

Navigating the opportunities and constraints. Migration as a local response to non-local political developments

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Abstract: The article describes the ways national and international political developments translate into migration patterns. Based on ethnographic fieldwork in a small town in Transcarpathia region in Western Ukraine, it offers an insight into the livelihood practices of its inhabitants. Labour migration is presented in the context of political and economic developments in Ukraine as well as the regional and local specifics of Transcarpathia (geographical location, ethnic composition, historical legacy). The politics of Ukraine's neighbouring countries are also considered an important factor in shaping migration patterns. Russia's aggressive politics have posed a threat to Ukraine's territorial integrity and left a mark on its economy and labour market. Hungary allows the inhabitants of the region to apply for its citizenship and Poland's simplified regulation on access to its labour market attracts the visa applicants. Ethnographic description is centred around migratory experiences, applied strategies and the changes in these strategies in the face of the national and international political and economic developments. The article concludes that these locally observed phenomena reveal individual and collective agency in subverting social and political conditions to one's benefit. It also points to the limits of this agency and the sustaining of social inequalities within and beyond migration.

Keywords: agency, labour migration, transnationalism, Transcarpathia, Ukraine

Introduction

The aim of this article is to describe the way national and international political developments and policy measures impact migration patterns. Using the process of ethnographic case study, I reveal the way these political and economic phenomena occur on the small scale and are experienced and reshaped on the local, grassroots level. In territorial and empirical terms, I focus on one particular location, a small town of Solotvyno in Transcarpathia region (*Zakarpatska Oblast*) in Western Ukraine, where I conducted my fieldwork in the years 2009–2011 and 2016–2017.

In order to capture the phenomena of interest in the reader-friendly way, present ethnographic vignettes which illustrate these phenomena with examples of particular individuals whose names I have changed. These individuals were selected due to their characteristics associated with the specifics of each town and the region as well as the methodological relevance carried such characteristics. As Solotvyno can be characterized as multi-ethnic site, I also acknowledge local diversity based on my informants' self-identification and declarations.

The regional migratory and transnational specificities related to geographical location and common legacies with and cultural links to other countries are also presented. I describe the complexity of Ukrainian labour migration which includes regional specificities and the position of Ukrainian migrant workers in the international migration movements. I discuss the way migration practices are embedded in the local and regional specifics such as the history of the region and its geographical location, ethnic, and linguistic composition of the town, the policies of other countries regarding citizenship, visas, and access to the labour market. This perspective aids in grasping the complexity of migration patterns and prevents the perception of Ukrainian labour migration-not to mention Ukrainian society at large-as a monolith.

Transcarpathia (or The Transcarpathian District; Ukr. *Zakarpats'ka Oblast'*) is an administrative unit in Ukraine with its headquarters located in the city of Uzhhorod. The region borders Poland, Slovakia, Hungary and Romania, as well as the Lviv and Ivano-Frankivsk Districts (*Lvivs'ka Oblast'*, *Ivano-Frankivs'ka Oblast'*) of Ukraine. Unlike the two previously mentioned districts (which in the course of history were a part of Red Ruthenia, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, Habsburg Galicia and Poland), from the Middle Ages until the First World War, the territories comprising Transcarpathia belonged to Hungary, Austria and the Hungarian part of Austro-Hungary. In 1919, after the Treaty of Versailles, they were ceded to Czechoslovakia, annexed by Hungary in 1938, and again in 1944 by the Soviet Union. Apart from ethnic Ukrainians, the region is characterized

With its history of relatively frequent statehood changes, this region serves as a prime site for the study of phenomena of political transformations and historical legacies. Through the 20th century and into the 21st, the region has been marked by peripheral positions within the larger political entities (cf. Batt 2002). As for Solotvyno, its industrial and late post-industrial character links this small town to the legacies of the so called “post-socialist transition” (cf. Burawoy and Verdery 1999; cf. Kürti and Skalník 2009). Its ethnic and linguistic composition appears as a potential resource which can be translated into livelihood strategies, including labour migration.

The article proceeds as follows. I begin by explaining the research methodology and data. Then I present an overview of concepts from the study of labour migration and transnationalism. In addition, I describe migration processes in Ukraine in general and in Transcarpathia in particular, each in their particular social and political contexts. Subsequent sections will present insight into Solotvyno and the livelihood practices of its inhabitants with particular focus on experiences of work abroad. I conclude that experiences of local inhabitants contribute to the global phenomenon of individual and collective subversion (or attempts of subversion) of existing social and political conditions. This approach helps embed migration in the broader social structures and political changes as seen through “local lens.”

