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Enforced temporariness and skilled migrants' family plans: examining the friction between institutional, biographical and daily timescales

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the impact of the legal rhythms and temporalities of migration on the specific temporalities of family life, under conditions of enforced temporariness. It apprehends enforced temporariness as a mode of governance infused with chronopolitics, which – by producing specific experiences of time – deprives migrants of the right/capacity to lead their family lives according to their plans and aspirations. Through a focus on highly qualified third-country nationals holding temporary visas in Belgium, it shows that these experiences of time result from the friction between the institutional timescale of administrative procedures and policies, and migrants' everyday and biographic timescales. Starting from the administrative timescales of highly-skilled migrants, the paper describes the existing Belgian migration legislation, with a focus on administrative procedures. It then explores the specific experiences of time those procedures generate, by highlighting different kinds of friction migrants experience as well as their effects. It presents some of the ways these migrants cope with them, and concludes by highlighting the fruitfulness of applying a friction lens to the study of intersecting timescales.

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A multi-scalar approach to the temporalities of migration and family life

The way legal frameworks and migration policies impact migrants' capability (Sen 1999) to pursue their personal and family aspirations has become a crucial question in the current context of increased migratory controls, closed borders and regimes of (im)mobility (Glick Schiller and Salazar 2013; Shamir 2005; Turner 2007). Understanding the consequences of those policies for intimate, reproductive and sexual citizenship issues (Bonizzoni 2018) is urgent. Although migrants are not powerless in the face of the legal system and the normative frameworks that underpin it, their capacity to develop strategies to 'respond to, resist, adapt to and/or bend the laws, rules and procedures emanating from specific policies' (Herrera 2010, 55) in order to pursue their family projects seems particularly at risk today.

This paper examines this question *through the lens of time*. With this approach, we are interested in studying 'friction' (Sheller 2019; Tsing 2005) between legal rhythms and

temporalities of migration, and the specific temporalities of family life – in particular as they impact on highly qualified migrants' decisions, practices and plans. In doing so, we respond to Sheller's (2019, p. 5) call for research on how 'the temporalities of reproduction intersect with the temporalities of migration under various kinds of visa regimes and temporary situations'.

As Näre (2020, 2) points out, 'there is now important research on the importance of time, temporality and waiting in contexts of restrictive migration regimes (e.g. Conlon 2011; Elliot 2016; Griffiths, Rogers, and Anderson 2013; Sutton, Vigneswaran, and Wels 2011)'. Until recently, this body of literature has mainly focused on the experiences of refugees and asylum seekers, highlighting the temporal uncertainties of those who are trapped in the administrative limbo of asylum-seeking procedures and decision-making (for an exception, see Reid-Musson 2018; and Yeoh et al. 2020). However, other categories of migrants, including the highly qualified, are also experiencing forms of 'permanent temporariness' (Boersma 2019) or 'precarious temporalities' (Stevens 2019a), due to their exclusion from long-term residence permits or entrapment in circular pathways (see also Robertson and Runganaikaloo 2014). Horvath (2014, 155) contends the securitisation and economisation of migration underpinning neo-liberal migration policies produce 'enforced forms of temporariness', that deprive migrants of fundamental civic, social and political rights. While Horvath is mainly interested in the macro-level of the governmentality of migration and the State regulations that enforce temporariness on migrants, other research has pointed to the lived experiences that enforced temporariness generates for migrants, such as being 'stuck' in the present, or, as Cwerner (2001, 27) puts it, living in a limbo where 'the future is uncertain; the present seems to be leading nowhere; and the past cannot be relied upon to guide action' (see also Anderson 2009). Temporal control is indeed 'shaped by visa regimes that often require migrants to wait, put their lives on hold, and leave the future unclear', an issue that concerns migrants across the skills spectrum (Baas and Yeoh 2019, 4).

Macro and micro perspectives on enforced temporariness both reveal the importance of chronopolitics (Fabian 1983) in (im)mobility regimes, that is, the use of time as a political device for controlling the time of the 'migrant' (see also Farcy and Smit 2020; Merla, Kilkey, and Baldassar 2020; van Houtum 2010). Time indeed structures migrants' trajectories in various ways, including the length of time they are allowed to stay and the temporal requirements they must satisfy to obtain citizenship in the country of destination (Bauböck 2011). As a structure of power and domination, time plays a central role in social processes of inclusion and exclusion. Temporary statuses, uncertainties surrounding their renewal, and shifting requirements or legislations have immobilising effects not only on a spatial level, but also on a temporal level. This holds consequences both for the immediate, lived experience of time and the capacity to project oneself in the future and pursue personal and family aspirations (Cwerner 2001; Griffiths, Rogers, and Anderson 2013; Merla, Kilkey, and Baldassar 2020; Villegas 2014).

