Ukrainian and Polish Domestic Workers in Naples – A Case of East-South Migration

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Abstract

This paper looks at a recent form of labour migration from East and Central Europe to South Italy. It discusses the case of Ukrainian and Polish domestic workers in the city of Naples as an example of informal and irregular migration. Based on migrant testimonies, it discusses reasons and modes of migration. In contrasting the situation of Polish and Ukrainian women migrants the paper argues that important issue for irregular migrants is not some much labour or social rights but the freedom of movement, i.e. the possibility to hold strong ties to country of origin across state borders.

Introduction

Migrations in the enlarging Europe have gone through important transformations. Emerging migration patterns include new destinations and origins (East-Central-West migrations, Southern European countries changing from emigration to immigration countries) as well as changing migrant profiles and strategies (feminisation of migration, transnational migrations and pendular migrations) (cf. e.g. Lutz & Koser 1998; Baldwin & Edwards 1999; Wallace & Stola 2001; Morokvasic et al. 2003). In this article I concentrate on one recent migration pattern which has emerged in Europe: East-South migration of female domestic workers (cf also Andall 2000; Anderson 2000; Ehrenreich & Hochschild 2003; Parrenas 2001).

I propose to look how the particular context of Southern Italy facilitates domestic labour migration. South Italy can be said to follow what has been called a “Mediterranean migration model” characterised by the coexistence of immigration, emigration and unemployment, extensive unofficial labour markets and labour markets that are segregated by gender and ethnicity (Pellicani 1999; Pugliese 1996).
Thus the article analyses connections between domestic labour, irregular migration and informal labour markets in South Italy.

In what follows, these questions are discussed in the context of Naples in Italy. Naples offers an interesting case in point, as it is known for its extensive underground economy and is one of the main destinations of irregular migrants. The article draws on a two-year ethnographic research in 2003-2005 during which thematic interviews among Ukrainian and Polish migrant domestic workers were conducted. The data used here consists of 44 thematic interviews: 24 interviews with Ukrainian and 20 with Polish domestic workers. These two groups were chosen as both are predominantly employed in the domestic labour sector. Furthermore, choosing Ukrainians and Polish, who enjoy quite different legal status in Italy, allowed me to study how the visa-free access of Poles to Italy (also before joining European Union) affected the migratory projects and everyday practices.\(^1\) This contrasted to the situations of Ukrainians who have to pay substantial sums for tourist visas and who usually remain to work in Italy for long periods of time without a permit to stay.

**Linking Informal Labour and Irregular Migration in Italy**

For centuries a country of emigration, Italy changed rapidly to a country of mass immigration in the late 1980s. Not prepared for this kind of rapid change the country failed to develop coherent legal measures to respond to the new situation. Hence, the core of Italian migration legislation remained in regularisation programmes, amnesties, under which irregularly present migrants can apply for a permit to stay (permesso di soggiorno)\(^2\). In result, Italy has one of the largest numbers of irregular immigrants in Europe (Melotti 2004, 69).

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\(^1\) In fact, the Polish domestic workers studied did not report of any significant changes in their situation or treatment after May 2004.

\(^2\) Although residence permit is a more common term, I want to use the literal translation of permesso di soggiorno = permit to stay. It is also more accurate as not all those migrants who have a permit to stay are registered in the communal residence registers.
Irregular migration is normally understood as clandestine crossings of state borders. However, the phenomenon is more complex. Irregular migrants often enter the country with a legal permit but overstay. This was the main entry route for the Ukrainian migrants in Naples. Migrants can also become irregular by losing their legal status due to administrative or political changes (cf. Jahn & Straubhaar 1999; Reyneri 2001). Irregular migration is thus a multifaceted phenomenon that can be induced by state policies.

Irregular migration is often linked to informality in labour markets. For instance, Emilio Reyneri (1998) analyses the causal relationship between the informal or underground economy and irregular migration in Italy. He comes to the conclusion that underground labour markets are an important incentive for irregular migration, as “were it not for the shelter of the irregular economy, [the migrants] would soon be forced back to their home country.” (Reyneri 1998, 329). My research confirms a certain “pull effect” from the fact that a migrant could find work without a residence permit. However, as Reyneri also acknowledges this “pull factor” needs to be understood in the light that Italy is a country that can hardly be entered legally. Moreover, although migrant workers find regular work, it is not usually possible to apply for a regular stay permit. On the other hand, many migrants holding regular residence permits continue to work informally. My research shows that migrants who consider themselves temporary workers are not necessarily interested in formal work contracts and continue to pay social security taxes in the country of origin. In my study informality takes various forms from disrespecting the collective labour contract to denying a contract in the first place and finally to human rights violations. I claim that as paid domestic work and especially migrant paid domestic work takes place in the privacy of households involving highly personalised labour relations and furthermore concerns workers whose legal status is not stable, it typically escapes regulation.

