

Cross-national and cross-cultural analysis of student motivation for mobility within the Erasmus+ programme

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Abstract. The aim of this article is to present the results of a study of students' motivation to participate in Erasmus+ mobility programmes. The theoretical framework was based on the Multidimensional Scale of Motivation to Study Abroad (MMSAS) and the push-pull theory. The survey included 230 respondents from Poland, Turkey, Italy, Romania, and Belgium. The results confirm the multidimensional nature of motivation, which includes both personal and academic aspects. Although the comparative study reveals differences between countries, improving foreign language skills, cultural experiences and career advancements are the most important motivators for students to participate in mobility. Structural constraints still limit mobility in some countries. One of the recommendations proposes a greater adaptation of the Erasmus+ programme's promotion to regional contexts to encourage students to participate in mobility.

Keywords: Erasmus+ programme, international students' mobility, push-pull theory, higher education internationalisation, study abroad motivations

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1. INTRODUCTION

Student participation in the Erasmus+ exchange programme is steadily growing, prompting researchers to investigate the motivations underlying students' decisions to study abroad. Understanding these motivators are important not only from an academic perspective but also for the universities themselves, which promote and support mobility. Prior research shows that students' decisions to join the Erasmus+ programme are motivated by a combination of personal ambitions, academic and career goals and socio-cultural factors. These drivers may depend on the national context; therefore, the motivations of Erasmus+ students in one country may differ from those in another. A theoretical framework from the Multidimensional Scale of Motivation for Studying Abroad (MMSAS) (Aresi et al., 2018) was used to categorise these motives. They included the dimensions of academic learning, intercultural experiences, career and personal development and foreign language learning. The push-pull theory (Nikou et al., 2023) indicates that some students are 'pushed' by the factors related to their home country (economic pressure, lack of development opportunities), while others are 'pulled' by the attractions of the host country (better conditions, better education). The theoretical framework became a reference point for the creation of an original research model that integrates categories from the MMSAS tool with mechanisms derived from the push-pull theory.

This article presents a comprehensive comparative analysis of the motivations of Erasmus+ students from five countries, based on literature and survey data. Among these countries are Poland, Turkey and Romania, Central and Eastern European countries, which are characterised by lower incoming mobility and more limited opportunities within each country. Additionally, there are also Italy and Belgium, two Western European countries, with high student integration in terms of mobility and more developed support networks for exchanges. By analysing the common and distinguishing features of these contexts, this analysis investigates how national conditions influence students' expectations of the Erasmus+ programme.

Section 1 discusses the significance of this study. Section 2 is devoted to a literature review on research into staff-perceived student motivations in international mobility programmes. There is also an overview of the push-pull theory and the Multidimensional Scale of Motivation for Studying Abroad (MMSAS) framework, considering regional and intercultural differences. Section 3, describes the methodology of the comparative study. The results are presented in Section 4 which also indicates the different motivational profiles of students from five countries in relation to the theories and hypotheses demonstrated. The final section reflects on implication for future research and university policy.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Multi faces motivations and the push-pull dynamics of Erasmus+ participation

Recent research proves that students involved in the Erasmus+ programme may have diverse motivations. These motivations are complex and multifaceted. They reach beyond simple reasons and often reflect a deeper commitment to the programme. Krzaklewska (2008) conducted early and groundbreaking research in which she identified four fundamental dimensions of student motivation. They include academic, linguistic, cultural, and personal reasons. This research indicates that students generally may be grouped into two main categories. One group emphasises academic and professional achievements, while the other focuses more on cultural and personal development. Subsequent research has confirmed this duality. In a study conducted in six countries, Van Mol & Timmerman (2013) found that various factors play a role in the decision to study abroad. Individual characteristics matter, as do structural influences. Students who possess a good command of a foreign language often have parents with international experience or benefit from a supportive peer network and are therefore more likely to engage in mobility opportunities. This

suggests that personal motivations can be reinforced or amplified by the surrounding environment. A significant study conducted in Turkey found that students identified various influences. They listed the push factors, such as better career opportunities and the desire to leave behind limited prospects in their home country. Furthermore, they highlighted the pull factors, including the opportunity to gain a better education and international recognition. The idea of studying abroad proved to be a significant investment. It brings mobility capital, including cultural capital, which encompasses skills, networks, and qualifications acquired through international experiences. The research by Haisley et al. (2021) also points to the importance of the push and pull factors as a framework for explaining student choices. Country of origin appeared as an important predictor of motivation. International students had stronger motivations related to language learning, academic development, avoiding social restrictions, and aspirations to work in the host country than students from the USA. In this regard mobility motivations are close to the general emigration aspirations of the youth (Aliyev et al., 2023; Kostelić & Fleşeriu, 2023).