Robertson (2019) has proposed a *multi-scalar approach* to the analysis of the temporalities of migration that allows us to bring to the fore and study the interconnections between, the macro-level of governmentality, the micro-level of the lived experience of time, and the biographical dimension. She argues that specific features of migrants' temporal experiences are produced through the overlapping and intersection of multiple layers of social and political temporal orderings, or 'timescales' (Meeus 2012). She thus

proposes a triumvirate of timescales to understand migrants' experiences of temporality: the institutional time of policy and governance (institutional timescale), the biographic time of life events and imaginaries of pasts, present and futures (biographical timescale), and migrants' everyday lived time (everyday timescale). Based on a study of skilled, educated Asian migrants to Australia experiencing the circular journey between the two regions and/or trajectories composed of a succession of temporary visas, she demonstrates that institutional, biographical and everyday timescales intersect and overlap to produce specific temporal experiences in the lives of migrants, forcing them to 'negotiate fundamental disruptions to teleological imaginaries of life transitions and migration goals' (174). For instance, institutional timescales characterised by constant, unexpected policy shifts affecting visa renewals and creating infinite waiting times can impact biographical events in migrants' lives, jeopardising marriage plans or career opportunities, and shape the rhythms of their daily lives. In this sense, time appears to function simultaneously 'as a mode of governance that disciplines when and under what conditions migrant bodies move; as a component of migrants' own understanding of their biographies in mobility and their individual imagining of mobile pasts, present and futures; and as the rhythms of social life that constitute particular places and spaces' (182). Although family plans and aspirations are not central in Robertson's work, her case studies are filled with examples of how couple and family formation are affected by the temporalities of migration. We thus believe her framework offers interesting ground to study the intersections between the temporalities of migration and family life.

In this paper, we combine Robertson's timescales with a conceptualisation of enforced temporariness as a mode of governance infused with chronopolitics, and which, by producing specific experiences of time, deprives migrants of a series of fundamental rights. We make the hypothesis that these specific experiences of time result from the *friction* between the institutional timescale of administrative procedures and policies, and migrants' everyday and biographic timescales, and deprive them of the right/capacity to lead their family lives according to their plans and aspirations. We focus on the lived experiences of third-country nationals¹ in Belgium, categorised as highly skilled migrants² and holding temporary visas.

Our hypothesis builds on Tsing's (2005) conceptualisation of friction as an encounter (or disruption), that produces movement, action and effect (Sheller 2019) and that involves power dynamics. Using the metaphor of a wheel on a road, Tsing reminds us that friction between the surface of these two materials (the rubber of the wheel and the concrete surface of the road) produces movement, including accelerations, but also decelerations and slow-downs. Friction also involves ideas of power and control, as it channels movement in a particular direction, and, more broadly, 'inflects historical trajectories, enabling, excluding, and particularizing' (Tsing 2005, 6). As Cresswell (2014) notes, 'friction can be a tool in the production of power and can be used by the powerful to slow or stop the mobilities of the (relatively) weak' (110). However, the effects of friction can be constraining and alienating, but also empowering and even disruptive: friction can provide enough grip to move forward without slipping, while differences between two surfaces in contact can deflect the axis of rotation in an unexpected direction. Through friction, understood as encounters, one can try to change the course of things, give them a new direction, and inflect the effects of such encounters. 'Friction reminds us that heterogeneous and unequal encounters can lead to new arrangements

of culture and power' (Tsing 2005, 5). Zhang, Chia-Wen Lu, and Yeoh (2015) seize this idea and claim that friction indeed generates potentially productive spaces for action and individual agentic behaviours. Here, the notion of friction thus directs our attention to how time is slowed, suspended, accelerated or channelled (movement) when different timescales encounter, so that only some migrants can settle permanently and pursue their family projects (effects). The notion also highlights how individuals on the micro-level (re)act to these movements (action) and try to counter their effects, in order to regain control over their lives.

Our paper is structured as follows. First, we present our methodology and introduce the three case studies that illustrate our argument. Second, starting from the administrative timescales of our selected participants, we describe the existing Belgian migration legislation, with a focus on administrative procedures. Third, we explore the specific experiences of time those procedures generate, by bringing to light different kinds of friction our participants experience, and their effects. Fourth, we present some of the ways these migrants cope with them. We conclude with a discussion of our theoretical framework.

Method

Over the past two decades, Belgian migration and nationality policies have become more complex, with increasingly selective policies, a reinforcement of the control of entry and constant, rapid changes in migration legislations and administrative procedures – a trend also observed in other EU countries (see Griffiths 2014, 1999). For instance, a new law adopted in 2012 amended the Belgian Nationality Code, restricting foreigners' access to citizenship, which translated into a significant drop in the change of nationality rate of third-country nationals (relatively stable at around 10% from 2008 to 2012, to 6,9% in 2013 and to 5,7% in 2018 (Myria 2019; Federal Migration Centre 2014)). In 2013, new measures were adopted to counter marriages and cohabitations of convenience, lengthening the time for authorities to consider the reality of the proposed union. In 2018, while there were 1,259,091 foreigners with a valid residence document counted in the country, only 1,043 third-country nationals enjoyed permanent residency (Myria 2019, 30). Temporariness lies at the core of the philosophy behind the current Belgian migration regime: limited stay is clearly the prevailing option, and unlimited stay, the exception (Boucher and Gest 2018; Dauvergne 2016). In addition, the complexity of administrative procedures makes status changes and access to permanent residency and nationality particularly difficult, and sometimes also leads to irregularity, even for those who are legally present on the territory (Farcy and Smit 2020).