_Ukrainian and Polish Migration to Naples_

In discussing migration to Italy we should take into consideration differences within the country, between North and South Italy. While in Northern cities a significant number of
migrants are employed by the industry and businesses, in South the main employment remains in domestic and care work, agriculture and retail (street selling and merchant). These labour sectors are stratified by gender and nationality. Hence, in Naples, the Ukrainian and Polish migrants are mainly women employed in households working as cleaners and carers for the elderly, children and infirm.

Moreover, especially in Southern Italy, immigrants are usually able to live for long periods without regular residence permits and without encountering a great risk of deportation. As 33-year-old Katya explained, the reasons for choosing Naples of all the cities in Italy: “this is a city that is much freer. Here you can move around. In the north [of Italy] you cannot.” (Interview of Katya 10.2.2005). South Italy remains also a region people leave to find work in the North (Pugliese 2002; Macioti & Pugliese 2003, 22–37.) This south-north internal emigration concerns nowadays also immigrants, so that many who arrive to the south continue their migration project in moving to the north (de Filippo & Pugliese 2000).

Polish and especially Ukrainian immigration to Italy grew drastically at the turn of the millennium. This is reflected also in the interviews. Most of the interviewed Ukrainians had arrived in 2000, most of the Polish some years before. The migration from Ukraine at the turn of the millennium is also indicated in the statistics. In the regularisation campaign of 2002 over 100 000 Ukrainians (101 651) were given a permit to stay. According to the figures of Italian Statistical Office (ISTAT) before that year, there were only 15 510 Ukrainians regularly present in Italy. In the amnesty of 2002, 30 021 Polish received a stay permit, doubling the size of the community (ISTAT 2005). According to the latest ISTAT figures, Ukrainians were the fifth biggest group with over 100 000 residents (107118) and Polish 12th biggest group with over 60 000 residents (60823). The majority, more than 70 %, of Ukrainians and Polish migrants are women. In the region of

3 All the names of the interviewed have been changed.
4 Another important group to regularise themselves in the amnesty of 2002 was the Romanians whose number more than doubled as 134 909 new permits of stay were granted in 2002 adding to the over 109 000 Romanians already regularly present.
5 Especially in relation to Polish these figures should be taken as only indicative as many work in Italy without having a regular stay permit. Also as my study has shown not all Ukrainians were able to apply for a stay permit during the amnesty.
Campania of which Naples is the capital, Ukrainians were the biggest migrant group with over 32 000 (32 189) permits, Poles the fourth biggest group with over 8300 permits (ISTAT 2005).  

The interviewed women explained reasons for migrating as being mostly economical. Usually the answer to the question: “why did you come to Italy?” is similar to Maria’s answer: “for work. There is work in Ukraine, but no one pays for it.” (Interview of 35-year-old Maria, 21.2.2004). The Ukrainians recall the several economic crises after the collapse of the Soviet regime, as explained by a 45-year old Tatyana who had arrived to Italy in 2000:

“When the Soviet Union broke down we lost all our money in the banks. Everything. We remained at zero, with nothing that we had conserved. I didn’t see the future because I was without money. I didn’t have any secure future and then started my health problems from the worry. (...) Then I thought that for me it is not important who I am, that I am the president of an agency, the important thing is that I am a mother and I am healthy.” (Interview of Tatyana, 15.9.2004).

It is likely that the economic crisis of 1998 was the last trigger to crash peoples’ hopes for a better future, to which the answer was to migrate. However, the economic reasons were mixed with various personal motives as with a hope to “have a change in one’s life” (45-year old divorced Ukrainian Natasha), and a wish to get away from an alcoholic and sick husband (47-year-old Ukrainian Alina). This is in line with findings from other studies such as Annie Phizacklea’s (2003) research on migrant domestic workers in London, where she found that “money and self-respect” were central in the migration stories.