Certain motivations appear to be common across Europe. Many students say that participating in the Erasmus programme has helped them develop as individuals and become more independent. The ongoing digital transformation in the higher education institutions and the development of digital platforms for learning and communications have increased opportunities for students' mobilities (Kokko et al., 2025; Sułkowski & Ulatowska, 2025; Silva Carmo et al., 2025; Staniec et al., 2023). Students perceive living abroad or engaging in digitally supported experiences as an opportunity to learn new skills and gain life experience (Sigalas, 2010; Grebe, 2023). This possibility is especially important because of the pandemic influence on education and student's concerns regarding quality of education and recognition of the formal achievements during studying (Kolodziej & Kolodziej-Durnaś, 2024; Rydzak et al., 2025).

Another strong internal driver is intercultural curiosity (Dolce et al., 2023). Many students want to meet people from different countries, try new ways of living and experience a different perspective. Externally, academic and professional goals are important. For example, students often seek academic programmes that are not available in their home country (such as specialised courses or better-equipped programmes) or want to improve their career prospects by gaining international qualifications and better interpersonal skills (Lesjak et al., 2015; Zuil et al., 2022). These intensions are supported by national and university-level policies aimed at attracting students (Mishchuk et al., 2024; Samoliuk et al., 2024). Learning foreign languages is a major driver, especially for the students from non-English-speaking countries who view the Erasmus programme as an opportunity to achieve proficiency in English or another language through immersion (Fidan & Karatepe, 2021). Research has shown that the desire to improve language skills is the main reason for moving abroad, alongside the attractiveness of European culture (Krzaklewska, 2008; Fombona et al., 2013; Mocanu 2023) and immersion in a different environment or broadening personal horizons (Zuil et al., 2022). This is particularly evident in Turkey, where improving English language skills is a key educational goal (Cetin, 2018). Mobility is an opportunity to develop international competences and improve employment prospects.

Financial issues, such as the availability of Erasmus grants or differences in living costs, can facilitate or hinder mobility. On the one hand, students from lower-income families are often motivated by Erasmus grants and lower personal costs during the exchange. For them, the programme can be a funded opportunity that would otherwise be beyond their reach (Souto-Otero, 2008). For some students, Erasmus is an 'important professional investment' rather than a luxurious experience (Vossensteyn et al., 2010). However, students from less privileged backgrounds are particularly vulnerable to having fewer opportunities to participate in the programme (Zuil et al., 2022; Granato & Schnepf, 2025). Students from disadvantaged families face serious obstacles to participating in the Erasmus programme, such as reluctance due to financial risk or family responsibilities. This highlights the importance of socio-economic context in shaping

motivation. The mobility experience can be ‘a luxury of personal development for one student and a key career boost for another’, depending on their specific situation (Beerkens et al., 2016; Cairns, 2017).

2.2. East-West contrasts in Erasmus Motivation

Research indicates differences between the students from Central and Eastern Europe and Western Europe in their motivations for participating in the programme. Students from Poland and Romania emphasise academic advantages of mobility, while students from Western Europe seek contact with renowned universities, and modern teaching and course delivery methods. Research on Erasmus students in Portugal shows how many of them were ‘attracted’ by the modern campus environment, the multicultural setting and, additionally, by specific and valuable courses (Kłopotowska, 2023). Qualitative research conducted on Erasmus students in Turkey shows that mobility provides them with opportunities to learn about Western academic culture and improve their language skills (Cetin, 2018). The main motivator for Western European students to participate in mobility programmes was the experience itself – the search for adventure, personal development and cultural enrichment. Their motivation is clearly less driven by the need to ‘escape’. They take the academic benefits for granted and assume that their home universities offer high-quality education experience. Students from Eastern Europe participate in mobility to seek opportunities to compensate for the shortcomings of their own country, while students from Western Europe use mobility to enhance existing advantages (Dabasi-Halász et al., 2019).

This dynamic was confirmed in the research by Cuzzocrea and Krzaklewska (2023). Students from Eastern Europe mentioned the importance of building capital and qualifications through multiple mobility experiences, while students from Western Europe emphasised the importance of taking on new challenges and personal development. However, regardless of their country of origin, all students indicated common internal motivations, such as the desire to travel, intercultural friendship and self-discovery. External motivations included better career prospects and language skills. The level of internationalisation and the economy of a given country can influence the balance between these factors. In Romania, a gradual change in motivation in response to improving domestic conditions can be observed. Previously, students participated in the Erasmus programme mainly because of the opportunity to access better education and job prospects. These motivations were of an ‘escapist’ nature and were rooted in a sense of deficiency. Now that the quality of education and training has improved, soft motivations such as travel and personal development are becoming increasingly important for Romanian students (Hobai, 2024).