The LIMA project, an interdisciplinary project that inductively explores how legal frameworks impact on migrants' agency³, seeks to capture the impact of this migration regime on third-country nationals' family trajectories and plans. For the purpose of this project, 39 highly-qualified third-country nationals⁴ were interviewed in Belgium between September 2016 and January 2019. In this paper we focus on three of these case studies, featuring 5 adult migrants. The interview guide covered the different stages of their administrative, family and professional trajectories (pre- and post-migration), the difficulties and opportunities encountered, and the evolution of their projects and aspirations throughout their stays. It also included an ego-centered network

map and a life-history calendar illustrating their family, professional and administrative trajectories. 2 waves of follow-up interviews (approximately every 12 months) were conducted to capture evolutions and changes in each participant's trajectory and networks.

All the collected material was transcribed, anonymized and first analysed through inductive thematic analysis, where time appeared as a key analytical category. For the purpose of this paper, we thus conducted a second, more in-depth thematic analysis of our material that allowed us to identify frictions in migrants' experiences of institutional timescales and their effects on their family lives and plans, and to select the three case studies that best illustrate them. We felt a focus on a limited number of case studies would allow us to grasp complex administrative trajectories, and to enter more deeply into the lived experiences and family situations of migrants. We were also careful to choose cases from varied nationalities, as our participants' experiences challenge the dominant dichotomic construction of the 'unproblematic' and mostly invisible migration of (white) 'expatriates' from the Global North, versus the 'undesired' immigration of (brown and black) immigrants from the Global South (Baldassar and Pyke 2014).

The three cases feature Aditya, an Indian man who arrived in Belgium in 2007 at the age of 31 with a company-sponsored work visa after being hired by a Belgian company, and his wife Prisha⁵ who joined him shortly after; Lisette and Urbain, a married couple from the Democratic Republic of the Congo – Urbain arrived in Belgium in 2010 at the age of 38 with a student visa to pursue Master's studies and was joined by Lisette in 2013, then aged 24, through family reunification; and Christine, a US citizen who arrived in Belgium in 2010 at the age of 24 with a student visa to pursue PhD studies. All successfully completed tertiary education.

Aditya, Urbain and Christine all three initially arrived in Belgium for occupational reasons (as opposed to family or love reasons) and had a temporary migrant status at the time of the first interview. They however used different ways to enter the country: Aditya had a work visa, Urbain a student visa and Christine entered without a visa. They were all in a couple relationship when we met and were experiencing family and personal challenges. As we detail in the following sections, by having to regularly renew their right to stay in the country, they also all experienced 'staggered migration processes' that is, 'contingent, multi-directional and multi-stage mobility pathways where the boundaries between temporariness and permanence (as both legal status and subjective state) are increasingly blurry and mutable' (Robertson 2019, 170).

Institutional timescales: administrative trajectories under conditions of enforced temporariness

The Belgian migration regime of enforced temporariness is clearly reflected in the administrative trajectories of our selected cases, presented in [Figure 1](#), where each vertical line represents a visa renewal. What immediately stands out is the frequency of status renewals, and the fact that participants combined periods of legal stay with periods of insecure legal status, as well as episodes of irregularity. As a result, administrative timelines challenge the conceptualisation of immigration as a linear progression towards secured legal status and citizenship (Farcy and Smit 2020; Stevens 2019a; Villegas 2014).



Figure 1. Administrative timelines of Aditya and Prisha, Urbain and Lisette, and Christine.

Hired by a Belgian company, Aditya arrived in Belgium in 2007 with a company-sponsored work visa. He was 31 at the time and married to an Indian woman, Prisha. Prisha and their first child joined him through family reunification a few months after his arrival, in October 2007. The couple had their second child in 2009. Until 2012, Aditya had to renew his work permit on a yearly basis, as did Prisha for her dependent residence permit. In 2012, he applied for a permanent residency of 5 years⁶ and in 2017, 10 years after his arrival, he applied for and obtained the Belgian nationality. A few months later, Prisha obtained the Belgian nationality as well.

Urbain arrived in Belgium in 2010 at the age of 38, with a student visa to pursue Master studies. In 2013, he enrolled as a PhD student. His wife, Lisette, and their first child joined him through family reunification in February 2013. Lisette was 24 at the time. They had a second child that same year. Upon arrival in Belgium, Urbain had to prove he was still enrolled in higher education to renew his student residence permit. In 2018, they welcomed their third child. Urbain also completed his PhD studies and found a job in December. His employer agreed to apply for a work permit in his name, thereby allowing the whole family to remain in Belgium. When we last met them that same year, Urbain, Lisette and their three children had not yet received official approval for Urbain's work stay.