Although the accounts of Polish informants were less dramatic, unemployment was also one of the main reasons for migrating to Italy for older women. Younger women saw emigration also as a way to save money for their future and in the light of their personal emancipation:

“I wanted to come here for three months to earn some money in order to study in Poland (...) I lacked money, because I have other brothers, well four of them. (...) I am the oldest and I had a sense of responsibility that I didn’t want to be maintained by my parents but wanted to earn my

One should of course be wary of these figures as they do not include irregularly present migrants nor are they up-to-date.
own money. Then I wanted to have my autonomy. (...) Then I also wanted to get to know the country, to learn the language.” (Interview of 27-year-old Monica, 22.4.2004.)

What is striking in the experiences of these women is that they had become the lone breadwinners for their families. Typically, Ukrainian women are separated from their husbands or they are widows. They considered leaving to Italy as the only available way to maintain their families.

How had the women arrived to Italy? For Polish women who did not need to have a visa to Italy, emigrating itself was quite easy. Typically the informants already knew someone who was working in Naples and a common practice was to start working as a substitute for a friend for a period of three months. The actual decision was rather easy to take, as returning is always a possibility. The existing transnational social networks play an important role in the migration projects of Polish women. Consider the case of a 42-year-old Dora:

“L: How did you decide to come to Naples?
D: (laughs) I did not decide. Everything happened by chance. After I had lost my job, I was very depressed, could not do anything. And at some point I was proposed to come to Italy.
L: Who proposed this?
D: My mother. She had a friend who worked here. This friend called my mother saying that there is a place where they are looking for someone. I did not want to come here, without anything, without knowing the language, nothing. I thought it was a crazy idea and I looked for an excuse for saying no. I said I don’t have the money for the ticket and you know what they did? (…) They bought me the ticket. I had to go”. (Interview of Dora, 17.3.2005).

This liberty of movement permits Polish women to create flexible forms of rotating work where two women alter one job in Naples taking three-month turns. The practice has been discussed in the context of migration in Central Europe, especially for small traders (e.g. Morokvasic 1992; Wallace & Stole 2002). Rotation work not only allows one to maintain close relations to one’s family and home but it was important in order to conserve one’s self-esteem. As Ewa, 60-year-old retired high school teacher put it: “after three months [of domestic work in Naples] we are tired, we need to restore our psyche.” (Interview of Ewa, 13.3.2005). Polish migrants who work on short-term basis in Naples are examples of how migration can paradoxically be used as a way to create settlement in the old home
country (Morokvasic 2003). The constant commuting back and forth allows Polish women to maintain their social relationships and contacts in two places simultaneously.

Another effect of this freedom of movement is that Polish migrants do not consider it very important to be regular (cf. also D’Ottavio 2006). My study shows that only few Polish women had permits to stay. It did not enhance or reduce their chances of finding work. Moreover, Polish women are likely to pay a private pension in Poland and did their medical check-ups when going back home. Social aspects of citizenship are dealt with in the country of origin.

The liberty of movement of Polish women contrasts with the Ukrainian women who have to pay substantial sums for a tourist visa to get to Italy. The interviewed Ukrainians had arrived legally with a tourist visa but overstayed irregularly. They arrived with busses that travelled through Italy and left people in different cities (cf. D’Ottavio 2006). Generally, the interviewed Ukrainians had weaker social networks than Poles who already knew people working in Naples. Without social ties Ukrainians had to pay for the first job:

*We all have paid when we come here. My friend knows a person who takes 4-8 of us Ukrainian women to sleep in their place and they find you work and you have to pay for them.* (Interview of 45-year old Ukrainian Natasha, 1.2.2004).

The interviewed Natasha had paid 300 dollars for her first job in 2001. She was grateful that there was someone who helped her in Italy especially when she did not know a word of Italian. However as these jobs are sold by private and illegal brokers, migrants do not have any assurance that they will actually be given a job. Tatyana who at the time of the interview worked as a cultural mediator tells of her first experience in Naples:

*"I didn’t know anyone here. (...) I did not know the language, I had no information. I bought a job here – I mean – I was sold a work – we call this a ‘work of wheel’ (lavoro di ruota). This means you go to work with an old person and then after two, three days arrive the sons or nephews and they throw you out and you will lose the 300 dollars you paid for your work. Then you have to get another job and pay another 300 dollars. I have many testimonies of these things,*

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7 The interviewed women stated that they had paid around 500 dollars for visa and travel to Italy but that prices kept rising at it had become more and more difficult to obtain a tourist visa. At the time of the interviews in 2004-2005 I was told the trip would cost up to 3000 dollars.
of these bad persons who earn money on our behalf.” (interview of Tatyana from Ukraine, 15.9.2004).
Tatyana describes a situation where the worker is employed and then fired on the excuse that she does not speak good enough Italian. Afraid of deportation the victims of this kind of fraud rarely go to the police.