To date, many studies have addressed the issue of student motivation to participate in Erasmus+ mobility programmes, but comparative analyses of multiple countries are still less prevalent. Therefore, there is a need to study motivation patterns in different social, economic and cultural contexts (Kropp & Larsen, 2025). This is important not only from the perspective of searching for certain universal trends in mobility, but predominantly because of new emerging factors. They include, for example, those related to digital support tools such as the Erasmus mobile app, online platforms and digital learning agreements. As a result of the digitisation of HEIs, the Erasmus programme has also become an instrument for implementing post-Schumpeterian innovations in educational practice (Sulkowski et al., 2025). This has created opportunities for students to develop key competencies such as adaptability, digital literacy, and language proficiency (Cuzzocrea & Krzaklewska, 2023; Grebe, 2023). New elements may also influence students’ readiness and decision-making, and diversify existing trends. This study fills these gaps by examining data on perceived student motivations collected from five countries and relating the findings to literature and theories.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Purpose and subject of research

The main aim of this study is to provide a cross-national perspective on the factors influencing student mobility within the Erasmus+ programme. Additionally, the aim is to identify ways of adapting and promoting the programme so that it better responds to the needs of different national contexts and conditions.

A review of the literature and existing research prompted the following questions and hypotheses, which served as the basis for the study:

Q1. What are the main motivations that encourage students to participate in Erasmus+ mobility?

Q2. How does the importance of various motivational factors differ among students in five countries: Poland, Turkey, Romania, Italy, and Belgium?

Q3. How do contextual factors (economic conditions, home environment) influence student motivations in these countries?

Based on these questions, the following hypotheses were formulated:

H1. There are differences between countries in terms of motivational patterns for Erasmus+ mobility. Students from Western Europe will place greater emphasis on internal motivations (cultural experience, personal development). For students from Central and Eastern Europe and Turkey, external and academic motivations (career development, academic opportunities) will be more important.

H2. Improving language skills will be an important motivation for students from all countries. In particular, students from Turkey will indicate foreign language learning as one of their main motivations for mobility (cf. Semiz & Salman, 2017).

H3. We predicted that students from Western Europe would prioritise career prospects more than their Eastern European counterparts.

3.2. Research design and tool

In order to examine students' motivations for mobility within the Erasmus+ programme in an international context, a mixed-method approach was used. The model combined quantitative research and a structured literature review. The quantitative research was based on surveys collecting data on students' perceived motivations in five countries. In order to contextualise and interpret the survey results, a literature review of previous research on motivation within the Erasmus+ programme was conducted. The combination of these two stages enabled the measurement of current motivational patterns and supported their theoretical understanding, based on previous empirical work.

A structured questionnaire aimed to determine the importance of motivational factors for student participation in the Erasmus+ programme. The questions were developed based on the common themes identified in the literature (Krzaklewska, 2008; Van Mol, 2014; Aresi et al., 2018; Cuzzocrea & Krzaklewska, 2023). The tool contained 20 questions about motivators, which were grouped into two broad categories. First, the Academic/institutional category consisted of 10 factors related to external professional and academic benefits, and structural considerations that often motivate students. This category contained the following statements: 'Enhance career prospects (job opportunities)', 'Study a specialisation or field of study not available at the home university', 'Improve foreign language skills', 'Access to unique academic programmes', 'Ease of ECTS credit transfer within the Bologna system', 'Meet the language requirements of the programme or studies abroad', 'Opportunity to undertake an internship or training', 'Exposure to different teaching styles and methods', 'Reputation or prestige of the host institution' and 'Opportunity to obtain a joint or double degree'.

Second, Personal/Cultural Factors contained 10 items related to personal, social, and cultural motivations. These included statements about ‘Desire for cultural exchange and a more global perspective,’ ‘Economic conditions (e.g. escape from high living costs or inflation in the home country),’ ‘Peer influence on the decision or word-of-mouth marketing,’ ‘Broader cultural awareness and tolerance,’ ‘Attractive marketing by the host university or promotion of the Erasmus programme,’ ‘Escape from restrictions or monotony in the home environment,’ ‘Build a sense of European identity or global citizenship,’ ‘Opportunity to travel to other countries while abroad,’ ‘Break from routine academic life’ and ‘Political or social situation (search for a more stable or open environment than in one’s own country). The items in this category are related to internal interests and contextual factors - the push factors (economic or political conditions).

