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Migration, vulnerability and the complexity of violence: Experiences of documented non-EU migrants in Slovakia

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A B S T R A C T

Migration to East and Central Europe (ECE) remains under-researched, not least because of the relatively small number of migrants in the region. Exploring experiences of documented non-EU migrants in Slovakia with various forms of violence – including violence motivated by hate and associated with work exploitation – the paper uncovers patterns of violence and vulnerability across the migrant cohort. As a broader contribution to studies of migration, the research alerts scholars to the need for a greater attention to the experiences of smaller cohorts of migrants, which often remain under the radar because of their size. The second line of the argument highlights the complexity and relations between different kinds of violence. Several risk factors are identified as contributing to the risk of migrants' exposure to various forms of abuse at the same time, providing with implications for preventive and supportive policies and practices. The analysis particularly emphasises the importance of ties between migrant communities and formal institutions for mitigating violence.

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Introduction

In the last decade, East and Central Europe (ECE) has been for the most part conceptualised as a source region of primarily labour-motivated out-migration. The flows of labour migrants from ECE to Western Europe after the accession to the EU in 2004 overshadowed other patterns of migration, drawing considerable interest from geographers (Williams and Baláž, 2008; Burrell, 2008, 2010; Stenning and Dawley, 2009; Findlay et al., 2010; McCollum and Findlay, 2011) and others (Anderson et al., 2006; Spencer et al., 2007; Cook et al., 2010, 2012).

This paper argues that the scarcity of research on the flows of migrants *into* ECE is consequentially echoed in the lack of understanding of migrants' experiences and livelihoods, obscuring underlying patterns of extensive abuse and exploitation. It demonstrates the importance of in-depth empirical and conceptual inquiry into both migration patterns *and* migrants' experiences in ECE, highlighting some methodological, conceptual and contextual challenges of such work. As a broader contribution to studies of migration, the paper provides an argument that the scale of migration is not necessarily reflected in the scale of abuse, and even areas with low numbers of migrants require attention that is often given only to those with more numerous flows of migrants.

This is attained through exploring the exposure of migrants from non-EU countries (third country nationals; TCNs) in Slovakia to diverse forms and practices of violence, drawing on findings from a nation-scale research project conducted by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) in 2012. The paper is thus in turn adding also to the existing understandings of migrants' experience with violence and the impact it has on their wellbeing (Black et al., 2006), focusing on the complexity of violence. This second line of argument brings together data on migrants' experiences with violence motivated by hate and that associated with work exploitation, highlighting the intersections and complex relationships between the factors of risk and support, and with patterns of social exclusion and marginalisation in the background. The main argument is that certain factors might increase or mitigate the risk of exposure to several forms of violence, which establishes implications for policy and practice to consider prevention and supportive strategies through multi-dimensional lens.

Present focus on ECE migration

All East Central European countries that accessed the EU in 2004 (the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia) recorded a rapid increase in immigration afterwards, even though this rate decelerated after the outbreak of the financial crisis in 2008 due to the dominant share of flexible labour migration. Nevertheless, they (except for the Czech Republic) still host some of the lowest

populations of immigrants within the EU, in both relative and absolute numbers. Yet in the light of expectations that followed the accession to the EU and the geopolitical and economic location of the region, it has been argued that ECE countries should be viewed as 'future immigration lands' (Castles and Miller, 2009, p. 116; see also Wallace and Stola, 2001; Fassman et al., 2009).

In spite of this, regular migration *to* the region of ECE remains under-researched as of the present. As an offset to the research agenda of the major East–West migration flows within the EU, return migration of ECE labour migrants from Western Europe has received some attention from the very onset of the post-accession period (Williams and Baláž, 2004, 2005b, 2008; Castles, 2006; Galasińska, 2010; Klagge and Klein-Hitpass, 2010; Cieslik, 2011; Martin and Radu, 2012; Careja and Emmenegger, 2012). Less so, researchers have attended to irregular migration and migration of refugees to ECE (Drbohlav and Janská, 2009; Klvanová, 2010; Pikhart et al., 2010; Maroukis et al., 2011; Medová and Drbohlav, 2013). Only very limited amount of work then specifically targets regular migrants in ECE, particularly those from outside the EU. The work of Williams and Baláž on the transnational spaces of Vietnamese petty traders in Slovakia (Williams and Baláž, 2005a; Baláž and Williams, 2007), Górny's and Kępińska's (2004), Veermersch's (2007) and Triandafyllidou's (2009) studies of the mobility of Ukrainian migrants in Poland and Hungary, and Cook's (2010, 2011) research on the geographies of transnational elites in Prague, are among the few examples of in-depth research into migration patterns and everyday experiences of non-EU migrants in ECE. Yet these studies focus on single groups of migrants from a particular angle and little is known conceptually about the diversity of migrants and their experiences in the region. In this context, only work of Williams and Baláž targets migration from and to Slovakia.