A note on methodology and data

Applying the extended case method (Burawoy 2009) as well as the concept of strategically situated ethnography (Marcus 1995), I link the locally observed phenomena with wider social and political processes. This approach allows me to describe a two-fold process of the macro-forces shaping and being reshaped by the local reality, daily practices and livelihood strategies of the local inhabitants (cf. Burawoy 2009; Marcus 1995; Buchowski 2012). In the tradition of participant observation and deep hanging out (Geertz 1998; Wogan 2004; Driessen and Jansen 2013), I accompanied research participants throughout their daily lives: at work (when possible), at home, in their free time, and at family and social events. My aim was to study the local occurrences in the time and space of the local inhabitants. I took daily handwritten notes while systematically maintaining a diary on my laptop. The research would not be possible without support of certain key-informants who helped me in pragmatic matters and introduced me to others. Throughout the fieldwork, there were 13 individuals whereas the total number of informants is 52. Meeting some only once, typically I regularly met and spent time with the majority of them, in some cases more than once a day. The conversations were

held in Russian, which serves as a local lingua franca (even though it is gradually giving way to Ukrainian). Between November 2009 and May 2011, I held 5 fieldwork visits each lasting approximately a month. I stayed in occasional contact with some of the key informants between 2011–2016 and re-visited the site in 2016 and 2017 reaching the same people and places. These enabled understanding the local changes and macro forces shaping them (cf. Marcus 1995; Burawoy 2003).

Although focusing on the results of territorially and temporally bound ethnography, I also draw from my broader interest *in* and *intimacy with* Transcarpathia which has lasted for a decade and a half at the time of writing this article. This includes: a fieldwork in locations other than Solotvyno, networking at the regional academic institutions, holiday visits and actual friendships. Some of the information and description comprises a common knowledge of the inhabitants of the region. This knowledge is what a frequent visitor (an outsider) is exposed to, and an ethnographer embedded in the studied milieu simply gets to know. I also refer to existing estimated but incomplete data on the economy and demography of migration in the region which serves as illustration and background information for the processes under study. It is not my goal to evaluate this data or fill its possible gaps.

Beyond centre and periphery: transformation and transnationality

Migration to Central and Eastern Europe carries certain characteristics of labour movements between the peripheries, semi-peripheries, and core of the global economy. Peripheral countries and regions have long served as a cheap labour reservoir for the countries of the core colonial and neo-colonial powers, and industrial and financial centres where wealth has been accumulated (Castles and Miller 2003; McKeown 2004). In the Soviet Union industrialization was accompanied by the acceleration of the labour resources' mobility. Large-scale state programs were introduced for the purpose of regulating the migration flows. Regulations were based on the passport systems which imposed limits and restrictions for various social and professional groups (Zaslavsky & Luryi, 1979). This corresponds with the phenomena of the state monopoly over the means of movement (Torpey 2000) and control over the “dangerous classes” (Balibar 2004: 113) associated with the capitalist societies. Political and economic transformations resulting from the collapse of the Soviet Union and The Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (COMECON) enabled various forms of postsocialist mobility fuelled by economic difficulties experienced in the countries and regions of emigration. Therefore, regardless of the political and economic regimes, migratory processes appear embedded in the broader processes of societal change.

In the core-periphery framework, contemporary Ukraine, as an exporter of the raw materials, semi-products, and workforce, appears on the peripheries of the European economy (Malyuk 2010; Malyuk 2014; Ishchenko 2013; Bojcun 2016). This positioning appears noteworthy in the context of international and domestic political developments concerning and shaping economic situations and social relations in Ukrainian society. Noting that *within* and *beyond* this framework, the “surplus extraction via migration” from the periphery to the core is also accompanied by the movement of both money and commodities in the other directions).

The concern about this two-fold process together with a step beyond centre-periphery approach can be seen in the transnational approach (cf. Glick-Schiller, Basch, & Blanc 1995; Brettell 2007). However, the fact that people “operate in social fields that transgress geographic, political, and cultural borders” and maintain social relations in the countries both of origin and destination (Glick-Schiller, Basch, & Blanc 1995) does not eradicate inequalities and exploitation. For the migrant workers and their social milieu *at home* and *abroad*, settledness in mobility (Morokvasic 2004) is often accompanied by the settledness in exploitation and hierarchy. Under such conditions people are more mobile with their work life and personal life becoming more “unstable.” This corresponds with the global trend in the framework of the precarious conditions of labour in the countries of origin, requiring workers to be more flexible and spatially mobile in turn putting more pressure on transnational mobility and work abroad (Böröcz, 2014a: 91). This in turn contributes to inequalities and economic dependencies between entire *sending* and *receiving* societies (Faist 2016). Financial remittance-an important part of livelihood among transnational communities and significant part of the emigration countries’ GDP-contributes to the phenomenon of “remittance-dependent economy” (Faist 2016: 334). Quoting József Böröcz, this phenomenon appears as an

...aspect of the dependence of a society on the economic, political, and social conditions (...) which results from value transfers by its own citizens who sell their labour power abroad. Just like dependency on aid or on foreign direct investment, remittance dependency is a process whereby external structural conditions are internalized so that the migrant emitting society loses much of its control over its domestic economic, political, social, etc., processes (Böröcz 2014b: 14-15).