The respondents rated each item on a 7-point Likert scale, answering a question about the importance of each factor. Although the items were measured on a 7-point Likert scale, we treated the responses as approximately interval-level for the purpose of mean-based comparisons. The respondents were also asked to rank the three most important motivations they most often hear from students. Evidence from sustainable personnel management in the service sector demonstrates that staff engagement, training, and supportive HR practices critically shape how institutional programmes are perceived and promoted by coordinators (Vovk & Vovk, 2024). The survey also included open-ended questions such as: ‘What do you think is the most important reason why students go on Erasmus?’ and ‘What reasons discourage some students from going abroad?’ The basic demographic data on the respondents were also collected (position, years of experience, country of employment). The survey was administered online, and data collection occurred over a three-month period. All the respondents gave their informed consent. This study captures staff-reported perceptions of students’ Erasmus+ motivations. Accordingly, the results should be interpreted as experts’ assessments of student motivators rather than students’ self-reports.

Descriptive statistics (N, M, SD, and 95% confidence intervals) were calculated for all five countries to provide comparable national motivation profiles (see Supplementary materials, Table S1.)

3.3. Characteristics of the research sample

The research was conducted in 2025 among Erasmus+ coordinators (N=166), Erasmus+ programme specialists (N=35), international office staff associated with the programme (N=14) and other staff (N=15) in Poland (N=73), Turkey (N=60), Italy (N=59), Romania (N=24) and Belgium (N=14) (see Table 1.). A total of 230 respondents who regularly advise students on mobility programmes and observe their motivations participated in the study. The literature review was conducted on the motivations of Erasmus+ students between 2010 and 2025. More than 25 studies – surveys, interviews, and international analyses – were included and analysed in relation to key frameworks – MMSAS, the push-pull dynamics theories.

Table 1

Characteristics of the group of respondents, N=230

		N	%
Current Role/Position	Erasmus+ coordinator	166	72.2%
	Erasmus+ programme specialist	35	15.2%
	International office staff associated with the programme	14	6.1%
	Other	15	6.5%
Years of experience with Erasmus+	Less than 1 year	13	5.7%
	1 to 3 years	57	24.8%
	4 to 6 years	37	16.1%
	7 to 9 years	46	20.0%
	More than 10 years	77	33.5%
Workplace country	Poland	73	31.7%
	Turkey	60	26.1%
	Italy	59	25.7%
	Romania	24	10.4%
	Belgium	14	6.1%
Overall		230	100.0

Source: authors' own compilation

4. EMPIRICAL RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Research results

The results indicate that Erasmus+ students, according to staff perceptions, are motivated by both academic and personal reasons. The importance of both categories was rated highly, with an average rating of M=5 on a 7-point Likert scale. The decision to study abroad is multi-motivated, and students consider many factors. The results present clear patterns regarding the relative strength of individual motivations and differences between countries. The highest-rated motivators were 'Economic factors (life costs, inflation)' (M=5.63) and 'Acquisition of foreign language skills' (M=5.58). This result is consistent with other studies, which also indicate the importance of language improvement as an incentive for student mobility within the Erasmus+ programme. Financial or economic factors also played an important role, as students appear to consider economic aspects when making decisions. Other highly rated motivators were gaining 'Desire for cultural exchange and a more global perspective' (M=5.36) and 'Enhance career prospects (job opportunities)' (M=5.27) (see Table 2).

Table 2

Mean ratings (M) of selected motivations. (Staff Perceptions; N=230)

Motivation item	Mean (M)
Economic factors (life costs, inflation)	(5.63)
Acquisition of foreign language skills	(5.58)
Desire for cultural exchange and a more global perspective	(5.36)
Enhance career prospects	(5.27)

An analysis of the results by country shows differences that are consistent with the accepted hypotheses. Table 3 presents the average ratings of the importance of selected motivations in each country and comparative trends. The ratings in the table are the average values indicated by respondents for their students. Higher values indicate a factor's importance in the decision to participate in Erasmus+.

Table 3

Mean importance ratings of selected student motivation factors by country
(Staff Perceptions; N=230)

Motivation factor	Poland	Turkey	Romania	Italy	Belgium
Improve foreign language skills	5.62	4.85	5.79	5.92	6.79
Enhance career prospects (job opportunities)	4.88	5.00	5.71	5.63	6.14
Study specialisation not available at home university	3.52	3.63	5.17	4.76	5.21

Source: authors' own compilation

Note: Values reflect staff perceptions of students' motivations; higher values indicate greater perceived importance.

