be detected for both first- and second-generation Turkish migrants in the 2000s, in line with the observations of Diehl and Liebau (2015) for intended and actual remigration rates. Factors driving this upward trend are likely to be related to both worse opportunities in Germany due to the economic crisis and increasing opportunities in a rapidly growing Turkish economy (Sirkeci, Cohen, and Yazgan 2012) where returnees can exploit their capital (language skills, social connections) and get a higher return on it than in Germany (Diehl and Liebau 2015; Kuhlensasper and Steinhardt 2012). This might also explain why in the last decade return intentions became almost as widespread among second-generation as among first-generation migrants (38% against 40% in 2012).

Table 3 shows the incidence of the life events we are interested in among first- and second-generation Turkish migrants. For both generations the most frequent family-related event is childbirth, involving more than 10% of observations. The frequency of other family-related events is much lower, particularly that of partnership dissolution (below 1%). Of work events, the chances of getting or losing a job nearly balance out in the first-generation sample (4.96% and 5.74% respectively), with a much lower incidence of retirement (1%). Mobility in and out of the labour market is more evident among the second generation, with a higher chance of getting than losing a job (12.74% versus 9.29%). Due to age differences across generations (mean age of the first and second generation is 44 and 25 respectively), the incidence of health-worsening

situations is much higher among first-generation migrants than among the second generation (9.97% versus 4.62%).

**Figure 1: Return intentions of Turkish migrants, 1984–2012 (% of positive answers)**



Source: Own elaboration based on GSOEP data.

**Table 3: Life events (% of respondents)**

	First generation		Second generation	
	Yes	No	Yes	No
Partnership formation	0.35	99.65	3.69	96.31
Partnership dissolution	0.51	99.49	0.49	99.51
Childbirth	10.84	89.16	10.05	89.95
Entering the empty-nest stage	3.12	96.88		
Becoming employed	4.96	95.04	12.74	87.26
Becoming unemployed	5.74	94.26	9.29	90.71
Retiring	1.06	98.94		
Health deterioration	9.97	90.03	4.62	95.38

Source: Own elaboration based on GSOEP data.

## 4.2 Determinants of return migration intention

Results from our probit estimates for both generations are reported in Table 4. Three out of the four life events we consider in the family domain for the first generation – partnership dissolution, childbirth, and entering the empty-nest stage – significantly affect the intention to return to Turkey. In line with our expectations, the effect is negative for partnership dissolution and childbirth (H1 and H2 respectively) and

positive for empty nest (H3). With no a priori hypothesis about the impact of partnership formation, our results show that it does not play any role in affecting return intentions. With regard to the three work events, the expected negative effect of becoming employed in Germany on return intentions (H4) is not observed. In fact, we detect the opposite: an increase in the first generation's intention to return to Turkey when becoming employed. We do find support for H5: becoming unemployed increases the return intentions of the first generation. Retiring, on the other hand, does not play a significant role in shaping return plans (no a priori hypothesis). Health deterioration does not affect return intentions either (no a priori hypothesis).

**Table 4: Determinants of return intentions (probit estimation, marginal effects)**

	First generation		Second generation	
Partnership formation	0.071	[0.087]	-0.167 **	[0.069]
Partnership dissolution	-0.162 **	[0.074]	-0.268	[0.195]
Childbirth	-0.039 **	[0.020]	0.008	[0.040]
Entering the empty-nest stage	0.090 **	[0.036]		
Becoming employed	0.039 *	[0.024]	0.004	[0.036]
Becoming unemployed	0.051 **	[0.022]	0.083 **	[0.040]
Retiring	0.028	[0.049]		
Health deterioration	0.017	[0.017]	0.079	[0.055]
Male	-0.033 ***	[0.011]	-0.072 ***	[0.023]
Age	0.004 ***	[0.001]	0.002	[0.003]
Years since migration	-0.004 ***	[0.001]		
German citizenship	-0.152 ***	[0.024]	-0.160 *	[0.089]
Years of education	-0.017 ***	[0.003]	0.019 ***	[0.006]
Home ownership	-0.046 ***	[0.016]	-0.076 **	[0.033]
Household income	0.043 ***	[0.012]	-0.014	[0.020]
Household size	-0.012 ***	[0.004]	-0.034 ***	[0.009]
No children	-0.051 ***	[0.016]	-0.098 ***	[0.029]
Partner in home country	0.016	[0.037]	-0.203 **	[0.103]
Children in home country	0.143 ***	[0.022]	-0.265	[0.197]
Parents in home country	0.037 *	[0.021]	-0.109	[0.107]
Siblings in home country	0.005	[0.037]	0.262 ***	[0.075]
Year dummies	Yes		Yes	
Observations	10,387		1,625	

Source: Own elaboration based on GSOEP data.

Note: Robust standard errors clustered at the individual level are reported in brackets. Significance levels: \*10%, \*\*5%, \*\*\*1%.

