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The different perception of migration from Eastern Europe to Turkey: The case of Moldovan and Bulgarian domestic workers

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Abstract:

In the last decade, both Moldovan and Bulgarian women have come to dominate the household work sector in Turkey. While Turkish academia directed a lot of attention at the Moldovans, Bulgarian domestic workers have largely been ignored. This article will shed some light on the different perception of these migrant groups in Turkey.

In the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union, Turkey has become an important receiving country for post-socialist migration movements. A substantial part of these are female circular migrants that are engaged in irregular work in traditionally female niches. Facilitating factors for this migration are firstly, the immigration regulations¹, secondly, a high demand for cheap labour, and thirdly, a similar language in the case of Turkish speakers like the Gagauz, the Moldovan Turkish speaking minority (Keough, 2004:440), or the Bulgarian Turks. Migration flows from Moldova and Bulgaria show many similarities, and the fact that the two groups are perceived very differently by Turkish academia and society is thus remarkable.

¹ While some countries benefit from 90 days visa waiver, all other Eastern European nationals can obtain entry visas at the border

In this short article, I will present the migration patterns of both Moldovan and Bulgarian female labour migrants into domestic work as documented by the Turkish academia. Furthermore, I will point out how the history of migration of the two groups has contributed to this rather different perception by Turkish scholars and society.

Categorisation of migration in Turkey

In migration studies, Turkey has traditionally been considered a migrant-sending country. However, the substantial inflow of different groups of migrants over the last two decades has led to a change of this perception.

A classification often cited in migration studies is Ahmet İçduygu's (2003; 2005) typology into four categories of migrations to Turkey. The first category is the legally residing non-nationals. This category consists of foreigners on a work visa but also foreign-born Turks from, among others, Bulgaria, Greece, and Germany. This number is rather small and hardly accounts for 1 percent of all foreigners living in the country (Pérouse, 2004). Furthermore, asylum seekers and refugees also belong to this category.

Apart from this, the other three categories are defined as irregular migration movements. The first group considered are foreign nationals from Eastern European countries, such as Moldova, Ukraine, Russia and Romania, which usually come to Turkey in order to seek job opportunities. As mentioned above, these movements are mostly circular and are dominated by women. They usually enter the country legally on a tourist visa, and engage in irregular employment in private households, factories, the health sector or the entertainment or sex industry. The second type of irregular migrants is transit migrants who intend to pass through the country on their way to Western European countries. These migrants come from a vast array of countries, such as Iran, Iraq, and Afghanistan, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nigeria, Somalia and DR Congo, and include people in need of protection as well as economic and other opportunity seekers. The third type of migrants is the rejected asylum seekers who refuse to or are unable to return home.

Interestingly, as Parla (2007) pointed out, while Moldovans are categorised as irregularly working migrants from post-socialist countries, Bulgarians are mentioned only in the

category of legally residing ethnic Turks or as asylum seekers and refugees (Içduygu, 2005; Yorgun & Şenkal, 2005). As categorizations usually serve the purpose of giving a simplified overview, a certain degree of imprecision is inevitable. While the above mentioned categorization does not account for several recent trends of migration movements, what is interesting for this article is the following: the prevalent typology neglects the fact that people from the same country of origin migrating to Turkey at different times, may not necessarily share the same legal status nor have the same rationale for migrating. Furthermore, the receiving society's perspective on them may vary.

“Care Crisis”/Domestic Work

It is not possible to give exact numbers of Eastern European and post-soviet migrants working in Turkey. According to official statistics by the Ministry of Interior, in 2005, nearly 92,000 entries of Moldovan citizens were recorded. This number lies behind Russian entries (nearly 2 million), Azerbaijan (410,000 entries), Georgia and Ukraine (370,000 entries) and Kazakhstan (110,000 entries) (Kaska, 2006). However, the statistics only show arrivals, and thus may include both circular migrants several times as well as genuine tourists. Bulgarians accounted for roughly 1 million entries, which was a threefold increase since 2000 (380,000 entries) (Parla, *ibid*:158). In an effort to tackle exploitation of irregular workers, the new law on work permits of September 2003 allowed foreigners to be legally employed in households (Erbatur, 2004) which they were not able to do before. However, numbers of both Moldovans and Bulgarians with resident and work permits continue to be very low, which still indicates a large informal labour market (Kaska, *ibid*:32).

For a long time, it was native Turkish women from rural sites who were employed in urban households. Also their employment was on an informal basis, which has to be seen against the fact that a large part of the Turkish labour market is irregular. Like in other parts of the world, also Turkey has experienced the “care crisis”, i.e. the increased participation of native women on the labour market - partly due the restructuring of the global economy - that has lead to an externalisation of care work, that was traditionally done by female household members. These services include the care of children, elders and the sick. This situation has in recent years resulted in high demand for foreign

workers, which lead to the situation that an increasing number of foreign women have found employment in Turkish homes. Among the latter, Moldovan and Bulgarian women are estimated to be the most numerous, and today “it has almost become normal to employ Moldovan domestic workers in private households” (Kaska, *ibid*:85).