Country in crisis, people on the move

The 2014 developments in Ukraine significantly impacted an economy already struck by the 2008/2009 global recession. The country faced devaluation of the national currency (Ukrainian Hryvna), record inflation rates, and the fall of its GDP (Eröss, Tatrai, Kovally 2017: 208).¹ Even though these trends began stabilizing in 2016, the initial recession left its marks on the country's economy. Most affected were the heavy industries, metallurgy, and mining – all partially related to the Russian market – as well as foreign trade and agricultural production (Iwański 2015; Kravchuk 2016). In the face of such social and economic difficulties, pressure on migration increased around the country.

Even before the post-2014 turmoil, Ukraine appeared on top of the list of European “countries of origin” in terms of migration. Ukrainian citizens also contribute to a significant share of immigrant populations in the receiving countries (Fedyuk & Kindler 2016: 1). Due to the lack of cohesive definitions, sources and applied methodologies, the available data appears as imprecise and the numbers of Ukrainian citizens working abroad vary between 2 and 7 million (Fedyuk & Kindler 2016; Leontiyeva 2014). Financial remittances from labour migrants are important for many Ukrainian households and trigger the local economies. According to the World Bank, estimated at 16 billion USD in 2018, financial remittances contributed to 13.8% of Ukrainian GDP,² more than the total sum of foreign investments (less than 2.5 billion).³ Over the last decade, the main destinations of Ukrainian migrant workers have changed, but the most common destinations were Russia, Poland, Czech Republic, and Italy. According to the International Organization for Migration, 905,000 Ukrainians resided in the EU in 2015 (this appears as the most recent data published by IOM so far); 37% of them in Poland, 26% in Italy, and 12% in the Czech Republic and Germany (IOM 2016). At the same period 2.5 million Ukrainian citizens were registered in Russia, 900,000 more than just a year earlier (Mukomel 2017). Although, in 2014 and 2015 29% of Ukrainian migrants went to Russia, “...increased labour migration is accompanied by a nascent reorientation of flows from east (to Russia) to west (to the EU)” (IOM 2016: 15). Various networks between employers and employees,

¹ For data on exchange rates and the changes in GDP, see also: <http://www.xe.com/currencycharts/?from=USD&to=UAH&view=10Y> (accessed: 31.12.2019) and <http://www.trading-economics.com/ukraine/gdp> (accessed: 31.12.2019).

² World Bank Annual Remittances Data: <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/labormarkets/brief/migration-and-remittances> (accessed: 31.12.2019).

³ World Bank Foreign direct investment, net inflows: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/BX.KLT.DINV.WD.GD.ZS> (accessed: 31.12.2019).

cultural factors such as common history of certain territories, long-established tradition of mutual contacts, and legal regulations in receiving countries influence directions of labour migration.

Before 2014 with those coming from Transcarpathia, the most popular destinations were the Czech Republic and Russia, and to a lesser extent, Slovakia and Hungary (Kychak 2012: 69-70).⁴ This situation has changed not only in the course of the political and military developments in Ukraine but also with changes in some neighbouring countries' policies. In 2010 Hungary introduced an amendment to the Law on Citizenship (Act XLIV 2010) entitling former citizens and their descendants to apply for the citizenship (Kovacs & Tóth 2013). In practice, it means that inhabitants of the historical Hungarian territories, regardless of their ethnic identity, are eligible for Hungarian passports as long as they speak the language. As dual citizenship is not recognized by Ukraine and Hungarian state, they do not provide official statistics regarding that matter and the exact number of Hungarian passports granted to Transcarpathians is not known but estimates are approximately 160 000 (compared to the region's population of 1 260 000) as of 2016 (Eröss, Tatrai, Kovally 2017). Possessing the commonly called "EU citizenship" makes it way easier to work and travel within the EU than it is for Ukrainian passport holders.

Tense Ukrainian-Russian relations along with the devaluation of the Russian currency has changed the migratory landscape of Ukraine. This shift can be observed in Transcarpathia. Nevertheless, it is difficult to assess the number of Ukrainians, including Transcarpathians, who still work in this country. The Czech Republic still remains the most popular destination for the inhabitants of the region but there is a shift to other areas due to policies introduced in Poland and Hungary. Transcarpathian migration to the Czech Republic can be described as the most diverse in the scope of strategies in terms of getting there and finding employment. Hungarian passports often used for travelling to countries other than Hungary appear useful in this regard. This is similar to the Polish policy of temporary access to the labour market officially known as a "declaration of intent to entrust work to a foreigner (*oświadczenie o zamiarze powierzenia pracy cudzoziemcowi*)" (cf. Górny et al. 2018: 4). Many Transcarpathians (as well as immigrants from other regions) reach Czechia having Polish visas in their Ukrainian passports. Relatively easy to obtain, it serves as a means of getting to the Schengen zone. In this so-called "Polish pattern" (Drbohlav and Seidlova 2016: 109) the work is either unregistered or done by Polish companies who post

⁴ Importantly, the two latter are rather invisible on the map of destinations on a nationwide scale.

their Ukrainian workers to the Czech Republic, raising certain social and legal concerns (Trčka et al. 2018).

