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## **Ukrainian Labour Migrants: Visibility Through Stereotypes**

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Today migration has become one of the most politicised and securitised issues in Europe. At the same time the debate on migration is a discourse that invites manipulation. For the receiving societies labour migrants can serve as a politically, socially, and economically convenient category of people. For instance, because of the lack of agency and rights in the receiving countries, migrants can be exploited economically as a mass labour force, socially as a scapegoat (blamed for instabilities within the country) and even politically linked to security issues of the state. In the sending societies, labour migrants are often targets of similar social, political, and economic manipulations. Socially and politically speaking, they may be looked down upon as unpatriotic or 'betrayers'. However, economically speaking, sending societies rarely fail to benefit from remittances and other forms of financial investments of their migrants.

While there is a significant bulk of literature written about migrants' situations in the receiving societies, there seem to be less interest in the role and place of labour migrants in the sending societies, which in the first place play a significant role in the causes and the forms of migration. The sending society's 'norms' and social practices often determine the decision to go to work abroad and later the choices of country, job, and life style, etc. Moreover, one of the distinguishing characteristics of labour migration is that people who work abroad maintain their connections with their homeland and thus are indirectly involved in the lives of their state, community and family while working abroad as well as upon their return. This paper, therefore, focuses on the conditions in the sending society, i.e. economic and social conditions that keep maintaining and reproducing high levels of migration from Ukraine. Using the example of Ivano-Frankivsk, a western Ukrainian city, the paper will also demonstrate how not only receiving but also sending societies shape their discourses on labour migrants without migrants' participation and that they do so in such a way that brings them benefits from the migration flow.

A friend of mine, who at the age of 42 left for Italy and has worked there for five years, says that while both in Italy and in Ukraine she often feels guilty about her decision to migrate.<sup>1</sup> Although she was clear about her motivation to leave, - to provide her children with basics such as good food and a better quality of life, i.e. an apartment and education, - she has been accused of heartlessness in both Ukraine and Italy. She says that while in

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<sup>1</sup> Private conversation. Ivano-Frankivsk. December 2005.

Italy, the public opinion of Ukrainian women as adventuresses dominates radio, TV, women's magazines and other press. In Ukraine, her status as a labour migrant is extremely low, as her village community suspects her of possible immoral behaviour abroad, implying she made 'easy earnings'; she has been accused of being a heartless mother for leaving her children in search of better life and even of betraying Ukraine during hard times.

However, such lack of respect, both on the part of the sending and receiving societies, does not mean that these societies ignore the benefits and income that labour migration brings. In case of Ukraine, where the estimated number of people who left ranges from 1 to 7 million (official versus unofficial estimates),<sup>2</sup> conditions have been made for the easy flow of money from abroad, particularly to suit the needs of labour migrants and their families. Economically speaking, due to the gradual converging of prices between Ukraine and the EU, it is practically impossible for a labour migrant to earn a sum of money that would allow them to start a business in Ukraine. Taking into account that most businesses are run by the political elite and their extended family, migrant workers who leave the country for several years lack not only the money but also the networks necessary for a successful business in Ukraine. However, migrants, or more precisely their family members who stay in Ukraine, constitute a group whose purchasing power - due to remittances sent back home by their relatives working abroad - are much higher than those of average citizens. The Ukrainian transitional economy<sup>3</sup> has been able to create a very sensitive but steady market for the growing needs of this category of people, as well as a well-functioning system for extracting the money from the population.

Therefore, under the conditions of a transitional economy in Ukraine, labour migrants constitute a high source of income; in 2000 they sent home 40 billion USD, a sum six times bigger than the country's annual budget.<sup>4</sup> However, labour migrants constitute a category that does not compete for local employment, political or other resources. Many labour migrants, coming back from abroad, choose to migrate again after a few years at home. The reasons are mostly economic; a person who worked abroad as a construction worker cannot start working in a similar job at home even though he feels he has enough innovative experience. After receiving \$10 - 15 per hour (an average salary of a Ukrainian construction worker in the USA) he will not agree to work for \$2 per hour (which is a salary of a similarly qualified worker in Ukraine). In addition, there is also a social prestige and acceptance aspect involved; e.g. while it is absolutely acceptable for women to work as cleaning ladies abroad, most of them would not take same job in Ukraine - definitely not for the money it offers - as it would mean a dramatic drop in their social status.

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<sup>2</sup> Olena Malynovska, "International migration in contemporary Ukraine: trends and policy." Global Migration Perspectives. No. 14, October 2004.