In 2010, Christine, then 24, moved to Belgium from the Netherlands, where she was studying, after being recruited by a Belgian university to conduct a doctoral study. However, she only obtained a student visa after her arrival (which she had to apply for at a Belgian embassy in the Netherlands), and thus stayed irregularly in Belgium for a few weeks. She went through various legal processes and obtained a series of legal residence permits, renewable on a yearly basis. In December 2013, her residence permit expired before she could finish her thesis, but she managed to get a research assistant contract at the last minute and transformed her student stay into a work stay. In May 2015, she filed for permanent residency while still unsure about her professional future. Her application was denied because her student stay only counted for half the time she had spent in Belgium. Christine resided illegally in Belgium until October 2015, when she got a new work contract and obtained a 3-year residence permit.

To better understand these complex trajectories, we elaborate briefly on the visa types and administrative procedures existing in Belgium⁷ and constituting the institutional timescale faced by our participants.

Temporary statuses upon entry

Third-country nationals wishing to stay more than 3 months in Belgium like our five migrants must apply for a Temporary Stay Authorization (ASP), or D-type visa, from the competent Belgian embassy or consulate in their country. It is affixed in the passport prior to arrival, and can be granted, for example, for a student stay, professional reasons, or family reunification. There is no maximal processing period, which reinforces the insecurity surrounding obtention of the visa, except regarding the ASP for family reunion with a third-country national, which must be issued within 9 months – as in the cases of Lisette and Prisha. Migrants with D-type visas must officially register at their municipality of residence within 8 days after entering Belgium. A residence check is then conducted by the local authority who then issues a one-year, renewable Certificate of Registration in the Aliens Register (CIRE). People entering without a visa or overstaying their visa – like Christine – may receive an order to leave the territory (OQT), meaning the person can be escorted to the border, and/or administratively detained until execution of the expulsion order.

Status changes

In our three case studies, the migrants tried to extend their stay by switching from one visa category to another over time. This involves a lengthy and complex administrative procedure. Applicants must file a variety of documents such as work permits or profession cards, medical certificates, and certificates of good conduct, proving that they qualify for a residence permit in another category. The procedure is further complexified by the involvement of two administrative bodies (the local municipality and the federal Aliens Office) in the examination and final decision, a process that may take several months. Applications must be submitted to the local municipality, which verifies whether the conditions are met, and then carries out a residence check. The local administration then issues a certificate proving that the application has been submitted and sends the application to the Aliens Office for decision. The Aliens Office decides to grant (or deny) the authorisation, and informs the municipality who then grants the successful applicant a CIRE. Unsuccessful candidates receive an OQT. This process is less complex when people apply for a worker residence permit, as all the steps are handled by the municipality.

Those new visas must usually be renewed every year, except for worker residence permits which remain valid for the duration of the work license plus one month – Christine for instance obtained a 3-year temporary residence permit based on her 3-year employment contract.

Seeking one's way out of temporariness through permanent residency and nationality

Acquiring the right to reside in Belgium on a permanent basis (permanent residency) – like Aditya in our study – is even more complex, as it depends on meeting seven criteria. Applicants must prove that they are nationals of a third country (1) legally residing in Belgium at the time of the request (2) with a legal and uninterrupted stay of five years

(3). Absences of more than 6 consecutive months, and of more than 10 months in total, reset the counter to zero, and stays for studies or vocational trainings only account for half their duration – as Christine painfully learned when she unsuccessfully applied for permanent residency. Applicants must also produce a valid national passport (4) and have stable, regular and sufficient livelihoods to support themselves and their family members (5). The Aliens Office appreciates this based on the nature and regularity of resources.⁸ Finally, applicants must have a health insurance in Belgium (6), and must not violate public order or national security (7). Again, applications must be submitted to the local administration, which then transfers the file to the Aliens office. Obtaining permanent residency does not exempt foreigners from further administrative procedures, as the document recognising unlimited stay must be renewed every 5 years.

Among our cases, only Aditya and his wife were able to acquire the Belgian nationality. Two distinct procedures exist for adults wishing to become Belgian citizens: naturalisation and declaration of nationality. Prior to the 2012 legislative change pointed out earlier, having established one's main residence in Belgium for at least three years was the sole condition for applying for naturalisation. But since 2012, naturalisation has been drastically restricted to people demonstrating exceptional merits in the scientific, sporting or socio-cultural fields. The 2012 law also severely restricted the acquisition of nationality by declaration. Before those changes, that avenue was open to permanent residents who had been living in Belgium for at least seven years at the time of the application. The new 2012 law introduced conditions in terms of economic participation, social integration, linguistic proficiency and participation in the life of the host community. Since those changes, acquisition of the Belgian nationality has become quite exceptional.

Aditya, Prisha, Urbain, Lisette and Christine's administrative timelines thus reflect the complexity, versatility, and increasing restrictionist character of Belgium's migrant legislations and administrative procedures, which result in prolonged periods of temporary stay. In the next section, we delve further into migrant lived experiences of time such a context generates.