For the second generation we observe rather different results with regard to family events: Partnership formation decreases return intentions (no a priori hypothesis), whereas partnership dissolution and childbirth have no effect (no support for H1 and H2). In terms of working life, becoming employed in Germany does not have the expected negative effect on the intention to return (no support for H4), nor a positive

effect as it does for the first generation. Labour market exit due to unemployment increases return intentions, which is in line with H5 and with the results for the first generation. Health deterioration has no impact on the second generation's return intentions (no a priori hypothesis).

As far as control variables are concerned, first- and second-generation women intend to return more than their male counterparts. Age positively affects the intention to return, although this effect is only significant for the first generation.<sup>18</sup> The length of time spent in Germany is negatively related to the first generation's return intentions; along the same lines, becoming a German citizen significantly decreases the intention to return for both first and second generations. Education also plays a significant role in shaping return plans for both generations, but in the opposite direction: the more years of education, the less the first generation intends to go back to Turkey, while the opposite holds for second-generation Turks. Both generations' intention to return is negatively affected by home ownership in Germany, whereas the realisation of economic resources, proxied by net household income, positively affects the return intention of the first generation only. In terms of household structure, the larger the size of the household in Germany, the lower the likelihood of either generation intending to return. The structure of the family in Turkey is also important in shaping migrants' return plans, albeit in different ways. For the first generation, having either parents or children who live in Turkey increases the likelihood of intending to return, while the presence of either partners or siblings per se does not play any significant role. For the second generation the presence of siblings in Turkey triggers return plans, whereas having a partner there hinders intentions to move.<sup>19</sup>

## **5. Conclusion and discussion**

What are the effects of family, work, and health events on the return intentions of first- and second-generation Turks living in Germany? Our study is one of the first quantitative attempts to answer this research question, using the unique longitudinal German Socio-Economic Panel (GSOEP) data over the period 1984–2012. As opposed to statuses, we focused on the effects of transitions and turning points in specific life domains, establishing a dialogue between the literature related to the life course

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<sup>18</sup> We also controlled for possible non-linear effects of age on return intentions by including the squared term, but unlike Diehl and Liebau (2015), who find two positive coefficients in both the linear and the squared term, we found no evidence of such relations.

<sup>19</sup> This might suggest the intention to bring over the partner, children, and other relatives in the near future, as also shown by the negative (albeit not significant) effect of the presence of children and parents in the home country.

approach, developed mainly for residential mobility and internal migration, and the literature focusing on the determinants of international return migration.

Within the family domain, partnership formation does not play any role in affecting return intentions for the first generation. As discussed in section 2, opposing forces might represent a counterbalance when the partner comes from Turkey (which is often the case): partner's strong location-specific capital in Turkey versus obtaining legal status in Germany (Bijwaard and van Doeselaar 2012). For the second generation, however, the only family event that significantly affects the intention to return to Turkey is precisely partnership formation. The effect is negative, although we did not formulate any *a priori* hypothesis on the sign of such a relationship because of the above-mentioned arguments for opposing counterbalancing effects. A possible explanation might be that second-generation Turks often marry someone who has grown up in Germany, albeit of the same ethnic group. Accordingly, both members of the couple are likely to have strong location-specific capital in Germany that prevents them from having return plans.

As per our expectations, the results show a negative effect of partner dissolution on return intentions. However, since the incidence of such an event in the second-generation sample is extremely low, we observe a significant effect for the first generation only. As most of the migrants who experienced a partner dissolution event in our sample do have children, they might prefer staying in Germany to live close to their children and/or grandchildren. Other factors that are likely to hinder the intention to return among the recently divorced and separated are avoiding a more negative attitude towards separation/divorce in Turkey (Akpinar 2010; Liversage 2012), major changes in children's lives, and taking advantage of opportunities and benefits for divorced people in the host country (Bijwaard and van Doeselaar 2012).

As stated in our hypotheses, entering the empty-nest stage triggers the intention to return, while childbirth hinders return intentions for first-generation Turks. The daily care of one or more children generally strengthens the ties with and orientation towards the host society. In addition, when the first child is already enrolled in school, second or higher-order births are likely to discourage return migration in order to avoid children's adaptation problems in Turkey and because of better educational opportunities and school environments in Germany (Diehl and Liebau 2015; Kuhlenskasper and Steinhardt 2012). After being released from caring duties and responsibilities when all children have left the parental home, the intention to move back to Turkey increases.

No effect of childbirth was found for the second generation. This result might be explained by the fact that in the second-generation sample childbirth was mostly a first-order birth, in contrast to the first-generation sample in which the chance of experiencing higher-order births was much greater. In addition, the above-mentioned argument for being more attached to Germany after childbirth is likely to apply to a

lesser degree if migrants face discrimination and other exclusionary mechanisms that they do not want their children to experience. Although the first generation might also face hostility, its effect is likely to be stronger for the second generation, as being born in Germany they are generally more integrated than their parents and have higher expectations of non-discrimination that might clash with the reality.

