Gendered experiences in migration from Russia to Hungary in the 1990s

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Abstract:
This article explores emigration from Russia to Hungary in the 1990s. It seeks to answer the question “What factors have influenced Russian men and women to migrate to Hungary after the breakup of socialism?” Applying a gender-integrative approach, I argue that Russian men and women migrated to Hungary due to a variety of interlinked factors. Migration policies, gender ideology and personal desires, not limited to economic and political factors, were all very important in decision-making. I also state that the Russian women I interviewed were active agents in the migration process, even though in their narratives they presented themselves as passive followers.

Introduction
Over the past few years, there has emerged an impressive body of research that explores migration to and from Russia after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Scholars generally concentrate either on the migration flows from and to “new abroad” (the former Soviet Republics) or on the movement of former Soviet citizens to the West, while emigration to Eastern Central Europe is almost never taken into account (Kosmarskaya 1999; Remennick 1999; Pilkington 1998). Morokvasic and Tinguy (1993) point out that in the 1990s, former Soviet citizens actively migrated to Eastern Europe. One of the most attractive countries for Russian immigrants was Hungary, particularly because of its geographic location and socio-economic situation (Wallace et al. 1998; Morokvasic and Tinguy 1993). By 1994, 14 % (4,200 people) of all immigrants in Hungary had come from the former Soviet Union. The majority of this group was from Russia and neighbouring Ukraine (Juhasz 1997).

Trying to fill a gap in the existing literature, I aim to answer the following question “What factors have influenced Russian men and women to migrate to Hungary in the 1990s?” My interest in this issue is determined not only by the lack of research in this area but also by two more reasons. First, in the Russian literature on migration, two dominating approaches can be distinguished in the analysis of migration – structuralist and neo-classical (Pilkington 1998, 3-50). According to the structuralist approach, out-migration from Russia to the West and from the former Soviet republics to the Russian Federation is a result of structural pressures, by which people are pushed to leave their places of settlement due to ethnic tensions, political conflicts, and economic instability. According to the neo-classical theory, migration out of Russia occurs as a result of the rational choices of individuals, seeking to maximize returns on their labor. Due to these perspectives, Russian scholars consider “ethnic” migration mainly as forced and as a result of political reasons, while considering non-ethnic as voluntary and as a result of economic reasons, which they
state became more available after the collapse of the Soviet Union (Mitchnek and Plane 1995; Vishnevsky and Zayonchkovskaya 1994).

However, recently more and more studies on migration have acknowledged that an individual’s decision to migrate cannot be reduced to economic or political reasons alone. As emphasized by a number of foreign scholars, these theories fail to answer many questions concerning migration (See Faist 2000). For example, the structuralist and neo-classical approaches cannot explain why the emigration flows out of Russia were not as significant during the early 1990s, as many officials and scientists had predicted (Codagnone 1998; Morokvasic and Tinguy 1993). In this study, I use the integrative approach, developed by Oishi (2002), which allows me to overcome the shortcomings of the main theories and interpret migration from a more comprehensive perspective.

Second, most of this literature on emigration to and from Russia is gender-blind. It does not acknowledge the fact that gender is “one of the fundamental social relations anchoring and shaping immigration patterns” (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2003, 3). Consequently, according to this literature, the migration patterns of Russian women are assumed to mirror those of men. Russian women are imagined to migrate due to economic reasons or as a result of political push factors. In addition, their status as dependants in migration also leads to the assumption that there is no need to examine women’s motives because women are seen as passive followers.

Feminist scholars have demonstrated that there are differences in the experiences in migration between men and women. Even though most of the women move to join their husbands, researchers emphasize that women migrate for a variety of complex reasons and cannot be viewed solely as passive followers. Non-economic reasons tend to be crucial in influencing women’s decision to migrate, among which feminist scholars have pointed out the following: marital discord, physical violence, broken marriages and the impossibility of divorce (Kofman 2000, 21), a desire to improve their (women’s) social status, to escape traditional gender roles (Cecilia and Gabriel Manriqye 1999, 103-127), family reunification, the possibility of greater autonomy, and increased opportunities for their children (DeLaet 1999, 13). In this research, I argue that emigration from Russia to Hungary after the collapse of the Soviet Union cannot be viewed only, or mainly, in terms of economic or political push-pull factors but should consider a number of other factors as well, namely migration policies, social networks, social order, and ecology. Moreover, the push and pull factors may differ for men and women.

To investigate the factors that influenced Russian men and women to move to Hungary in the 1990s, I apply the integrative approach developed by Oishi (2002). This approach demonstrates the need to look at migration at three levels of analysis – macro (state), meso (social environment and social networks) and micro (individuals) – in both the receiving and the sending countries. To collect information about the macro and meso levels of Hungary and Russia, I analyze data in the existing literature. To get the information at the micro level, I use the qualitative method. I
conducted nine semi-structured, in-depth interviews with two Russian men and seven Russian women who arrived in Hungary in the 1990s. The gender imbalance among my interviewees is determined by a number of difficulties I faced in reaching Russian men in Budapest. Unlike Russian women they claimed that they were extremely busy and also refused to introduce me to some of their Russian friends.