Frictions between institutional timescales and migrants' everyday and biographical timescales

In this section we examine the movements and effects arising from the *friction* between institutional timescales and, first, migrants' everyday timescales and, second, migrants' biographical timescales.

Temporary migrants' everyday experiences of institutional timescales

In our case studies, migrants experienced friction between their everyday timescales and institutional timescales, that had constraining and disempowering effects on them. The temporalities of administrative procedures for visa applications or renewals strongly disrupted their everyday, short-term schedules. Our participants used terms like 'running, rushing, running around, stress, panic', but also 'waiting, time-consuming or waste of time', to emphasize the speed and stress surrounding everyday administrative procedures and their struggles to meet legal requirements within short and strict time periods. They

also expressed their exasperation over the long waiting periods they had to endure to get a response from the administration, and which generated feelings of being stuck in place and time. Organizing one's everyday schedule became extremely hard in those contexts.

Our interviewees recalled long waiting lines with people jumping queues, others got up very early to get a shot at entering the administration queue and still had to wait hours with no guarantee of actually meeting a clerk. Some also experienced having documents expire before they could get a decision, meaning they had to file the whole process all over again. In the following quote, Lisette underlines the extent to which her daily schedule was fully dedicated to – and disturbed by – the visa procedures, and, in particular, the disorganisation and unpredictability of the administrations' planning.

Lisette: The procedures were not easy. I first did, how many times? Three times the procedures. [...] I lived in a commune that was kind of far from [the embassy] and you had to get there at 7 am. So practically, I had to get at 4 am to get ready and go there. [...] And when you got there, there were a lot of people. Even if you got there early, sometimes people who arrived late, and you don't know why, were called before you. [...] So it takes time. [...] and at some point, they tell you 'We're stopping here, you go home'. And you must go home and come back again.

Migrants' capacity to make short-term projects was also impacted. After rushing to introduce her visa renewal application on time, Christine for instance had to give up her plans to visit her family for Christmas, as she explains below.

Christine: Once I got that stuff in on time I had to wait like a month for federal decisions to be made. So I couldn't leave the country for Christmas [to visit my parents]. I couldn't do a thing [...].

This succession of rushing and waiting periods was sometimes experienced as unfair, both by the initial – migrating – person and by family members waiting for their relative to visit, or their own visa to be processed.

In addition, having to renew their residence permits or redo procedures after being refused made our participants feel like they were running around in circles and caught in a vicious circle while repeating the same experiences over and over again. Lisette failed to get her Belgian visa several times, and had to wait long periods to be notified of the administration's negative decision – a delay which, according to her, reflects the will of the authorities to postpone her next application. In the next quote, she also shows how exacting requirements make deadlines impossible to meet.

Lisette: I had proof that I was born in the Congo but my birth certificate was from Kinshasa; they turned it down [...] and I had to do all that travelling and waste all that time [...] I brought the birth certificate back, and they called me a second time to tell me that now 'The medical certificate you gave us is almost expired. You need to redo it'. [...] And you need to do it all over again.

Each of these steps were lived as an everyday battle against time, where the friction between strict formal institutional timescales and migrants' everyday, short-term schedules generated discouragement and feelings of disempowerment.

Besides, during family reunification processes, the institutional temporalities of countries of origin and destination often conflicted, rendering frictions on that level all the more present. Our participants faced temporal clashes between these different

contextual temporalities when experiencing slow administrative procedures in their home countries (e.g. for the legalising or gathering of certain documents) while having to hurry on the other end to meet Belgian deadlines, as explained by Aditya:

Aditya: The documents here in Belgium were more or less organized; I just had to run around to get them together. But in India it was a bit more challenging, not only the consulate but the Indian government itself: because certain documents required some attestation by the government and Home Minister. And that does take time. It's not like you can get it over with right away.

De-synchronisation between the institutional temporalities of administrative procedures in origin and destination countries reduces the grip between the two systems, preventing migrants from moving forward in their trajectories.

The three cases also reveal how much the unpredictability of administrative procedures and migratory policies limit migrants' capacity to (re)take control over time and obtain a visa without hindrance. Our participants carefully planned their next administrative steps (e.g. a permit renewal or an application for a permanent residence permit) to ensure they would meet legal requirements on time. However, they were often confronted with slow and arbitrary administrative procedures – even administrative errors in some cases – resulting in long waiting periods, no fixed dates to get a decision, and insecurity, as Christine explains in the following quote:

Christine: By May last year, I'd been here for 5 years. [...] So, I thought, ok, perfect, I can apply for [permanent residency] and [...] that will basically be the last time I have to deal with these contracts running out and the panic of deportation. [...] I had to go to the commune and tell them basically I want permanent residency. Which I had repeatedly already asked them for 'Coming up in May I am going to have 5 years. What [do I] need to do?' I wanted to have everything ready. 'Nothing, you just come here and you just tell us because we have your file. We have everything'. So, I went in, did that. Seemingly everything was fine [but I never received the decision so I called] and they said 'We don't know what you're talking about. There's no file here'. [...] they had no record of me applying for permanent residency [but] I was already working on the deadline.