With regard to the work domain, we expected and found a positive effect of becoming unemployed on the return intentions of both first- and second-generation Turks in Germany. To a certain extent this might recall previous findings showing that actual return migration increases with unemployment status and duration (Bönisch, Gaffert, and Wilde 2013; Bijwaard, Schluter, and Wahba 2014; Constant and Massey 2002; Kleinepiper, de Valk, and van Gaalen 2015; Kuhlenkasper and Steinhardt 2012). Once in Turkey, returnees might play the ‘transnational card’ represented by their multiple capital – human (languages), cultural (home and host cultures and customs), and social (networks) – which helps them find a job in Turkey that is better paid and higher on the occupational ladder (Grasmuck and Hinze 2016; Kılınç and King 2017). This result might also be driven by the increased difficulties Turkish migrants face in Germany in the aftermath of the global economic crisis, with lower job turnover and longer spells of unemployment.

Contrary to our expectations, no negative effect of becoming employed was found for Turkish migrants’ return intentions. For the first generation the results even show a positive effect. Although becoming employed generally strengthens economic attachment to the host society (Diehl and Liebau 2015), this stronger attachment might be more than offset by the increased economic resources, which could be the necessary trigger to realise the return project that many first-generation migrants have always nurtured in their imagination (Cassarino 2004). The absence of a negative effect of becoming employed on the second generation’s return intentions might reflect their actual or perceived disadvantageous career prospects in Germany. Especially when the new job is below their qualification level, the prospect of pursuing upward socioeconomic mobility in Turkey using their ‘transnational’ assets might lead them to consider moving.

While there is evidence from prior research that entering retirement triggers a long-distance move within national borders, we found neither a positive nor a negative effect on first-generation Turks’ intention to return. This finding suggests that other aspects counterbalance the positive effect on return migration of being free from work obligations in the current place of residence – for example, nation-specific old-age benefits that first-generation Turks, whose income is often below the minimum subsistence level, can only enjoy as long as they live in Germany, like non-portable pension top-ups and housing and transport subsidies.

No hypotheses were formulated in advance about the effects of health deterioration on return migration intentions, and indeed we do not observe any significant impact for either first- or second-generation Turks. The insignificance of health deterioration might be explained by the opposing effects previously discussed, which counterbalance each other in our sample. On the one hand, worsening health and the subsequent increasing care needs might lead migrants to plan to return to Turkey to be cared for by family members who stayed behind, where they will not face language or cultural barriers when accessing healthcare services. On the other hand, the presence of children in Germany and the difference between the two countries in the quality of healthcare services might reinforce migrants' attachment to Germany and be sufficiently strong to compensate for the former effect. This result does not reflect the evidence previously obtained regarding internal moves, which shows a positive impact of health deterioration on relocation choices.

Overall, our study shows that, with appropriate adjustments, theoretical arguments regarding how the life course matters for residential mobility and internal migration also apply to international return migration. Several life events do have an important role in shaping intentions to return (or not) to Turkey, and this study could be replicated in different migrant groups and/or destination countries. Return intention is generally a necessary but insufficient condition for action, as there might be social, economic, and political constraints that prevent people from returning. In addition, as suggested by Carling and Pettersen (2014), return intention might affect other behaviour besides return itself (e.g., investment in relationships, skills, or assets), with consequences for migrants and their families in other life domains that are important to investigate. It would therefore be very interesting to also explore the intention-behaviour nexus within the life course approach.

While not exhaustive, the following topics are also worth considering for future research relating life course theory and international return migration. First, future studies could consider the possibility that people may express a return intention in anticipation of a life event – such as childbirth, retirement, or a decline in health – by means of a fully dynamic model that takes both delaying and anticipating effects into account. Second, future work could address gender effects: given the persistent gendered norms and the division of paid and unpaid work, men's intention to return is more likely to be affected by work-related events and women's by family-related events. Third, while the present study examines the effects of each life event separately, future research could consider the interlinkages of various life events and assess their joint effects (see Kleinepier, de Valk, and van Gaalen (2015) for an outstanding example of examining life course trajectories in the family domain). Fourth, future research could benefit from combining life events with the presence of moving conditions (resources or restrictions) in similar or different life domains, and analyse

the moderating effects of these conditions (for an excellent exercise on residential mobility among older adults in the Netherlands, see Bloem, van Tilburg, and Thomése 2008). For example, when quitting the labour force, poor health status is likely to have a negative conditioning effect on return migration intentions, while high educational qualifications can be expected to increase the likelihood of return intentions. Finally, and closely related to the previous topic, it would be interesting if future research were to take the specific circumstances and life events of significant others into account. For instance, instead of looking at the impact of the presence of parents in the home country (as done in the present study due to a lack of detailed information), it would be valuable to examine the different effects for migrants whose parents are in good health and those with ailing parents. For most of these recommendations, the GSOEP and other existing datasets are inadequate. This is why these recommendations should be taken into account in the methodological design of future surveys aimed at investigating the determinants of migrants' return intentions.

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