**Macro-level: Migration Legislation after the Collapse of the Soviet Union and the Break-up of Socialism in Hungary**

Before the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the state strongly controlled movements in and out of its borders and movements within the state. But with the appearance of glasnost and perestroika, the debate over migration issues emerged and in 1989 a draft law, which recognized the individual right to travel, was proposed. The Law on Emigration from and Immigration to the USSR was adopted in 1991 and went into effect in 1993. Similar to the USSR, emigration and immigration to Hungary was restricted and severely controlled by the state. The turning point in the migration history of Hungary came in 1989, when elections brought an end to Communist rule and, as a result, freedom of movement was introduced. With its open borders, Hungary turned into an immigration country, and moreover, into a transit country “for those headed west” (Juhasz, 1997, 17).

In the 1990s, Hungary began to relax entry requirements for former Soviet citizens. In particular, no visas were required to enter Hungary, and migrants could stay on their territory without any permit for a month. Only in 2000 did Hungary introduce a visa system for some Eastern European countries, including Russia (Nagy and Molodikova, 407, 2002). Thus, in the 1990s, Russian men and women were able to circulate between Russia and Hungary every month to maintain their legal status. Morokvasic points out that circulation has become a prominent feature of migration after the fall of the “Iron Curtain.” Moreover, she emphasizes that “the circulation seems to be an important element in migration that one otherwise readily qualifies as ‘permanent’, or as migration with the goal of settlement” (Morokvasic, 2000, 106).

Furthermore, in the first few years of transition, it was relatively easy to acquire residence in Hungary since regulations were not developed. That is why Hungary was very popular place of destination at that time (Wallace et al. 1998, 274). One of the options to get a residence permit was to found a firm, which did not even require an individual to obtain a work permit from Hungarian authorities (Nagy and Molodikova, 414, 2002). Establishing a firm gave the founder the right to a short-term residence permit, then a long term residence, which afterwards led to an immigration permit. The establishment of the immigration permit existed between 1994 and 2001 and allowed foreigners to exit and re-enter the country on unlimited occasions and guaranteed the right to work without a special work permit (Bozoki and Bosze 2004, 25). Consequently, one of the reasons why Russians preferred Hungary as a place of destination was its legislation migration policies, which in the 1990s made it relatively easy for Russian citizens to reside in the country. Moreover, it was also very
advantageous for a woman to come with her husband, in the sense that she could gain “immigrant” status independently from her husband if she registered a firm in her name alone or jointly in her and the husband’s name.

Meso level: Social Environment
Patterns of migration are conditioned by social norms of a particular society. Usually, society does not severely restrict the emigration of men, and men can move on their own or with their family. However, the movement of women is generally more constrained by the social environment. In particular, Oishi emphasizes that large-scale female migration is more likely to take place if a society does not stigmatize women who go abroad and then return home (2002, 8). To analyze the patterns of women’s migration, Oishi points to the importance of using the concept of “social legitimacy,” which she defines as “the embodiment of norms in a given society, which endorses particular behavioral patterns.” In connection with migration, social legitimacy, according to Oishi, is rooted in the history of women’s wage employment, women’s rural-urban mobility, and gender equality, particularly in education. (2002, 13-16)

The transition from the Soviet economy to a market economy has caused some changes in the understanding of the roles of women in society. If before, women were viewed as workers, mothers and wives, since the late 1980s, the idea that a woman’s place is at home with her children and family and not at the labor market has been officially stressed. In this respect Bridger (1999) points out “The official emphasis on motherhood and the definition of women first and foremost as actual or potential mothers was to prove disastrous to women’s employment prospects with increasing moves towards market reforms” (76).

As a result of this campaign, a high percentage of Russian women not only found themselves to be unemployed, but also experienced discriminatory practices while applying for a job (Bystydzienski 1999; Pilkington 1996). Although men were loosing their jobs due to the transformation of the political and economic order of society, their involvement in the labor market remained much higher than that of women (Einhorn 1993, Molyneux 1981).

Consequently, the gender ideology of the transition period to a market economy reinforced women’s roles in the private sphere, while demolishing the importance of women in the public. Thus, Russian women in the early 1990s were more likely to be expected to join their husbands if the latter sought to improve their economic status abroad. They were less likely to be encouraged to migrate independently from their families in search of jobs as these were relegated more to the private than public domain.

Micro Level: Interview Analysis
I will start my analysis with a discussion of the motivations to migrate of the two families, the Kupriyanovy and the Vovk, emphasizing the differences in the spouses’
motives to move to Hungary and the complexity of the factors which influenced the
decision of these two couples to emigrate. Furthermore, I will explore the emigration
motives of the female respondents, who are either divorced or married to Hungarians.