The disempowering effect of the friction between migrants' anticipation of administrative temporalities, and actual institutional timescales also results from a lack of information and last-minute requests for legal documents migrants were not advised of in advance, creating a sense of urgency to meet the deadlines and, again, be 'on time'. Sudden and unexpected shifts in policies and administrative criteria – which are relatively frequent within the context of increasingly labile and restrictive migratory policies – also create a sense of insecurity. Urbain is fully aware of this situation.

Urbain: We already had some information [regarding permanent residency] but ... You know, law is alive, it changes ... We don't know, maybe when the time comes, legislation will have changed.

These high-skilled migrants may be said to experience 'contingent temporality' (Robertson 2019), a constant juggling and redefining of futures and projects across a dynamic institutional timescale. Constant legal changes and the uncertainties they generate do not 'give things enough purchase to move without slippage' (Sheller 2019). As a response,

our participants often had to shift their plans. This also concerns their longer-term biographic and family projects, as we will discuss in the next section.

Friction in temporary migrants' biographic timescales and family lives

Temporariness more broadly impacts on migrants' biographic timescales and family lives. Indeed, throughout all of our cases, family plans and transitions within the biographic timescale such as finding a home, settling somewhere, getting married or having children, frequently appeared to be structured and shaped by the institutional timescale imposed upon them by their migrant status and temporary situation. In their encounters with administrative timescales, biographic timescales and trajectories might be accelerated, suspended or delayed. Our subjects had the feeling of moving backwards instead of progressing through crucial life-stages, and faced the impossibility of projecting themselves (and their families) in the future.

Our participants described settling down in a foreign country, far away from their family members, as a very stressful period. They regretted having to rush to make important decisions with long-term biographical consequences for themselves and their relatives – like getting married or finding an accommodation. During his interview, Aditya clearly expressed a feeling of acceleration, stemming from a clash between the necessary procedures and the temporalities of finding a place to settle down, as well as the temporalities imposed by strict migratory administrative processes.

Aditya: When I landed in Belgium, the first thing I had to do in the next seven days was find a place to live [...]. I had to choose where I wanted to live within seven days. [...] So I got a house contract [but] the house was not in good shape, and I signed the contract for six months. [...] That was a very big challenge for me [...] normally [...] getting an apartment is almost like a three to six months' project [...]. Otherwise you end up in a very shabby place [...] it was definitely a nightmare, really a nightmare. [...]

These periods of accelerations are closely intermingled with episodes of suspension and delays in biographic timescales. While some experienced these periods of suspension in a positive way as a time to 'stop and think' in the midst of urgency and stress, others struggled to strike a balance between their personal life and their migration trajectory, and put off some important life choices and plans (e.g. getting married, having children, moving elsewhere with a partner or even settling down). In the next quote, Christine expressed how much her life is on hold until she gets permanent residency.

Christine: [My ex-boyfriend was from Africa and] I had considered moving to Africa. But then decided against it because I am already so close to my citizenship. And to give that up, you know, for my personal life. I just couldn't do it. [...]

She also found it difficult to create a real 'home' for herself in Belgium.

Christine: Until this year, I refused to get new furniture for my dining room because I am like, I don't know, I might have to leave in 3 months. [...] So, I refused, I had a couch. [...]. Is it worth investing in buying a home? I'm going to buy a home and then what? Have to move? [...] It just feels like a waste of time to buy something for the walls or even think about buying an apartment here. [...]

In the end, all of her life plans were disrupted by her constant struggles to renew her visa:

Christine: The second you sort out one [employment] contract you have to be looking for the next. So, you can't think about establishing your life, whether it's your relationships, your family life or housing or buying a car or anything like that. [...] I don't think I would have had children but ... I don't know. [...] In general, I think you have to settle before you can start thinking about those things.

Interestingly, Christine postponed her marriage with her current European partner as she did not want that key moment to be polluted by administrative considerations (here, getting Belgian nationality). Migration policies, visa constraints and administrative deadlines thus shape migrants' lives as they delay desired or intended family trajectories, revealing the channeling effect of friction on their trajectories. As argued by Robertson (2019, 179), 'institutional processes still work to temporally contain migrant bodies [...] in particular states and particular spaces' and push migrants in certain directions they would normally not have taken to obtain migration related outcomes.

Participants also experienced steps backwards in their life trajectory. Urbain went back to a lifestyle that did not correspond to the life stage of a man in his mid-forties. Upon arrival, he struggled to find his own independent accommodation because of his temporary and insecure student visa. He had to stay at his uncle's for 6 months, and then share a house with some friends before finally accessing his own independent place. Those steps backwards are precisely what Christine wanted to avoid, despite her unstable status in Belgium. In order to finish her thesis, she could have moved back to her parents' in the US, but that would have meant living off her parents, becoming dependent on them, which is something she absolutely wanted to avoid. She also highlights how much such steps backwards – here linked to the potentiality of moving 'back' to one's parents – can put couple relationships under strain.