<sup>3</sup> While the term *transitional economy* is rather questionable in Ukrainian context, however, it is not until February 17 2006 that the US formally announced in Kyiv that "the United States has granted market-economy status to Ukraine." Radio Free Europe/ Radio Liberty. 2006.  
<<http://www.rferl.org/featuresarticle/2006/02/433d73cd-97cc-45c8-a45f-3a3d6f87dc01.html>> 2 April 2006.

<sup>4</sup> Keryk, Myroslava. "Labour Migrant: Our Savior or Betrayer? Ukrainian discussions concerning labour migration." Migration Online. September, 2004. <[www.migrationonline.cz](http://www.migrationonline.cz)> 5 Dec.2005.

Meanwhile, the Ukrainian economy is very sensitive to the real but unregistered incomes of its citizens. Ivano-Frankivsk, a west-Ukrainian regional centre with a population of around 219,500<sup>5</sup> is a vivid example of this. According to the Ivano-Frankivsk regional statistics<sup>6</sup> the unemployment rate in 2004 reached 11.1 per cent and the average monthly salary was 544 Hrn, about \$100. The city has about 27 different banks,<sup>7</sup> each of which has a number of branches within the city, along with 12 Western Union offices.<sup>8</sup> Prices for new apartments have been consistently growing for years, now reaching about \$370-390 per square metre and the city is booming with new construction sites. Although the new banks and construction sites do create some jobs, the salaries for these newly created jobs remain within the ranges of an average registered income in Ivano-Frankivsk and so the high prices cannot be explained solely through domestic factors.

Apart from earning money for accommodation, another dominant economic reason for going to work abroad has been to pay for migrant's children's schooling. The educational sphere has thus recently become another highly profitable sphere in the local economy. In the academic year 2004-05 the city had 30 Higher and Further Educational establishments<sup>9</sup> of I-VI levels of accreditation (i.e. colleges, institutes, universities and academies). The average tuition fees are around 3000 Hrn. (\$600) per semester and since the average monthly salary is around a \$100, it is impossible for the young people to pay themselves through school and cover their daily expenses. From these few examples one can see that the economy of the region has developed a suitable system for obtaining the unregistered income from the population. Those gaining from such a system also seem to be interested in maintaining this situation, no matter what the source of the people's income is.

In addition to the income which temporary labour migrants send home, the people in themselves create a very 'convenient' category of citizens for local and national governments. Since labour migrants are missing from their homes for several years in a row, they cannot take an active part in the political life of the country. While the labour migrants can be perfectly aware the political situation at home, they often fail to be an active political force due to, for instance, missing important elections or being unable to be socially and politically active in their home country while they work abroad. This lack of engagement in home-country politics is mainly caused by people's often semi-legal status in the receiving country; the need to stay 'invisible.' Therefore, labour migrants often represent a classic example of N. Gogol's "dead souls," i.e. names, which exist in records but have no real agency and therefore can be manipulated for political and economic ends.

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<sup>5</sup> Holovne Upravlinnja statystyky v Ivano-Frankivskij oblasti [Head Department of Statistics in Ivano-Frankivsk Region]. 14 October 2002. <[http://stat.if.ukrtel.net/X\\_OBL/X\\_OBL.HTM](http://stat.if.ukrtel.net/X_OBL/X_OBL.HTM)> 30 January 2005.

<sup>6</sup> *Ivano-Frankivsk Short Reference Book on Statistics*. Ivano-Frankivsk, 2004.

<sup>7</sup> Dovidnyk-kataloh (Banky Ukrajin, SNH, stran Baltyky) [Reference Book and Catalogue: Banks of Ukrainian, Former Soviet Union and Baltic States)]. 2005.

<sup>8</sup> *Western Union Ukraine*. 2002. <<http://www.ufg.com.ua/wu/index.php?module=place&func=view&letter=И>>. 6 Dec. 2005.

<sup>9</sup> Holovne Upravlinnja statystyky v Ivano-Frankivskij oblasti [Head Department of Statistics in Ivano-Frankivsk Region]. 14 October 2002. <[http://stat.if.ukrtel.net/X\\_OBL/X\\_OBL.HTM](http://stat.if.ukrtel.net/X_OBL/X_OBL.HTM)> 30 January 2005.

