

Foreword

Recent decades have seen an unremitting interest on the part of researchers, policy makers and the general public in the mobility of people of Eastern Europe (EE). After nearly fifty years of administratively suppressed out-bound migration and delimited migration potential, the population of that part of Europe has finally become free to move. What was largely expected around 1990 was not only a shift from a low to high incidence of East-to-West mobility but also a profound change in its forms and types: from a predominance of outflows for humanitarian reasons (family reunion, 'repatriation' of ethnic minorities, asylum seeking) to a regular and steady emigration flow. It was believed that migration, by becoming possible for everybody instead of being an option available only to a tiny proportion of the population, would involve great masses of people. Those expectations have only partly been realized. On one hand, the real-life migration-related phenomena turned out to be richer and more complex, and, on the other hand, it appeared to be somehow blurred and more difficult to capture.

Apart from the collapse of the Soviet bloc and Soviet-style socialism – both of which paved the way to the increased international mobility of Eastern Europeans – there was also a wide array of other powerful factors playing significant roles.

The transition to market economies, a process during which each country of the region took its own course, led to a substantial intra-regional differentiation in economic performance, availability of jobs and wage levels. Newly emerging centres of economic dynamism spurred the mobility of people travelling between countries of EE. Various primitive forms of mobility such as the short shuttle movements of petty traders that developed in the early 1990s became a prototype for more long-distance, westward mobility that characterized the end of the decade. Needless to say, the introduction of visa-free travel to the West greatly contributed to that mobility. Lower costs and the increased effectiveness of international transportation and communication greatly facilitated quick, multiple, roundtrip journeys across Europe.

A particularly strong magnet that attracted migrants from EE was the combination of much higher wages and an unsatisfied demand for relatively cheap labour in the West. Access to Western labour markets, however,

was considerably restricted. Under these conditions, population movements from EE were generally characterized by clandestine motives and forms. While the vast majority of migrants from EE sought employment in foreign countries – which was undoubtedly the main motive behind their migration – they were compelled to declare other purposes to both the administration of their country of origin and host countries simply in order to be allowed to (until 1989) leave or (until at least 2004) enter and remain. This forced them to adapt to an unstable and disadvantageous if not precarious situation in the labour market and in social life in general. Even after 1989, when exiting EE countries was permissible and residents could easily enter many countries of their ‘traditional’ destination, migrants, as a rule, could legally only be tourists in those countries, which was rarely their actual motive for embarking on a journey to a foreign country.

Because of their more or less irregular status, most migrants originating from EE suffered from discriminatory practices pervasive among employers, and, in particular, were significantly underpaid. As a means of coping with that situation, migrants developed a peculiar pattern of mobility that enabled them to revalorize the ‘real value’ of their foreign earnings: ‘incomplete migration’, a circulation of individual household members, often repeated, characterized by short-term employment abroad and a very high rate of earnings remitted or repatriated to the migrant’s home country – where the cost of living was substantially lower. By spending most of the ‘foreign money’ earned in the country of origin, the migrant’s real wages became relatively high and afforded migrant households a decent – if not a substantially improved – living standard.

Since 1 May 2004, with the first EU eastward enlargement, this situation has become even more complicated. Some people (in fact, hundreds of thousands) from eight EE countries have moved for work to Britain, Ireland and Sweden, where restrictions to labour market were lifted, whereas many of their compatriots continued to move to other EU or EEA countries to be employed there as seasonal or guest workers – though sometimes under the guises of ‘tourist’ or ‘student’ or ‘self-established entrepreneur’. At the same time, the citizens of other EE states, notably the highly mobile people from Ukraine, Romania, Moldova and Bulgaria were left behind, still forced to engage in various forms of ‘irregularity’ in Western labour markets.

All these factors produced quite a new migration reality in Europe characterized by, on one hand, the very existence of large numbers of highly mobile people from EE who easily adapt to local administrative rules or loopholes and to specific and variable labour market situations, who are capable of profiting from those situations and exploiting opportunities of living in transnational social spaces, and, on the other hand, by specific

partly symbiotic and partly competitive relationships between their countries of origin and, eventually, their destination.

I hasten to admit that the complexity of this new reality and the pace at which it has evolved has left researchers hardly able to cope with it, a bit surprised and maybe even feeling helpless.

The intrinsic value of this book lies in its meticulous analysis of current scientific mobility, using, as an example, Bulgarian and Polish scholars in the West (Britain and Germany). But, it is also much more than this. For it encapsulates most of the above-mentioned characteristics of recent East-to-West European population movements. Focusing on a very specific type of mobility, namely that of natural scientists, it accurately describes the essence of those movements, in all their intricacy and complexity. It departs from a tendency still prevalent in much literature – that is, attempting to understand the present European migration reality by means of traditional concepts and frameworks – and, instead, takes a quite innovative approach to mobility. In this approach, mobility is described as a combination of highly diversified, fluid movements, capable of metamorphosis, which reflect individual trajectories of movements over the span of one's life cycle and professional career. The holistic stance adopted by the authors enables them not only to track individual series of mobility episodes but, in addition, and above all, to link those episodes to migrants' family conditions, to his/her connections to and positions in various networks, and to labour market dynamics both in the home and potential host countries. Furthermore, it effectively incorporates the 'circulationist perspective' into the mainstream of mobility studies, and also accounts for social costs and benefits in both the sending and receiving countries. I have little doubt that this book presents itself as one of the few rare, groundbreaking endeavours in the area of migration studies.

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