Although improving language skills is an important factor in all countries, the respondents from Belgium gave it an exceptionally high rating, considering this factor to be very important ($M = 6.79$, $p < 0.01$). However, there were no statistically significant differences between Poland, Italy and Romania. This is especially surprising, as such a result was expected for countries in Central and Southern Europe. Perhaps Belgian students strive to improve other languages. Multilingualism developed during mobility can also be an advantage. By contrast, Turkish respondents rated language slightly lower ($M = 4.85$). Despite the results of other studies that pointed to the dominant importance of language improvement (Semiz & Salman, 2017), the respondents from Turkey graded this factor slightly less important. This may be explained by the fact that students are more guided by professional and academic needs. One of the Turkish coordinators noted that 'for engineering students, the prestige of the host university, and the possibility of an internship are very important.'

A clear distinction between Central and Southern European countries and Western European countries was illustrated by the motivator 'Enhance career prospects (job opportunities)'. The direction of this differentiation proved to be the opposite of what had been assumed. The respondents from Belgium perceive 'Career Development' as important for their students ($M = 6.14$), while it is slightly less important for the respondents from Romania ($M = 5.71$) and Italy ($M = 5.63$). For the respondents from Turkey and Poland, this factor is clearly less important ($M = 5.0$ vs. $M = 4.88$). The result did not support hypothesis H3. In developed education systems, students value the opportunity to strengthen their CVs and gain an advantage in the labour market more in connection with mobility. Polish students may be able to count on good employment conditions in their country and are more likely to use mobility for self-fulfilment (youth unemployment in Poland is relatively low). Students from Belgium, who enter more international labour markets, may treat the Erasmus programme as a prerequisite for obtaining employment. Böttcher et al. (2016) found that male students indicate career motivations as important and focus on career outcomes.

Given the number of item-level comparisons, we controlled for multiple testing using the false discovery rate (Benjamini–Hochberg procedure). One of the factors that strongly differentiated students' motivation was 'Access to specialisation not available at home country.' This factor was rated relatively low by respondents from Poland ($M = 3.52$) and Turkey ($M = 3.63$), which places it in the range defined as 'moderately important'. Higher values were found in Romania ($M = 5.17$) and Belgium ($M = 5.21$). The Italian result ($M = 4.76$) falls between these two extremes. These differences proved to be statistically significant (ANOVA $p < 0.01$; post hoc tests showed that Poland and Turkey $<$ Romania and Belgium, $p < 0.05$).

The results indicate that Romanian students perceive Erasmus mobility as a special opportunity for academic development in areas that are not available in their country. This observation is confirmed by the remarks of programme coordinators, who emphasise that these students often seek courses in advanced technologies or specialist niches that are underdeveloped in their country. In the case of the results obtained in Belgium, students may want to use mobility to gain unique academic experiences. In this situation, they may treat mobility as a form of distinction, for example, when they undertake mobility at a prestigious university. However, the results obtained in Belgium may be affected by sample limitations, i.e. the limited number of the respondents.

In Poland and Turkey, the results indicate that this factor is of low importance. It is likely that students do not realise that there is a gap in what their universities offer. In Poland, study programmes are widely available. In Turkey, however, the prestige of Western universities and the perceived quality of teaching may be more important than the lack of specific, available specialisations. The average score ($M = 4.76$) may indicate that the university's offer meets the educational needs of Italian students. Going abroad as part of the Erasmus programme may have different meanings for students depending on the location of the university or its teaching and research facilities. Furthermore, it is worth noting that the respondents in all the countries rated motivations related to the desire to travel, experience adventures and meet new people very highly. There were slight differences between the countries, with average ratings ranging between 5 and 6. According to the respondents, students value travel and intercultural interaction regardless of the country in which they study. Peers' influence ($M = 5.47$), defined as 'encouragement from other students to participate in mobility programmes/observation of other students' success during their mobility programmes,' proved to be an additional factor of strong importance. The results of other studies (Åmo & Doornich, 2023; Cuzzocrea & Krzaklewska, 2023) confirm that the success of peers during mobility is a strong motivating factor.

To verify H1 (differences between countries), an one-way ANOVA variance analysis was conducted for each motivational factor. At a significance level of $p < 0.05$, seven of the twenty factors analysed differentiated the countries in a statistically significant manner. These included the following factors - 'Language skills,' 'Career prospects,' 'Lack of specialisation available in the home country,' 'Academic reputation of the host university,' 'Influence of university marketing,' 'Financial and economic factors,' and 'Political situation'. For economic factors, the ANOVA result approached conventional statistical significance ($p = 0.06$).

In Poland and Romania, economic factors proved to be important ($M = 5.0$), while in Italy and Belgium, they were less significant. Although the differences were not considerable, they partially confirm H3, which assumes that students from lower-income countries are more likely to be driven by financial motivations when choosing mobility.