This paper responds to this lacuna by providing a comprehensive overview of the migration context in Slovakia, drawing on an extensive original fieldwork as well as existing datasets. Emphasising the wellbeing of migrants rather than migration patterns themselves, the focus is on the vulnerability of migrants in Slovakia to various forms of violence as an emergent and under-researched issue.

Context of violence: Conceptual framework and research scope

As Lawrence and Karim (2007, 10) argue, "[t]here is always a context, or a structure, to violence". Theorising violence requires examining much more than the physical act of ferocity itself, as the relevant context might range from the conceptual spatialities of military conflicts (Gregory 2010) to the "waves" of emotional experiences and practices contesting domestic violence (Pain 2014). This paper maps experiences of (documented) migrants with actual physical violence, but first and foremost it explores the context of vulnerability that increases the risk of exposure to violence and inflates its consequences. This includes various patterns of social exclusion, marginalisation or discrimination that often create a pillar or framework for violence themselves (Reed et al., 2010; Rafferty 2013), but the focus of the paper is also on experiences of violence not necessarily related to migrants' socio-legal status, as how they are mitigated reflects back on the patterns of inclusion and exclusion experienced by documented migrants in Slovakia. This is also why the paper explores relations between violence and migration without looking at where violence is likely most prominent: experiences of displaced persons, victims of human trafficking or refugees (Huang and Yeoh 2007; McGrath 2013). Whereas the relations of vulnerability and exploitation are more obvious in these contexts, the paper intentionally looks also at perhaps more subtle forms of violence, abuse and exploitation as

a way to shed light on patterns of injustice associated with documented migration, and often overlooked, particularly in the context of ECE.

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines violence as:

"The intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment or deprivation." (WHO 2002, 4)

Of various facets implied in this conceptualisation, three are of particular importance. First, abuse of a power relationship, threats, pressure, neglect and maltreatment, all need to be seen as manifestations of violence, not only the physical act itself. Second, violence does not have to result in physical injury as the harm can be psychological or social, and it can manifest only after a longer period. Finally, the intentionality of the act is crucial for identifying the act as violent, even if there is a mismatch between the actual and intended consequences.

The paper thus does not only directly explore acts of violence, but, emphasising the *complexity* of violence, it explores also perceptions and threats of violence, their consequences, and the intentions behind such practices. Further, recognising the importance of the *context* of violence, it associates these with the socio-economic and legal circumstances of migrants, highlighting the risk and mitigating factors. It recognises that there might be a tension between various definitions of violence and its subjective perceptions by victims and that particular acts of violence can be viewed differently by various actors besides migrant communities, such as policing and helping institutions or media (Jewkes et al., 2002; Benson 2008). It looks at practices associated with physical violence that are often labelled as abuse or exploitation, paying attention to the presence of violence, actual, threatened or perceived. By exploring the importance of violence in the experiences of those migrants who are usually deemed to be less prone to violent abuse, the paper identifies overlooked patterns of vulnerability, marginalisation and social exclusion.

Migration and violence

Migrants can be more prone to abuse and exploitation than the host population for a variety of reasons. Migration itself is often an attempt to address one's own vulnerability and disadvantage (Brainard et al., 2009; Raleigh, 2011). Migrants can be at a handicap in relation to the host society because of the cultural capital they establish (Erel, 2010) or the lack of acceptance from the host society (Manevska and Achterberg, 2011). They can become vulnerable not just because they lack resources, but because they might not be aware of them. Moving to a new locality also means a relative loss of social capital for many migrants in comparison with their long-term place of residence (Cheong et al., 2007). Diasporas and migrant communities, ties with individuals from the host society (for instance through churches or workplace) and effective institutional interventions can mitigate this disadvantage, but social isolation is a key element of the risk of exposure to violence for many migrants. Migrants' legal and political status can further limit their rights and opportunities (Bloemraad et al., 2008) as the limited permit to stay or have a job, restricted access to welfare system or restricted movement are among the disadvantages that can lead to further abuse and exploitation. Finally, the move to a new country itself, or a change of setting, can lead to an economic handicap which can translate to the risk of abuse. A combination of these factors, or a significantly strong presence of some of them, triggers the most notable patterns of vulnerability.