

Patterns of Migration in Central and Eastern Europe

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Patterns of Migration in Central and Eastern Europe: Post-socialist Transition and Other Factors Affecting Mobility

“We asked for workers. We got people instead” – Max Frisch

In these last decades, the favourite myth elaborated by the western populist political discourse was that of a new phenomenon of immigration that was threatening their societies. While migration in Western Europe has been neither new nor threatening, the transformations in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union have posed new challenges to both East and West. At a time when EU15 was being defined and redefined as a major immigration target, Central and Eastern Europe (CEE)[1] was gradually acquiring a dual profile as a region of both emigrants and immigrants. Consequently, a “new migration space” (Wallace & Stola 2001) — first in the EU proximity and then inside the union — was being constructed.

By relying on a two dimensional analyses of *time* — the pre[2] and post CEE EU accession — and *space* — inflows and outflows of migrants in the region — this essay explores the different patterns of migration in the CEE by analyzing the underlying motivations of migrants’ mobility in both periods and directions. Accordingly, it is argued that while, over the last decades, immigration into CEE has moved from diverse to mainly economically oriented, migration from CEE has evolved from being mainly economic transition-related to being more structurally diverse economic, cultural as well as social migration. In this way, the transformation of CEE from the immediate EU eastern neighbouring region to the new guardian of the EU eastern border has affected both in and out flows of migration in CEE. Although led by different motivations, temporary migration represented the predominant migration form over these two decades. This is why Wallace (2001) defined this cross-border movement as mobility rather than migration.

Immigration into CEE

Pre-accession Period

Migration into CEE before the EU accession has been very diverse. Nevertheless, the major part of this immigration was related to economic and social motivations deriving from the post-socialist transition period. In this regard, immigration into CEE in the post-socialist period was a continuation of previous migration patterns of the socialist period. Special border and migration agreements existed between the CEE and other countries from the socialist block. During transition, the application of low regulated capitalism in the region promoted the development of an informal sector which employed many irregular foreign workers (Stola 2001: 96-97). In this way, many foreigners entered the region as legal migrants but worked illegally. In the case of Poland, migration from Ukraine, Belarus, or even the other CEE countries was an existing phenomenon before the regime change and continued afterward. Ukrainians represented the largest migrating group, which was mainly engaged into temporary migration, a circular border crossing for short working periods in Poland, defined by Okólski (2001) as incomplete migration. Poverty was the main cause of these flows (Okólski 2001: 117). In the case of Hungary, although there was a primarily economic-driven migration, this mobility acquired an ethnical dimension as the country attracted Hungarians from neighbouring countries.

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On the other side, CEE experienced migration flows that were related to political issues. First, Chinese and Vietnamese migrants in the region used visa free agreements or other special regulations of the socialist time to migrate into Hungary, Czech Republic and Poland (Stola 2001: 99; Drbohlav et al, 2009: 90-94). They usually had political reasons, although many of them first migrated as students or temporary workers (Nyíri, 2002). These migrants engaged in their own economic activities and ethnic networks, developing in this way a permanent or semi-settled stay in the respective destination countries.

Second, CEE became a highly affected region by asylum seekers. The dissolution of the Soviet Union and the wars in Yugoslavia were accompanied by considerable demands for asylum, especially by Chechens in the former case and Bosnians and Kosovars in the later (Wallace and Stola 2001: 11-15). Furthermore, there were asylum seekers from other part of the world that were using CEE as a transition region to get into the EU countries. As the CEE countries and the EU had special readmission pacts, which meant that EU countries would return these migrants to the previous country they came from — which in this case meant the transition country rather than the origin one — CEE countries became countries of destination rather than transition. Consequently, the region acted as a “shock absorber” middle zone (Stola 2001) or “buffer zone” (Wallace 2001) for the EU.

Post-accession Period

Although CEE's EU membership affected the access of immigrants into the region, it did not prevent them from relying on the CEE labour market to fulfil a major part of their economic needs. The CEE expanding labour market was even more attractive after EU accession, although more labour and residence regulations applied. While regulations affected migrants' decisions to settle — many Ukrainians and Armenians in Poland asked for permanent or long-term residences (Iglicka & Ziolek-Skrzypczak 2010) — temporary migration still represented the dominant pattern of migration. The classical post-socialist migration itinerary of working in CEE and supporting family members in the home country was still predominant. Furthermore, new flows of migrants reached these countries by relying on the already formed co-nationals' migration networks. As a result of these late flows, Czech Republic for example has clearly become a “county of immigrants”, where legal and illegal migrants worked in “manual, unskilled, and underpaid jobs” (Drbohlav 2005; Drbohlav et al, 2009: 26). Consequently, the underlying motivations and patterns of migration into CEE remained predominantly economic, where cross-border circular working activities still prevailed.