Situated in between the interests of the home country and the interests of the receiving societies, a labour migrant appears to be caught in the middle, surviving the best they can. Any effort to improve the situation of the temporary labour migrant is complicated by the very nature of this type of migration. Since people who go to work abroad temporarily do so for several years, they do not plan to assimilate or integrate in the receiving society entirely. Due to various reasons - migrants' connection to their homeland, owning land and property at home, the leaving behind of extended and close family, uneasiness with social norms and expectations of the receiving society or foreign culture and language problems - temporary migration attracts people partly because of the possibility of reversing their migration; it is a chance to improve one's economic situation without changing the whole life plan, living and language environment, etc. Therefore, many labour migrants see their conditions as temporary and so live and work in rather closed communities, socialising with the receiving society mostly due to necessity. While some of them would like to stay in the receiving country for good, many of them are not interested so much in the legalisation of their status, or at least not to the degree where they would lose a part of their income and thus prolong their stay away from their home. In fact, what they are often interested in is a larger income and invisibility so that it would save them from bureaucratic and financial interaction with an unfamiliar system, which would allow them to return home sooner, as they earn their desired amount in a shorter amount of time.

Labour migrants often slot into existing working groups of relatives, friends and acquaintances i.e. networks that guarantee them employment within a week of arrival, without any paper work or delay. Legalisation programs, no matter how simplified and sensitive, still lead to unnecessary hassle and are often unaffordable for people who have just arrived and have already borrowed money to cover their visa and travel expenses, do not speak the local language and do not have the resources to wait for official registration. While these programs are important and needed for those migrants who have already worked and lived abroad for some time, they can hardly affect the flow of migrants who wish to improve their immediate economic situation with opportunities of temporary work. Invisibility and informal arrangements are crucial factors for their immediate benefits. However, it does not mean that the legalisation of labour migrants in the receiving societies is useless. It will definitely change the face of labour migration, the migrants' pool, their occupations and life styles, by bringing more visibility, agency, and security to labour migration. It could also become a way for more official interaction between the labour migrants and the state, a vital act of recognition of the migrants' contribution to, and their rights in, the receiving societies.

Similar processes of recognition and acknowledgement need to be done as the first steps in establishing a dialogue with labour migrants in Ukraine, as it is the all important sending society. Ukraine has to acknowledge that people who work abroad to support their families and invest their income in the country deserve to have the adequate social and economic recognition. The tendency however is not comforting; in 2002, the former

Ukrainian president Kuchma called Ukrainian women working in Italy “prostitutes”<sup>10</sup> and in 2006 Inna Bohoslovs’ka, the leader of the political party Viche,<sup>11</sup> referred to people working abroad as “pig-herders and wood-choppers”<sup>12</sup> on national TV during a debate. More significantly, the recognition should trigger programs for the re-integration of labour migrants into the social and economic life of the country. The main target of such programs should be centred around supporting returning labour migrants with employment opportunities, acknowledgement of their stay abroad not as ‘missing years’ or as a gap in professional experience, but as a work experience that can be added to their overall employment standing and also taken into account for pension calculations. Such programs will not only make the return of the migrants to Ukraine more likely but also make it socially and economically attractive. It will also make crossing borders in both directions easier and will defuse the tension connected to travelling abroad, leaving the country and coming back.

In the multifaceted flows of international migration, the position of temporary labour migrants is particularly difficult to trace. They are also a group for which self-representation is problematic for several reasons. In their invisibility, labour migrants present a group that lives and functions in-between nation-states and citizenships. They are willing to abandon their citizenship rights for a while in order to improve their life conditions, which would otherwise be very difficult to change. However, under the nation-states system, rights seem to be too tightly attached to the category of citizenship and by abandoning their civic rights, labour migrants lose their basic human rights for safe labour, healthcare and freedom of movement etc. In the nation-state system, where the citizenship category becomes a marker of the status and eventually the guarantee of human rights, labour migrants, whose presence in the country is often illegal or semi-legal, by definition can have neither a representative voice in the media, popular culture or politics nor be a part of the civic society in the receiving country. For the same reason, labour migrants cannot organise themselves to demand better treatment or improvements of labour conditions. All they can do is to adjust - as long the benefit outweighs the potential danger - and develop the invisible ethnic and family networks that would guarantee at least some security and stability. What is left is someone who appears to the public as a stereotype; a threatening image of the illegal ‘other.’

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<sup>10</sup> Keryk, Myroslava. “Labour Migrant: Our Savior or Betrayer? Ukrainian discussions concerning labour migration.” *Migration Online*. September, 2004. < [www.migrationonline.cz](http://www.migrationonline.cz) > 5 Dec.2005.

<sup>11</sup> Formed on the basis of Constitutional Democratic party and civic foundation “Viche,” this party campaigned actively in the Parliamentary elections in Ukraine (March 26, 2006) but did not pass the 3% barrier of votes required for getting into the Parliament. <<http://www.viche.org/eng>> 4 April 2006.

<sup>12</sup> Svoboda Slova [Freedom of Speech]. TV debates hosted by Savik Shustov. ICTV. 17 March 2006. <<http://svobodaslova.ictv.ua/ukr/catalog/2006-03-17/text63.html>>