The factor of 'political situation,' which can be understood as the desire to escape from an unfavourable socio-political reality, received a neutral rating - averaged $M = 4.4$ overall. The respondents from Turkey ($M = 4.8$) and Romania ($M = 4.6$) rated it slightly higher than the respondents from Poland and Italy ($M = 4.2$). However, these differences emerged as statistically insignificant. These results seem to be consistent with the qualitative observations, which suggest that for students from Turkey, in the context of instability in their country, the Erasmus programme may be a safe alternative.

Next, the overall motivation index was analysed. It was divided into academic/institutional and personal/cultural motivations. A mixed ANOVA analysis was used with an intra-group factor – motivation category – and an inter-group factor – country. The results of the analysis demonstrate that the main effect of the motivation category proved to be significant $M_{\text{personal/cultural}} = 4.85$ vs. $M_{\text{academic/institutional}} = 4.73$; $F(1, 230) \approx 4.03$, $p = 0.046$). After averaging the results, it appeared that personal/cultural motivations scored higher than academic/institutional motivations (4.85 vs. 4.73 on a

seven-point scale). Therefore, it can be concluded that motivations that are more internal in nature slightly outweigh external motivations. The result is consistent with the narrative of the Erasmus programme, which points to the importance of cultural exchange as a factor that increases intercultural competence and openness to other cultures (CHE Consult et al., 2019).

However, this effect was limited by a significant interaction between country and motivation category ($F(4, 230) \approx 4.30, p = .015$). The results indicate that the difference between the assessment of personal/cultural and academic/institutional motivations was not the same in all countries. The post-hoc tests revealed that in Belgium and Italy, personal/cultural motivations dominate over academic/institutional factors. In Poland, conversely, the respondents rated both groups of motivations almost identically; while in Turkey, these differences did not occur at all. In these countries, both types of motivation are equally important. In Romania, academic/institutional motivations were rated slightly higher than personal/cultural drives. According to the respondents from this country, students are more often guided by the factors related to education and the acquisition of new skills.

The results of the interaction confirm H1. The emphasis on motivation varies depending on the country and its cultural context. Students from Western Europe give higher priority to personal/cultural motivation, while students from South-Eastern Europe assign greater value to academic/institutional factors. However, the respondents from all the countries considered both categories of motivation to be relevant, with differences mainly concerning their relative importance. A comparison of the 'three most important motivations' confirms these correlations. 'Language improvement' and 'personal development/cultural experiences' were the most frequently chosen motivators in each of the countries (appearing in 50-60% of responses). The differences mainly concerned professional motivations. In Belgium, approximately 70% of the respondents stated that career is important for students; while in Poland, it was 35%. In Italy, over 60% of the respondents indicated the importance of 'adventure and independence;' while in Turkey, 40% of the respondents indicated this factor. The results only partially confirm the hypotheses. Statistically significant differences between countries were observed with regard to motivational factors. This allows confirming us to support H1. With regard to H2, language motivation proved to be a generally significant factor. Although the average in Turkey was lower than expected, language was still an important reason for mobility chosen by students. However, hypothesis H3, stating that students from Western Europe gave higher priority to career prospects than their Eastern European colleagues, cannot be confirmed.

The findings indicate that the choice to engage in Erasmus mobility is shaped by both the push factors, such as academic deficiencies and economic conditions; and the pull factors, including cultural appeal and educational quality. The answers obtained in the open-ended questions enabled a more detailed analysis of the quantitative results. The analysis indicates that the respondents from Poland and Romania emphasised the importance of personal development and expressed the importance of students' desire for self-confidence and independence. The respondents from Turkey, by contrast, highlighted the importance of family attitudes as factors that either encourage or hinder decisions about mobility. Additionally, some respondents expressed the opinion that some of the motivations indicated by students may mask other, deeper motivations. The respondents from Belgium and Italy claimed that participation in Erasmus mobility programmes creates opportunities for students' personal development. The Romanian respondents additionally emphasised the importance of financial constraints as factors limiting mobility, while such responses did not appear in the Italian group. Among the responses from Poland and Turkey, a recurring opinion was that digital tools, including the Erasmus+ electronic application, support administration and indirectly encourage participation in mobility programmes.

4.2. Discussion

The aim of this analysis was to explain the similarities and differences in motivations of students participating in the Erasmus+ programme in the selected countries. One of the main conclusions is that the basic motivations for studying abroad are widely shared by students, regardless of their country of origin. One of the most frequently reported motivations is the desire to improve language skills while studying under the Erasmus programme. This result is confirmed by other studies (see Krzaklewska, 2008). Hypothesis H2 assumed the universality of language-related motives. The results generally confirm this hypothesis, although in Belgium this motivator scored higher than in the other countries. In the case of Turkey, the findings underline the contextual nature of staff perceptions. The studies of Turkish students also prove that the opportunity to learn a language during mobility is one of the most common drivers for students (Semiz & Salman, 2017). In this study, the respondents' opinions also validate the high importance of this factor, but according to the respondents, it was not treated as a priority. Perhaps the students themselves emphasise its role more, while coordinators, advisors, and experts in mobility and international cooperation also point to the importance of other, additional factors. However, regardless of the differences between countries, it can be concluded that the Erasmus programme supports the opportunity to improve language skills.