Moldovan migration

Unofficial estimates depart from the assumption that from a population of roughly 4,5 million between 600,000 to 1 million Moldovans are working abroad (Kaska, *ibid*:37), with the biggest part being employed in low-paid and low-skilled jobs. While men find work mostly in construction, agriculture, transportation, mining, women’s main fields of employment are domestic work, the health sector or the entertainment and sex industry (Kaska, *ibid*:39). The first destination for Moldovans, especially men, is Russia. Moldovan ethnic-Romanians tend to choose Italy as their second destination as they have a language advantage and benefit from higher wages. However, for the Turkish speaking minority, Turkey has become the second most attractive option, mostly due to the language similarity, and in recent days also due to the extensive informal networks on the labour market. It is estimated that up to 70% of women from villages in the Gagauzia region have migrated to Turkey, as well as to Italy, Spain and Portugal (Kaska, *ibid*:40). Usually, Moldovan women enter Turkey on a one-month visa which they consecutively overstay for a period of six months. The fine for the overstay sums up to around US\$ 400 to be paid when leaving the country; after this period the fine doubles. Moldovan workers can earn up to US\$ 400 a months which corresponds to about ten times the amount of a salary in Moldova (Keough, 2004:440). However, their stay is not free of problems: On the one hand, the police is reported to harass irregular migrants on the streets, and on the other hand, Moldovan women suffer from negative stereotypes the Turkish society has towards them, by stigmatizing them as “natashas”, i.e. Russian sex workers (Kaska, *ibid*:66).² Nevertheless, Moldovan women in domestic work are mostly able to reach the economic gains that motivated their migration, as Kaska (*ibid*:87) observes. Also, they were able to establish informal networks among each other and with employers to overcome structural constraints.

² Portraying Eastern European sex workers as mostly contagioned with HIV/AIDS as done by Yorgun & Şenkul (2005) is just another example of how this stigmatisation in the Turkish context works.

Bulgarian migration

While Moldovan migration started with the collapse of the Soviet Union, Turkey experienced migration from Bulgaria several times in history. The largest, most recent migration was the exodus of 1989, when the Bulgarian state enforced assimilation policies on the minorities living on its territory in an attempt to create a homogeneous nation. Under massive media attention, Turkey reacted with opening borders and officially welcoming the Turkish minority as “ethnic kin”. More than 300,000 Bulgarian Turks used this opportunity, and their emigration was publicly labelled as “the return of ethnic kin to the homeland” (Parla, *ibid*:160). These so-called “return” migrants have been granted double citizenship, and received state support in finding accommodation and securing a job. After the fall of the communist regime in 1990, more than half of them returned to Bulgaria (Içduygu, 2004:90).

This, however, is in stark contrast to the migration patterns of the next migration wave, the post-1990s migrants. Though the ethnic Turks among them identify themselves as ‘of Turkish descent and culture’, they experience “official indifference/tolerance” (Parla, 2007:161) from the Turkish state side, which Parla regards as a softer version of De Genova’s (2002) “legal production of illegality”. Unlike the 1989 Bulgarian immigrants, the new wave of Bulgarians have no underlying political motivation that formed their decision to move, instead their migration is purely economically driven. Bulgarians arriving after 1990 are not granted citizenship automatically; they usually enter on a three-month visa waiver as tourists and are engaging in irregular work. The most common strategy to keep legal residence status is to leave Turkey every three months for a few days to come back on a new three months period. One of the starkest polarities between the two movements is the question of ethnic belonging. While the 1989 migrants view Turkey as their homeland, post 1990s migrants do not share their feelings of homecoming despite their ethnic affiliations with Turkey and their self-ascription with Turkishness. For most of them the homeland remains Bulgaria.

Similarities

Both post-1990 Bulgarians and Moldovans have left their country for the same economic reasons. As in the case of Moldovan migration, the majority of the post-1990 Bulgarian

migrants are female; they often migrate first or alone, enter the country legally, and engage in the same low skilled jobs traditionally seen as feminine. Many of them are moving back and forth between their home country and Turkey. Also, a large number of them, the Turkish minorities, benefit from the similarity in language and culture with Turkey³ and from the informal networks they have managed to establish. As initially mentioned, the representation of the two groups in Turkish academia is very different despite the many similarities they share. An explanation that Parla (2007) pointed to is that by ignoring the fact that the reasons and the conditions of migration change, misperceptions of migration movements are created. Nevertheless, perceptions can change, and Parla's (ibid) research seems to prove that. It remains to be seen, however, when this changed perception finds its way into the general categorisation of migration to Turkey.

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³ It is not known how many of the Bulgarians and Moldovans arriving in Turkey are ethnic Turks and from the Gagauzia region respectively. However, studies by Parla (2007) and Kaska (2006) depart from the assumption that their number is substantial.

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