In the meantime, new destinations have emerged. The United Kingdom has become within the reach of Hungarian passport holders, while at the same time inaccessible for Ukrainian citizens. Thus, work in the UK has become possible for some of the inhabitants of the region following the 2011 amendment to the Hungarian Law on Citizenship. It has become particularly popular after an increase in migration pressure beginning in 2014. Transcarpathians can now be met on the British construction sites and warehouses.

Poland, a popular destination in other parts of Western Ukraine since the 1990s appeared as a destination country in Transcarpathia – although limited in its popularity – only after 2014.⁵ Polish salaries and work conditions are not appealing to the inhabitants of this region who already have well developed networks in the Czech Republic. Although Poland is not a common destination for work, it appears popular for other activities. Apart from aforementioned “gate” to the Czech Republic, the country is attractive for its market of second-hand cars. At the time of my fieldwork, the “European-plates” (*evroblahy*), vehicles registered not only in Poland but also in Slovakia, Hungary, Czech Republic and others, were popularly driven without their re-registration in Ukraine in order to avoid taxation. This practice has largely decreased (however there is no data on that at the moment of writing this article), since in February 2019 certain measures were taken in order to simplify the re-registration on the one hand and increase fines for failing to do so on the other (UNIAN 2019). According to the individuals involved in this practice, these regulations do not apply to foreigners and Hungarian passport holders are more likely to manoeuvre between the given laws in order to keep their cars “European” (as they are often called) while saving money on registration. Even if work in Poland is not a reality, cars with Polish license plates and adverts of brokers offering Polish visas still contribute to the increased Polish presence in Transcarpathia.

Transnational and cross-border links to Hungary are limited largely to those Transcarpathians who identify, along with their spouses, as Hungarians. Even though Hungarian labour market is not as attractive as the Czech or British ones, it is still relatively popular among Hungarian speakers who not only do seasonal work but – and necessarily the same people – invest in properties in Eastern Hungary and share their lives between the two (or more) countries as well.

⁵ I have no knowledge on Solotvyno-to-Poland migration and I have not seen any adverts offering work in Poland. However, this kind of adverts can be spotted in the towns of Mukachevo and Uzhhorod. During my fieldwork in the latter, I interviewed one person who used to work in Poland.

Solotvyno: crisis and mobility on the grassroots level

As stated in the introduction, since the very beginning of its existence, Solotvyno was a salt mining centre. Surface mining dates back to ancient times and the underground mining to the Middle Ages, while industrial methods began in the 18th century (Dyakiv 2012: 69; Privalov & Panova 2008: 155). The Austro-Hungarian Compromise of 1867 had its impact on economic policy, capital relations and the further development of modern industry and capitalist modes of production. Salt mining was not the main branch – or even one of the major ones – of a Hungarian economy dominated by agriculture, cattle breeding, and in terms of mining, coal (Butschek 1994; Hanák 1975). Still, the town served as a significant salt resource not only for Hungary but for the Habsburg Empire as a whole. Further in the course of history, authorities of the interwar Czechoslovakia invested in the mines as well as in local infrastructure. After the Second World War the town faced intensive industrial and technological development due to serving the demands of entire Soviet Union⁶ (Dyakiv 2012; Makara 1982; Privalov & Panova 2008). Now in the 21st century, with the salt mines closed and infrastructures dismantled – its metal parts, including large pieces of towers, rails and equipment ending on a scrap-heap – the busy industrial landscape has turned into an apocalyptic site with scenes of deserted ruins testifying to a bygone industrial “radiant past” (cf. Burawoy and Lukács 1992).

Facing lack of regular employment, Solotvynians searched for work elsewhere. Before 2014 the popular destinations were the Czech Republic, Russia, Hungary and to a lesser degree Romania as well as Ukraine’s big cities such as Kyiv, Donetsk or Mariupol. After 2014, Czechia remained the most common destination-which also became a destination for those who used to go to Russia-while some people started going to the UK, whereas Russia almost disappeared from the local migration map. The popularity of Czech Republic and Hungary increased – along with the practice of obtaining Hungarian passports – while the popularity of Russia decreased for reasons previously mentioned. Simultaneously, new destinations such as the UK, have emerged because of the possibility for Hungarian document holders to travel and work there. Czech Republic remained popular also among those who held exclusively Ukrainian citizenship.

Migration mostly takes a short-term “circulation,” with individuals involved in locating their lives and leisure centres in Solotvyno, dividing time between *here* and *there*. Others have left the town for good. Permanent resettling abroad

⁶ It would be an exaggeration though to consider Solotvyno as a crucial salt supplier in the USSR.

in most cases are Hungarian passport holders who reside in the EU countries, not necessarily Hungary. The branches of employment are production (both males and females), construction and renovations (men) and cleaning (women). It is difficult to speak of a direct continuity of industrial experience between working in the mines at home and other branches abroad. However, in the case of men in the 40+ age group, the experience gained in the mines can translate into skills – such as knowledge of different kinds of tools and machines – which prove useful in other types of employment or making it easier to learn new skills.