Talking to Boris Kuprijanov, who moved to Hungary with his family in the
late 1990s, I found out that, first of all, he wanted to come to Hungary because of the
more secure social situation:

*I wanted more safety in my life. And here you are not afraid to leave your
house without iron on the windows. I am not afraid that my house will be
robbed, the car stolen.*

Boris pointed out that at the moment of emigration, he was working as an artist in an
association of painters in Moscow. Working as an artist became more and more
difficult for him, because to organize exhibitions was tremendously expensive. In
contrast, in Budapest, it was much cheaper and easier to arrange expositions of his
paintings. His wife Irina left her well-paid job as an accountant in Moscow to come to
Hungary because, like her husband, she wanted a more secure life. She stated that it
was much more convenient for her to live in Budapest than in Moscow. The distances
in Budapest are shorter and it does not require much time for her to take their
daughter to school or to the swimming pool.

Applying the macro level perspective, it was possible for the family to move
to Hungary in the late 1990s because Boris’s mother was living there, which allowed
Boris to get a short-term residence status. Later Boris and Irina established a
company, which, from a juridical point of view, allowed them to get first a short-term
and later a long-term residence permit. At the meso level, it seems important that Irina
accepted a particular gender ideology and gave priorities to her family and not to her
job, even though she was the main breadwinner in the family for some time. Trying to
keep the family intact and seeking social security, she joined her husband and moved
to Budapest. On the level of individual preferences, the main reason to emigrate was
the desire to live in a more secure environment. However, the other motivations
differed between the wife and the husband. In particular, Boris was looking for an
improvement in his career, while Irina appears to have thought about the fate of her
child. The economic reasons were not as important for Irina in deciding to move to
Hungary. She was aware that she would not be able to find such a well-paid job as she
had in Moscow.

Similar to the family of Kuprijanovy, the spouses Vovk presented distinct
motivations to emigrate from Russia to Israel and from Israel to Hungary. Sergey
Vovk emphasized the economic and political factors, while Marina Vovk in her story
focused on the welfare of her children and her husband’s career. Sergey recounted:

*I left Moscow for Israel. It was fashionable at that time to emigrate. But
my case is unique. During socialism, I was an active member of the
Communist Party and the secretary of the Komsomol Committee. <...>*
*By the end of the 1980s, I realized that everything I believed in was*
crashing. <...> The country is being stolen part by part. There is no more hope for career, jobs…

Sergey wanted to emigrate from Russia because of political and economic reasons. Further, Sergey said that he decided to move from Israel to Hungary because his company experienced finance difficulties and he hoped to start a new business “somewhere abroad.”

It is worth mentioning that both Boris Kuprijanov and Sergey Vovk started their accounts on emigration, using only first person sentences, pointed out many details of their pre-migration career, and said nothing about their family life until I asked them if they were married. For example, “I left Moscow for Israel, I realized…,” said Vovk or “I wanted more safety in my life” (Kuproijanov). Both respondents presented themselves as sole players. Chamberlain (1997) investigating Caribbean migration also highlights that, whatever their circumstances, the male migrants she interviewed represented themselves as independent of their families, initiators of the move, while her female respondents articulated their family needs, presenting themselves as passive followers of their husbands, although in reality it was not the case.

In contrast to her husband Sergey, his wife Marina stated that they made the decision to migrate to Israel together because both of them were disappointed with the change of the regime. The reason to move from Israel to Hungary for Marina was primarily the desire to keep the family intact:

Oleg earned much money in Israel. But his job was connected with business traveling to different countries. He was absent from home for many weeks. I was tired of that. I said “It cannot continue anymore. We should find a solution. Let’s move to found another business but stay together”.

Thus, Marina was motivated to leave Israel so that her husband could stay all the time with the family. Moreover, she was worried about the future of her children. Sergey, on the other hand, wanted to improve his business. According to Marina, they chose Hungary as the place of destination together. They were on holidays there and liked it very much. After having found information about the socio-economic situation in Hungary from the Internet, they decided to move. Even though in her narrative Marina always placed her husband first, emphasizing his career achievements, she actively participated in the decision-making to migrate to Hungary and organizing the move. The choice to come to Hungary was due to economic reasons for Sergey, and due to family reasons for Marina. At the macro level, Hungary was distinguished from the other Western European countries by the relative easiness to get a short and then a long-term residence permit. The family Vovk got the residence permit through establishing their small company in 1998.
Conclusions

Analyzing migration out of Russia to Hungary in the 1990s, I came to the following conclusions. First, a variety of interlinked factors influenced Russian men and women to move to Hungary during these periods. Among these factors, there were structural opportunities (i.e. migration policies of Russia and Hungary), social environment (i.e. gender ideology), networks and personal desires, which in most of the cases were not limited to economic motives. The following reasons were mentioned by my respondents in forming their decisions whether to move to Hungary: stable social environment, opportunities to establish a secure business, keeping the family intact, welfare of children and love motives. Second, my male respondents were more likely to name their career and material status in explaining their reasons to migrate, whereas the women highlighted their devotion to the family and children, and recounted these factors as crucial.

Finally, although some of my female interviewees formally came to Hungary as dependants and perceived themselves as “followers” of their house-heads, these women were also active agents. They made their decision to move and often facilitated the migration. In contrast, the men from my sample talked about themselves as autonomous actors in migration. However, their decision to migrate and initiate the move, in fact, depended on agreements and support from their wives and families.
Bibliography


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