Christine: I was living with my boyfriend so where does he go? What do we do? So, [moving back to my parents'] was an option but it was a last resort.

Temporariness also impacted our participants' long-term projects. Many struggled to make plans over the long-term both for themselves and their families, and felt stuck in the short-term.

Lisette: Here, in Belgium, it's simple, everything is locked [...]. We cannot make any new projects. [...] All that comes with a secure stay. Somehow, even if you have an idea, you don't know if it's going to work. You give up ... [...] We live day to day.

Lisette experienced a 'directionless time' (Brekke 2010), a time where the present does not point in any specific direction. The friction between temporariness enforced by institutional timescales and biographic projects makes migrants' life trajectories so slippery that time loses its direction. Christine also expresses this feeling of being stuck in the short-term. During her interview she emphasized how inconceivable it would be to give up and leave at the end of her PhD and before getting Belgian nationality, especially after enduring so much stress and waiting. This shows how locked people are into a vicious circle that prevents them from formulating new projects.

Such temporariness has important consequences not only for individuals, but also for their family members (partner, children, parents). Urbain's interview brings this to light particularly well.

Urbain: The question of making long-term projects here, because I need to renew [my residence permit] every year, is very limiting. You first ask yourself how you will survive next year here before even considering making long-term and solid projects. [...]

Having to renew his visa every year traps him in an unstable present and weighs heavily on his psychological well-being.

Urbain: Now, if your residence situation does not become permanent, if it stays unstable, then you better look for opportunities elsewhere. Because, even psychologically, it's not healthy to live permanently in instability. [...]

Instability prevents him and his wife from fulfilling their parenting role of providing a future for their child.

Urbain: It's also an investment, let's say, personally, socially, for the family, and it's important to keep your family in good conditions to be able to go forward. When the children are there, we have the feeling they are aware of some things, even if they're still little. And you need to make them safe in various aspects. [...] It's important for us and it's important for them too to be able to grow up in a stable environment. [...] [but] the student permit is very unstable, very, how can I say, precarious.

Beyond temporariness *per se*, accelerations, suspensions, delays or steps backwards in migrants' timescales may also directly result in friction with their family members' timescales. Those persons may indeed be following other temporalities, either because they are located in different geographical and national contexts (e.g. in the case of transnational families or families waiting to be reunited), or because of their different legal statuses (e.g. in case of a third-country national being in a love relationship with a Belgian citizen). As highlighted by the notion of 'stratified citizenship' (Morris 2002), individuals and their family members living in the country may be holding different residence permits granting them different rights, and thus placing them in different contexts of opportunities and constraints, which can in turn lead them to nourish diverging projects. The postponement of marriage or childbearing projects by a partner waiting for permanent residency is a striking example of this friction. Participants expressing a desire for stability and fixedness, in contradiction with their Belgian partner's desire for travel, is another relevant example. As temporary migrants' trajectories become more uncertain, their family, work, and educational trajectories simultaneously become increasingly fragmented and intermingled (Vlase and Voicu 2018).

Agency and strategies to deal with time

In this last section we now turn to our participants actions to (re)gain control over their lives. As explained in the theoretical introduction, friction can indeed support agency in providing a 'grip' to move and react to time constraints. Our highly-skilled participants are not powerless in the face of enforced temporariness and develop various strategies to

act upon time and limit the negative effects of institutional timescales on their trajectories. First, their narratives revealed strategies of stretching and controlling time to overcome temporariness. When her 4-year doctoral fellowship expired, Christine managed to extend her time in Belgium by negotiating a few months' extension with the administration on the grounds that she needed more time to defend her thesis. With Urbain's student stay gradually coming to an end, Lisette enrolled in higher education so that the whole family could switch onto her student stay in case Urbain could not find employment in Belgium and switch to worker status. Second, our participants also often anticipated administrative procedures, even if it was hard to get an accurate and reliable idea of the local or national administrations' requirements. They gathered information beforehand on the Internet, on forums, at the administrations themselves, or through acquaintances who had been through similar processes. They sometimes adapted their personal situation too. Urbain, for example, really worked hard during his Master's studies to increase his chances to get a doctoral grant and meet the income requirements of family reunification. He explained:

Urbain: [My wife] came in 2013. Having your family coming during the Master's is really difficult because there's no real funding. It's easier during the thesis because then, you can get a grant and meet the legal requirements. [...] So I needed to work assiduously during the Master's to finish with a good ranking and very good grades so that when I went to ask for funding, I'd be well placed [...] [and] increase our chances.

In all the selected cases, individuals reached out to their support network to handle difficult institutional temporalities. Christine asked her parents to help her get her FBI background check for her visa application as she could not go back to the US to get it in person. She also asked her colleagues and professors to keep track of her permanent residency file while she was waiting for a decision from the administration. Urbain asked an uncle if he could go live with him until he could get a place of his own. Aditya reached out to the Indian community in Belgium to find a place to live within a very short period of time when he first arrived in the country. He also turned to his work environment with a colleague helping him fill out the registration forms at the town hall:

Aditya: I had help from my company. I couldn't do it so I asked for help from my company and they said 'Okay, we'll help you out' and one of my colleagues helped me fill out the forms. [...] Once the agency came into the picture, they were quite professional; they knew what had to be done, so it was very fast.