The amount of time spent *here* (the town, the region, the country) and *there* (Russia, Czechia, Hungary, UK and other countries and places), have consequences in the social, cultural and economic life of the local community. It may seem obvious that the experience of travelling and working abroad influences the way groups and individuals perceive “their” place of origin and the feeling of belonging. This is also the case with the non-migrants who are exposed to the experiences of the others. Images of *here* and *there* shaped by migration and cross-border mobility are worth considering when it comes to analysing the local outcomes of the global processes.

The perception of geographical distances in relation to symbolic ones and the amount of time and effort necessary in order to travel between *here* and *there* is also noteworthy. For example, some Sototvynians regularly travel – or did travel – to Moscow or Prague but have never been to the towns and villages just across the border in Romania. Different relations between the time spent *here* and the time spent *there* can be observed, whereby “there” has no constant character as circular migrants change their destinations according to labour market and travelling opportunities. Safeguarding the right to enter the territories and labour markets of the destination countries is essential in securing the livelihood in Ukraine.

Russia and the Czech Republic: proximity and change

Before 2014 the Russian capital city seemed closer and more accessible to many Sototvynians than the neighbouring Sighet (Romania) and not so distant Nyiregyhaza (Hungary) or Košice (Slovakia). Ukrainian passport holders could travel to Russia uninterrupted and Transcarpathian townships were well connected with Moscow by regular buses and irregular mini-buses (*marshrutki*) providing door to door transport. This was enhanced by the popularity of Russian TV (including the news channels), music, and movies (broadcasted by Ukrainian stations). However, this westernmost region of Ukraine has not avoided the results of tensions with the country’s Eastern neighbour. After post-2014 developments,

Ukrainian passports and origin from the West of the country started to present a risk for those who worked in this country.

“Everything there [in the Moscow suburbs] was built by our people, from Transcarpathia, Ukrainians, Romanians and Hungarians,” I was told to by Alexandr – an ethnic Romanian in his mid-thirties and a manual worker with migratory experience in Russia and Czechia – back in 2011. He also complained about workers from Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Moldova who, as he believed, they lowered salaries on Moscow construction sites. According to him they worked for 300 USD per month plus three meals a day and still are satisfied. In his opinion, Transcarpathians were in a much better situation as compared to Tajiks and other immigrants since they still had chances for finding employment *here* and when in Moscow *there* (“our people” or simply “ours”) for at least 1000 USD. Alexandr went to Russia several times and proudly showed me the photos of construction sites at the outskirts of Moscow; luxurious villas and swimming pools whose owners and construction companies would pay, as he put it, “a good money” (up to 2000 USD) for good workers – *us, our people*. Ivan (an ethnic Romanian, manual worker and a truck-driver in his forties), came back from Moscow to his hometown of Solotvyno in November 2010. He had worked for three months on a construction site Russian capital city. In April 2011 he was planning to go there again to work for three months, bringing back some money, since his earnings at home were not enough to afford basic needs. In Moscow he was hoping to earn between 800 and 1000 USD per month with food provided. The work was supposed to be arranged by a man from one of the neighbouring villages who had all the necessary networks and a minibus that would pick him up from his home in Solotvyno and take him to the location in Moscow for 100 USD.

Memories and opinions associated with the Czech Republic, its labour market and work conditions were more positive. Florian – a Romanian in his mid-forties who is a manual labourer and mechanic – used to work there in the early 2000s. He travelled around this country and worked its construction sites, but what he enjoyed most were, as he describes “...small towns where there were just two streets, one bar and that was it.” In such places everybody would all know and greet one another. When asked about the inhabitants’ attitude to the foreigners he said, “...unless there was a fool who would look for trouble, everything was fine.” However, he suggested that this would not happen often. When I talked to Vasili, an ethnic Romanian in his fifties and manual labourer/craftsman in autumn 2009, he was already retired but his memories from the construction site in Prague were still vivid. He was keen to explain the difference between the *Czechs* and “the *Ours*” attitudes to work; he assured me that the Czechs did not

do any work other than that specifically assigned to them. “They wouldn’t even move the cement bag if it disturbs their work,” he told me. He considered it an advantage of Transcarpathians to be able to do the tasks they were not expected to do. He used to be employed as a bricklayer but once when a welder was missing he did the welder’s job and his Czech employers were so impressed that later on they would hire him to do *everything*.