Professional and academic motivations were important in all contexts. A comparison of external and internal motivations proves that their importance varies across the countries. This variability in the prevalence of personal development and cultural experiences or educational benefits and future career prospects can be linked to self-determination theory (Carvalho et al., 2022). When comparing external motivations with internal motivations, it can be noticed that their importance differs among the countries – in some cases, personal development and cultural experiences dominate, while in the others, the priority shifts towards educational benefits and future career prospects. Perhaps students are initially driven by the motivations related to internal benefits, but external benefits reinforce these decisions. Personal and cultural motivations were rated marginally higher than academic motivations. On this basis, it can be concluded that the participation in the Erasmus programme offers students an opportunity for personal development, not just career advancement.

The aim was also to test the hypothesis about the relationship between students' country of origin with varying degrees of internationalisation and wealth of their countries, and the push and pull factors. However, the results are not conclusive. The case of Romania provides evidence of a correlation between these factors. The results prove the importance of the factor 'lack of academic specialisation in the country' as a factor influencing student motivation. A weak pattern of the push motivation is also evident in the Italian results. Hobaia's (2024) research indicates that the development of competences and the opportunity to gain experience to improve future employment prospects are the main motivators among Romanian students. In Turkey and Poland, the importance of the push factors related to improving career prospects is further revealed in the context of competitive labour markets. In both countries, factors such as experience abroad and language skills are important in the search for employment (Hojda et al., 2022; Sahan & Şahan, 2024).

With regard to the 'pull factors' for Italian and Belgian students, personal factors are more motivating than academic drives. Some respondents argued that students 'can afford' to focus on the pull factors because they already have many push factors (such as good education and a stable economy) in their home country. With the increasing domestic internationalisation of countries, the motivations of their students are shifting towards internal factors. Both countries receive many incoming students and have international campuses, so local students do not feel the need to go abroad for academic reasons, but rather for personal development. This is consistent with a study by Van Mol & Timmerman (2013) indicating that students

from older EU member states often participate in exchange programmes to broaden their horizons rather than to fill gaps.

However, the results of this study also blur the line between Eastern and Western Europe. The assumptions about career motivations did not fit a simple model. It was assumed that Polish and Romanian students would be very career-focused, while Belgian students would be career-focused to a lesser extent. However, the data proved that Belgian students attach the most importance to career benefits. Essentially, the findings caution against overgeneralising about “East versus West”. It is apparent that there are many axes involving economic context, academic context, cultural norms and even gender roles that intersect with each other. This finding directly addresses H1 and confirms the existence of differences between countries; however, the nature of these differences is more intricate than previously hypothesised. The fact that motivations can change introduces another level of complexity. In Poland and Turkey, for example, where foreign students are not so common, local students are more likely to go abroad to get international experience. This makes students more focused on their academic and career goals. In contrast, countries such as Italy and Belgium with a high number of international students, often experience student outward mobility driven by cultural and personal reasons, since there are some intercultural experiences available in those countries. The data fits this pattern: Italian and Belgian students seek more difficult cultural challenges, while Polish and Turkish students tend to focus on the practical issues. Poland, however, is a special case. Although it does not attract many foreigners, it sends sizable groups of students abroad, which over time has made mobility a more ‘commonplace’ experience. This may explain the lower than expected focus on professional benefits and a more balanced approach – combining pleasure with development. Romania, by contrast, presents a classic profile dominated by academic motivations, while Turkey shows a mixed picture: some students seek a better educational environment, while others are driven by internal motivations and cultural curiosity.

The findings do not support H3 as formulated (i.e., higher career prioritisation in Western Europe); instead, the pattern is mixed, with Belgium showing the strongest career orientation. All these observations suggest that the social and economic environment is not the only determinant; historical, cultural, and educational-system factors also play a crucial role. Poland, for example, has a long history with Erasmus and a culture that has embraced it, so Polish student motivations may have changed over time. In contrast, in a country that is newer to Erasmus or has lower participation (such as Romania), motivations may still be shaped by practical considerations.