When facing temporal constraints over which they have limited control, our participants thus developed coping strategies and tactics to mitigate their effects, and their ability to do so greatly depends on their social networks, as well as their level of legal consciousness (Ewick and Silbey 1999) and migration literacy (Stevens 2019b). Our three cases feature highly-qualified migrants with rather privileged positions ensuring them high levels of cultural and social capital to access the necessary resources (networks, information, etc.) to mitigate the effects of enforced temporariness on their family lives – yet they still struggled with friction between temporalities.

Conclusion

This paper contributes to a growing literature on the intersections between migration policies, the temporalities of migration, and family life. It does so by building on Robertson's triumvirate of timescales, which proved particularly useful in analysing the multiple dimensions of migrants' temporalities that are impacted by institutional timescales. Our paper also further develops this concept by conceiving these timescales not only as 'conflicting and overlapping' (Robertson 2019, 170), but as entering in 'friction', as suggested by Sheller (2019). Here we dug into Sheller's intuition, expanded on the notion and showed how to operationalise it. To date, 'friction' has indeed mainly been conceptualised to study globalisation and cultural diversity (Tsing 2005) or transgovernmentality (Zhang, Chia-Wen Lu, and Yeoh 2015). By articulating friction with Robertson's conceptualisation of timescales, we showed that the unpredictability of administrative procedures produces everyday experiences of being entrapped in the 'now' – a 'now' characterised by (sometimes concomitant) episodes of rushing and waiting – as well as biographical or 'life course disruptions' (Stevens 2019a) – as migrants accelerate or postpone family projects in response to migration policies. But we also firmly connected these movements with power dynamics, through processes of exclusion from settlement (effects), and with agency (action), as individuals try to regain control over their lives. This approach helped us demonstrate how enforced temporariness, as a mode of governance infused with chronopolitics, deprives migrants of fundamental rights through the production of specific experiences of time.

This paper also challenges 'the perception that there are two classes of the globally mobile – one that is privileged, 'frictionless' and transnational, the other being highly disadvantaged and vulnerable' (Baldassar and Pyke 2014, 4). The cases we presented here all feature skilled migrants whose profiles are supposedly appealing to knowledge-based economies (Schittenhelm and Schmidtke 2011), and whose migration is therefore often presented as 'frictionless'. Yet, these narratives highlight that they too experience disrupted trajectories and directionless time (Brekke 2010), rendering it extremely difficult to make informed decisions for the family and to project into the future – an experience initially observed amongst asylum seekers. Unlike asylum seekers, our participants did not face the terrible threat of deportation to an unsafe country – which makes the latter experience even more stressful. Yet, our results suggest that enforced temporariness and hardening migration policies deeply affect people across educational and skills levels, migrant statuses, and ethnic boundaries.

This being said, this paper ultimately emphasizes the need for future research applying an intersectional lens when studying friction between the temporalities of migration and family lives under conditions of enforced temporariness. When dealing with judicial and administrative systems, migrants indeed face discrimination based on gender and/or race and/or age and/or other markers of difference, regardless of their legal status and (recognised) skills level (for Belgium, see Mascia 2019). Those markers of difference also influence their capacity to access and mobilise resources to act upon the frictions we identified in this paper, and eventually pursue their family projects. Research blurring conventional dichotomies between migrant categories, and closely examining how various markers of difference impact on migrants' experiences and trajectories would be particularly fruitful in this respect.

Notes

1. Here, the term ‘third-country nationals’ refers to migrants coming from countries outside the European Union.
2. As Hercog and Sandoz (2018)’s special issue highlights, highly skilled migration can be defined in many different ways and cover distinct realities. This paper focuses on migrants having successfully completed tertiary education (Belgian Contact Point of the European Migration Network 2013), and whose level of qualification is recognized in the host country and connected to their visa type.
3. *Personal Aspirations and Processes of Adaptation: How the Legal Framework Impacts on Migrants’ Agency*. ARC Project n°15/20-064, UCLouvain. See <https://www.limaucloouvain.eu>.
4. 7 Congolese, 20 Indian and 12 US citizens aged between 22 and 49, with varied profiles, including 23 men and 16 women. For more details on the recruitment strategy, see (Farcy and Smit 2020).
5. Please note that, in this case study, only Aditya participated in our interviews. Aditya and Christine were interviewed in English, and Urbain and Lisette, in French. We use pseudonyms in this paper for anonymity purposes.
6. As explained here below, the validity period of a permanent stay is unlimited but the document recognizing this right expires after 5 years making its renewal mandatory for individuals.
7. Source: www.adde.be.
8. A minimum amount is established by the Royal Decree of 8 October 1981 and indexed each year. In 2017, it was 809 euros for the applicant and 270 euros for each dependent family member (www.adde.be).

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