A predominantly transition-related economic profile does not exclude other migration patterns in the region. While CEE continued to serve as a transit region for many migrants into the EU, the level of asylum seekers has declined as a result of stricter regulations on the issue (Iglicka & Ziolek-Skrzypczak 2010; Juhász 2003). On the other side, there was a less visible emerging migrant profile: the western immigrant. Westerners from Europe and the USA used to work in prestigious and well paid jobs in CEE countries since the beginning of transition (Rudolph & Hillman 1998). In Czech Republic and to a certain extent in Poland, the number of western migrants was considerable (see Drbohlav 2005). This can also be considered an economically-driven migration, but certainly not motivated by post-socialist economic and social reasons, as is the eastern migration.

Emigration from CEE

Pre-accession Period

At the end of the socialist period, the EU countries represented CEE citizens' favourite destination of migration in search of work. Although CEE migration toward the EU was not a new phenomenon — for example Polish migration had a distinguished historical dimension — the end of the socialist regimes signed the beginning of a widespread east-west migration flow. CEE citizens' migration at the time was mainly focused on the EU eastern border and therefore the most affected countries were Austria and Germany, but also the rest of continental EU, especially France, Belgium, Sweden and Italy (Okólski 2007: 6), gradually became destinations for migrants in search of labour markets. Old and new migrants' ethnic networks developed during this time, which served as important recruiting agencies for co-nationals in search of a job (about Polish migration to Brussels see Grzymała-Kazłowska 2006).

CEE citizens' migration was directly related to the economic and social conditions of the post-socialist period.

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Unemployment and the hard living conditions were the main incentive for crossing the border in search of temporary jobs. The circular nature of this migration was again related to the conditions in the home county, where the migrant — predominantly men but also women — would not prefer to move their families which were entitled to benefits from the broad welfare system that existed in the post-socialist countries (Wallace 2001: 50). Furthermore, although migrants crossed the border legally and illegally, most of the time they worked illegally in the destination countries. These conditions made them engage in unskilled, underpaid and sometimes dangerous jobs. Whatever the employment, most of these early years' transition period migrants from CEE were not there to stay; their earnings were meant to be spent in their home countries, with their families and where they felt like living, although they were spending more time in a foreign county than home.

Post-accession Period

With the 2004 CEE accession in the EU, a new wave of migrants left the region toward EU15. There were authors that pictured the emergence of a "new migration system in Europe" which would be exploitative to some extent and would promote the emergence of a second-class citizens' group inside the EU (Favell 2008). Favell made this assessment on the basis of the circular nature of CEE citizens' migration and the low-paid jobs they were engaged in. It is true that this new wave of migrants engaged in similar jobs as the previous ones and that they aimed at those countries that opened their labour markets (like Ireland and the UK) to the new member-countries. It is also true that there was a fundamental economic incentive driving these migrants. On the other hand, however, this new, mainly circular, migration had a different migrant profile which now was decreasingly driven by transition-related economic motivations.

The last decade's east-west migration shows a new migrant who is driven by diverse motivations. First, this migrant is not typically coming from the village, relying on migration as a fundamental source of income and mainly working to support a family back home. Increasingly people from the town, well educated, in their twenties and mostly single (Accession Monitoring report 2004-2006: 10-12), were leaving CEE to engage in working activities in EU15 countries. Although many Poles, for example, migrated to the UK and Ireland because these countries opened their labour market for them, this migration was more adventurist, not relying on the old ethnic migration networks in the traditional migration countries near the border. Also, it became "more regular than irregular or clandestine, more long-term than circular, and more 'individualistic' than related to household or family strategies" (Fihel & Kaczmarczyk 2009: 45). Consequently, in this last decade intra-EU migration has gone through some structural changes where the migrants were not driven by the previous transition related motivations and the immediate pressure of poverty, but rather by a desire for new challenges and a better life.

Conclusions

By relying on a two dimensional analysis of time and space, this essay explored the different patterns of migration from and into Central and Eastern Europe. Although migration patterns and the underlying motivations that drive them usually tend to be stable, during these two post-socialist decades CEE has experienced gradual changes in both immigration and emigration dynamics. While Eastern Europe was increasingly integrating into the EU, it started to represent the new west for many of its eastern bordering countries and beyond. Consequently, in the post-accession period the 'new easterners'[3] that migrated into CEE would start engaging in similar working activities as the migrants from CEE used to engage in the pre-accession period in Western Europe. Their basic economic migration motivations remained stable throughout these two decades. On the other side, CEE migration into the EU in the post-accession period has gradually shifted away from a post-socialist transition-driven economic and social mobility. Although evolving, CEE migration in the EU15 countries remains fundamentally materialist, differing from western European citizens who are increasingly driven by post-materialist incentives in their migration choices.

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[1] This essay focuses on the four Visegrad countries.

[2] The pre-accession period in this essay starts from 1989 as the main focus is the post-socialist period.

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[3] Ukrainians, Belarusians, Armenians, Russians etc.

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