When I met the previously mentioned Ivan and Alexandr again in the Summer 2016, Alexandr no longer intended on going to Russia. He had been deported from the country a year before which made him reconsider his plans for the future. Like most of his friends and colleagues he was thinking about Czechia and as he spoke Hungarian he was also considering applying for citizenship of this country. “If you are from Western Ukraine, they will not ask whether you are Romanian from Transcarpathia, if you are from the West you are a banderite (banderovets – a Ukrainian nationalist) and that’s it,” he stated, explaining the reasons and the broader context behind his deportation. In his opinion, even with the lower price of the Russian currency, it was still worth the effort to go there. However, the living conditions and general attitude towards the migrants has worsened over the last few years. Police harassment combined with the low exchange rate of Russian ruble has put Russia even further down on the list of countries chosen by Transcarpathians as a migration destination.

Ivan’s situation was similar, yet more “successful” than Alexandr. Giving up work in Russia, he began working in the Czech Republic again, just as he used to in the early 2000s. This time, like many other Ukrainian passport holders, he travelled there with Polish visa, which was commonly believed to be easier to obtain in the visa centres in Uzhhorod, Ivano-Frankivsk and Lviv than the Czech ones. In his opinion, finding a job in Czechia was not a problem and Prague was well connected with his hometown. Working unregistered, he earned around 100 UAH⁷ per hour. He claimed he would have earned more if he had a Czech visa. Nevertheless, this amount of money, according to him, was significantly more than one could have earned in Ukraine. Interestingly, from the regional perspective, recalling construction sites in Prague, Ivan complained about Ukrainian co-workers from Lviv and Ivano-Frankivsk who would refuse to speak Russian and disliked it when he would address them in that language. His command of Ukrainian was rather poor, particularly when it came to technical vocabulary.

Volodymyr – an ethnic Ukrainian in his early sixties living in one of the nearby villages – whom I got to know in the summer of 2016, had worked in Russia, or

⁷ About 3,5 EUR in September 2016 (i.e., at the time of our conversation).

the Russian FSSR for most of his adult life. His last visit was in 2014, claiming that if it was not for the war, he would never have stopped working in Moscow. When we talked at his workplace in Solotvyno (the job itself was quite law paid with no prosperous perspective for the future), he complained about the situation in Ukraine, which according to him, had been getting increasingly worse since independence. He was truly convinced that the place of Ukraine was by Russia: a prosperous country where most of Transcarpathia's wealth came from thanks to hard work which translated into remittances. Under the tense Ukrainian – Russian relations and uneven rate of the Russian currency, he did not consider it an option to return there. Although he was equipped with a new Ukrainian passport, he was not sure what to do with it, as in order to work abroad one also needed a visa (which he was not sure he would get). His situation and plans for the future remained unspecified.

By 2017, with Russia no longer an attractive destination, Czech Republic seemed to have taken its place among those who had already been involved in migration and those who had only recently begun (or to work in general). When I got to know Maria, a Romanian and a daughter of an educated white-collar worker – back in 2010, she was a teenager attending secondary school. Her older brother, Adrian, worked as a blue-collar worker in one of the local companies. After graduating and getting married, Maria set her feet “on the migration track.” In the subsequent years, with her Solotvynian husband (also Romanian and similar age) she lived in Prague and worked as a cleaning person while her husband worked in construction. They stayed there, or actually just entered, based on 6-months valid Polish visas. As with his sister, Adrian also lived in the Czech capital city and just like his brother-in-law, he worked in construction. However, unlike his sister and brother-in-law, he had Hungarian citizenship which safeguarded his residency. As he told me, travelling on the Prague Metro felt like home, as Ukrainian and Russian languages can be constantly heard. In his assessment, most people come from Transcarpathia and Ivano-Frankivsk regions, however, there also was an increasing number of workers from Central and Southern Ukraine (which was where the Russian speakers came from). Their mother would occasionally send them packages through the mini-bus drivers or neighbours who travel to Czechia with their own cars. She also maintained a regular contact with them via Skype. Maria and her brother would also return at least three times a year, helping the family back home with renovations, housework, and gardening (which is how we had an opportunity to meet and talk).

Great Britain: the new destination

Unlike Russia and the Czech Republic, Great Britain appeared as a destination only after 2011 with its popularity among Transcarpathians increasing after 2014. As a new phenomenon limited to a particular group (Hungarian passport holders), its profile in local public space and narratives – such as in the form of advertisements – was not as high as other countries. Even if small in numbers, Transcarpathian migration to the UK presents a noteworthy account of the way historical legacies, ethnic identities, diaspora politics and migration intersect. It also contributes to individual and collective agency and entrepreneurship of those who circumvent the obstacles and use the given circumstances to their benefit. Travelling to and working in the UK is possible thanks to the Hungarian passports which, as previously mentioned, are granted based on Hungarian citizenship policy. This in turn references the historical legacy of the Kingdom of Hungary and the current national (re)building policy. This fact also narrows the scope of this kind of “Ukrainian” migration to Transcarpathia. I illustrate this point using the example of Imre, an ethnic Hungarian, entrepreneur in his mid-forties.