Comprehending these motivational disparities has pragmatic consequences. Promotional strategies should be adapted to fit the needs of each country. In countries such as Romania or Turkey, stressing the benefits of academic or work experience can help students and their families feel better about the rewards (e.g. getting credit for their work or getting a job). In Belgium or Italy, promotional messages could focus on adventure, personal growth, and cultural experience. It is said that one size does not fit all: ‘discover new horizons’ may work better in Belgium, while ‘career framing’ may prove more effective in Romania. There was a strong of motivation to learn a language in each country, which means that more time and money needs to be spent on preparation and support. Many students go abroad to learn a new language, but some of them withdraw because they are uncertain of their language skills. Offering preparatory courses, tandem programmes, and promoting English-taught options can convert intention into participation, especially in Turkey and Poland (Çetin, 2018). Financial issues are still important, particularly in countries with lower incomes. Policies and grants to provide equal opportunities are crucial. If financial cuts are introduced, Polish and Romanian students might not be able to participate. However, if students are granted benefits or cost-of-living allowances, mobility programmes can become more popular and inclusive. This agrees with what Basset (2021) concluded: students from low-income families have more problems than other students. Introducing digital processes into the Erasmus+ student experience has become essential.

Research by Dehinsilu-Isa & Amoidu (2025) shows that minimising bureaucracy and improving access to information through digital platforms increases participation. However, it is important to remember that not all students are comfortable with technology. Therefore, they require support in accessing and using it.

5. CONCLUSION

This study analysed the motivations of students from five selected European countries to participate in the Erasmus+ programme. The results confirmed that although the selected motivations are universal, they also depend on students' national context. The most important factors related to the drives for participating in the programme's mobility schemes are language improvement, new cultural experience, personal growth and the opportunity for adventure. A comparative analysis in Poland, Turkey, Italy, Romania and Belgium proved that motivations vary. In countries such as Romania and Turkey, where opportunities for studying are considered limited, the Erasmus programme becomes a means to develop, gain knowledge, international (cultural) capital or simply to experience improved living conditions. In countries with greater resource availability (e.g. Italy, Belgium), Erasmus provides students with the opportunity to increase the value of their education. Poland represents a midpoint case, demonstrating that the system is improving, and students value both the practical and experiential aspects of mobility.

The results suggest that, from a political and administrative perspective, it is necessary to develop support strategies. Programme administrators and universities responsible for the Erasmus programme should pay attention to factors motivating mobility and adapt their counselling and promotion activities accordingly. For example, focusing on mobility opportunities and linking them to professional development may encourage more Eastern European students. By contrast, focusing on cultural immersion programmes may be attractive to students from Western Europe. Maintaining funding and possibly increasing scholarships for students from lower-income regions can ensure equality for highly motivated students who face financial constraints. Another practical conclusion is the importance of sharing success stories and promoting a culture of mobility. The influence of peers and social networks was very clear. When students witness their friends benefiting from Erasmus mobility, a positive cycle of motivation is created. Universities can capitalise on this by offering peer mentoring and social media campaigns that showcase student achievements. From a sustainable development perspective, supporting student mobility through adapted, culturally-sensitive promotion aligns with SDG4 objectives of quality education and innovation orientation (Olubiyi, 2024). Apsite-Berina & Kukite, 2024 emphasise the importance of digital storytelling in mobility decision-making. This promotes the idea of going abroad, especially in areas or communities where mobility is less widespread. In theoretical terms, this study suggests that traditional frameworks such as push-pull should be applied in a fluid and context-dependent manner. It confirmed that both push and pull factors exist. However, their interaction can lead to unexpected patterns (e.g., a strong career orientation in a high-income country). This highlights the importance of multidimensional scales (such as MMSAS) in assessing motivation; a single indicator of 'motivation strength' is less informative than a comprehensive profile covering different categories. Future research employing these scales may reveal different 'types' of motivation that may occur in various proportions in different countries. Identifying these types could further enhance tailored support for participation in the Erasmus+ programme.

This study has its limitations. Firstly, it surveyed the opinions of university coordinators and Erasmus programme experts, who indirectly conveyed their opinions on student motivation. Although they are knowledgeable about these issues, their responses may contain errors or omissions. Future studies should integrate the perspectives of both groups. An important limiting factor in this study is the sample size, especially in Belgium and Romania. Therefore, the results should be carefully generalised. In the future, efforts should be made to achieve a higher response rate from both countries.

In addition, this research explored the emerging impact of digital facilitations measures on mobility choices. The growing implementation of digital tools, relatively new solutions within the Erasmus+ ecosystem, such as the Erasmus Without Paper initiative, the European Student Card and the Erasmus+ app, illustrates how technological innovations facilitate the realisation of students' plans. In this context, further research is needed to focus on how digital innovations affect students' readiness and motivation for mobility.

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