In 2010 Imre was operating a small retail business. In 2016, while still maintaining the business, he began travelling to London in a “circular mode,” working on construction sites and renovations. The company he worked for was owned by “...some Russians who have lived there for a long time,” describing his employers. He would go there approximately every three months, staying for a similar amount of time. In order to get there he used low-fare airlines from Debrecen or Budapest airports in Hungary. Alternatively, he travelled by the Satu-Mare (Romania) to London bus, which he boarded in the Hungarian town of Mataszelka. Even though the starting point was closer to his hometown, he considered the Hungarian location better as the bus stopped near the supermarket giving him a chance to do some additional grocery shopping for London. His strategy involved other countries than those of origin and destination (Hungarian documents, transportation hubs and supermarkets in Hungary) and as such required certain transnational competence. While living in the UK, Imre tried to save as much as possible, thus travelling by bus – even though a 30-hour long trip – would enable him to bring cheaper food from Ukraine and Hungary. The bus presented a more attractive alternative to the plane, as it was not only cheaper but allowed for more luggage, including glass jars and bottles. While in London, apart from supermarket chains, he would also shop at Polish grocery stores. He enthusiastically recalled the sausages from one of the most recognized Polish meat producers. Transferring his remittances, he used the service of, in his words, “...some Moldovan company which doesn’t charge commission.”

When we met in Solotvyno between 2016 and 2017, Imre looked upon with resignation and hopelessness at Ukraine, pointing to the ubiquitous corruption, lack of perspective and the war in Donbas, which he considered to be “... just a show.” He was not fond of life in London, either. The city itself was too big, too grey and too noisy. He did not feel comfortable in the “multicultural” environment as much as he disliked the fact of being separated from his family back in Ukraine. In fact, he was critical towards the widespread emigration from his hometown which, in his opinion, affected families, friendships and neighbourhoods in a negative way.

Hungary: an awkward bond

The difficulties some faced in Ukraine resulted in international mobility. However, Hungary, despite its symbolic presence in the region, is not necessarily seen as an alternative. Before 2012, there was the concept of a specific exclusion from the imagined Hungarian national community. The vast majority of the people travelling to Hungary identified as Hungarians. Despite shared language and bearing similar names and surnames, they were referred to as “Ukrainians” or “Russians” by their co-ethnics from an ideological homeland. In addition, they were exposed to mistreatment by Hungarian border guards and police who often treated them with an aloofness that sometimes turned into superiority and contempt.

In 2011 my frequent and intense conversations with Gábor, an ethnic Hungarian in his forties, a former miner who then worked as a technician, accustomed me to his fierce criticism regarding virtually everything in Ukraine. Everything from the state of the country to his hometown, his workplace, state of the national, regional and local healthcare and infrastructure and more. In his opinions, he did not spare Hungary either. As an ethnic Hungarian, he considered this country “his” and disliked the way immigrants from Ukraine – most of them of Hungarian ethnicity – were treated. He also recalled, with discontent, the fact that everywhere he would go people asked whether he was “...from the East.” He shared a bitter story of the migration experience in Budapest. He set off for the first time in the early 1990s. He went there, together with friends who had a relative in Budapest and who was supposed to help them find work. Once Budapest they got employment demolishing a building in the city suburbs. The work was far below Hungarian standards but still significantly more than they would have received in Ukraine. After a while, when returning to Budapest without planning anything in advance, they ended up sleeping outdoors on the outskirts of the city until, by chance, meeting an older woman who allowed them to stay in her leisure cottage (*dacha*).

The story was no better for Istvan, an ethnic Hungarian in his thirties, who had been working in the agriculture sector in northwest Hungary in 2003. The work had been arranged by a woman from Sotolvyno who was married to a Hungarian citizen and lived there, employing Transcarpathians. Istvan and the other migrant workers felt cheated, their earnings much smaller and work conditions much tougher than promised. His passport was taken away from him and he had to struggle to get it back in order to be able to leave earlier than planned. When I met Istvan and Gábor during 2016 and 2017, they lived in Sotolvyno, using their Hungarian passports – obtained after 2011 – for short visits in Romania, Hungary and Slovakia. In Istvan's case, these were also work-related, since as a professional driver, he occasionally carried passengers to and from these countries.

Together with the post-2011 widespread acquisition of Hungarian passports, migration routes and strategies change, “reversing” to some degree, the relations between “home” and “destination” countries. Nevertheless, they remained awkward. During this time there were the uniformed officers from the country of actual residence that were likely to give the travellers “suspicious looks.” In addition, the locals, Sotolvynians or Transcarpathians, regardless of their ethnic identity, still seemed to be perceived by their Transcarpathian Hungarian passport holders as “Ours,” but increasing identification with Hungary as a state could be observed. Pro-Hungary sentiment and Hungarian nationalism seemed to emerge even among those who had never previously expressed such views. Nevertheless, the emergence of nationalism among the minority groups appears as secondary to the process of acquiring citizenship.

Hungarian citizenship, diaspora and other such policies aimed at territories with which the country shares common history also appeared as a subject of discussions and concerns to some of the Hungarian passport holders. This kind of involvement of Hungarian national ideology extends beyond the boundaries of the nation-state, meeting Ukrainian state-building efforts and pursuit of territorial integrity. Hungarian extra-territorial policy also takes the shape of subsidies not only for Hungarian speaking schools and cultural institutions, but also health care institutions in Transcarpathia regardless of the language of their services. In the framework of “gesture politics”, Ukrainian cultural initiatives in the region are also supported (Eróss, Kovály and Tátrai 2017). Apart from its symbolic value and travelling opportunities it offers, Hungarian citizenship can also entitle one to the country's pension fund, or to put it simply, a “five times higher pension,” even if one has never worked in Hungary. However, to fully benefit from the possibilities granted to the ‘foreign’ (i.e. Hungarian) passport holders, one needs to register as a resident. The need for registration boosts the real estate market in Hungary but requires certain resources, both financial and social, from the new

citizens. Apart from dual citizenship itself, circular migration and cross-border commuting between the two countries is also strengthened by the requirement of permanent residence in Hungary for at least six months per year in order to be counted as a resident and eligible for the pension fund. This all contributes to the increased “circulation” between Ukraine and Hungary but does not necessarily translate into work in the latter.

Conclusions

Familiarity with language and culture attributed to the destination country or region shaping migration patterns and transnational social spaces, such as the economic (availability of job offers and attractiveness of salaries) and policy (accessibility of labour market) factors do. In Transcarpathia, destinations of migration and the strategies of obtaining the necessary documents⁸ are to a large extent grounded in the regional and local specifics such as historical legacies and living social memories of the past, and ethnic and linguistic composition and social networks worked out in relation to these aspects.

For instance, working in Russia can be considered a part of the “Soviet legacy”. It can be traced in the common fluency in Russian language, which had not been spoken in Solotvyno before 1944 (its knowledge in the region was limited to the Russia-oriented intellectual circles). These language skills are accompanied by competency in Russian popular culture and news.⁹ The visa-free regime between the two countries was an important policy factor encouraging travel to this destination, turning quite marginal after the post-2014 political developments in Ukraine. Hungarian passports are granted on the basis of reference to history and nationalist narratives. They enable recipients to travel and work within the European Union. Thus, applying for Hungarian citizenship is not necessarily related to Hungarian identity or the intention of working in this country, although in some cases it might. Czechia appears not only as the most popular destination but also covers with the widest plethora of documents, making it more “accessible” for Czech and Polish visas or Hungarian passports. The popularity of this country corresponds with positive social memory of the interwar Czechoslovakia which Transcarpathia used to be a part of (cf. Uherek 2009). Livelihood strategies, as observed in the fieldwork and described in this

⁸ I deliberately avoid the term “work permits” or “work and travel permits” as the actual and official functions of the documents do not necessarily overlap.

⁹ It shall be acknowledged that over the last decade, the use of Ukrainian language in Solotvyno has increased while the popularity of Russian TV has decreased.

article, contribute to the bottom-up responses to transformation processes and the legacies of the past. Existing political and economic conditions appear as altered, transformed and put in motion through strategies of survival. Pragmatic responses to political and economic conditions derive from the regional and local specificities. These kinds of actions also reveal individual and collective agency in developing migration strategies and navigating between existing political, economic and legal contradictions to an individual's benefit. These strategies change with the political developments in both "sending" and "receiving" (or potentially receiving) countries and regions. Ethnographic studies of these dynamics provide us with the evidence of the local outcomes of the (inter)national and global processes, including the regimes of mobility and their bottom-up reshaping. No doubt this activity, on the grassroots level, undermines these regimes, creating economic opportunities for individuals, groups and households. However, this does not introduce significant changes in the existing hierarchies and social inequalities (cf. Faist 2016) which can be perceived as fitting within the neoliberal strategy of "human resources management" and individualisation of livelihood strategies.

Stephen Castles (2010: 1579) notes that social theories, both "critical" and "mainstream", applied to migration studies often fall into the trap of political and economic determinism and fail to recognise human agency. This can also be said about various kinds of large-scale concepts and master-narratives which loose the actual people and their individual and collective problems out of sight (cf. Han 2018: 339). It does not mean that social and cultural research should not pay attention to macro-forces, which the position of particular groups and individuals is embedded in. Quite the contrary. To quote Don Kalb, ethnography "...can show how everyday practices and social relationships are embedded in the peculiarities of local paths of change, and in trajectories of possible becomings" (Kalb 2002: 69). Recurrent fieldwork in the small town of Soltvyno enabled me to capture significant changes in local migration patterns and the ways they mirror international political developments and policy frames. It has also revealed persisting exclusionary mechanisms and the need of constant negotiation of power asymmetries and underprivileged position of its inhabitants.

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