Although Ukrainian women find work they do not have a possibility to apply for a permit to stay, as this has been made possible only during amnesties and until recently very small yearly quotas. They find themselves “stuck in Italy” without a possibility to leave the country, as once out of Italy, returning would have meant spending substantial sums in a new passport and a visa. The women suffer especially from the fact of not being able to visit their families back home. Hence, what emerges from the comparison of the situation of Polish and Ukrainian women, is that regularity is important for the freedom of movement – not for the work contract in itself. This aligns with recent theories on transnational migration that sustain that contemporary migrants continue to hold close ties to their countries of origin and build social fields “that cross geographic, cultural, and political borders.” (Basch et al. 1997, 7).

Moreover, in order to apply for a permit to stay migrant needs a regular work contract. Tying the residence permit to a work contract implies that the migrant worker is not considered as a sovereign subject but as dependent. Migrant’s subjectivity is equalled with her/his ability to work, and in practice immigrants are dependent on the goodwill of their employers to apply for the stay permit. Many of the Ukrainian women I had interviewed had had serious problems in convincing their employers to apply for the regularisation within the two months time of the last amnesty of 2002. Employers’ reluctance was mainly due to not wanting to pay for the social security taxes. In some cases Ukrainians were forced to change jobs because the employer was not willing to regularise the worker. In other cases they resort to boyfriends’ or other friends’ help and come up with fake work contracts due to their real employer’s reluctance to pay extra. Some migrants do not succeed in convincing their employers in time, as the story of 53-year-old Ludmila shows. Ex-medical doctor in Ukraine, Ludmila had worked for almost two years taking care of a 94-year-old man who was suffering from Alzheimer’s disease.
when the amnesty of 2002 was announced. Her employer was the old man’s 72-year-old daughter. Ludmila recalls their discussion as following:

“She said to me that we are like sisters. I couldn’t believe that after all she didn’t give me a stay permit. Because I waited when there was the new law. I waited and waited, all my friends already had their permits. And when the time was running out, I asked three weeks before: Signora M., you are not going to do the work permit. She said: no, I cannot. -Why? -Because, I can’t. Then I have to pay taxes, a lot of money and I cannot.

After I said: "excuse me, Signora M., but this document is too important for me. I want to work like all people, like all my friends. If you can’t pay all, I will pay half.” She kept saying: “I cannot, I cannot”. After two days, I cried and said I pay for everything because this document is too important for me. (...) Now, I cannot go like all the rest people in this country, I cannot go back to my country.” (Interview of Ludmila, 17.11.2003).

Finally Ludmila’s employer did not give in and the time ran out. She remained irregularly in Italy. During the same period, she was diagnosed with breast cancer. Her employer got worried that her going to the hospital would reveal that she was illegally employing a worker, so she stopped paying Ludmila and told her to find a new job. At the time of the interview Ludmila was without work and home, apart from short periods of work as substitute for her friends. She was about to start chemotherapy and was living in a free accommodation run by nuns. Nevertheless, she had had the strength and persistence to take legal actions against her ex-employer who did not regularise her nor pay extra for the bank holidays. The legal actions available for migrant domestic workers consist of denouncing their employers. However, the legal processes are very long and I did not hear of any convictions against employers during my fieldwork.

**Domestic work in Naples**

Paid household work performed by East European immigrants seems to be extremely heterogeneous. When inquired about the work duties, the most common answer was: “I do everything” (faccio tutto). For instance, Silvana who otherwise spoke Italian with difficulty proved to have a vast vocabulary when we started to talk about household work: “I clean the four rooms and the kitchen. Clean. Iron. Cook. Do the shopping. Cook again. Do all the things you need to do in a home. I do everything.” (Interview of Silvana, 8.11.2003). If work is about taking care of the elderly people, household chores are often
only a part of the work. The carer works also as a nurse. Svitlana took care of a 95-year-old man: “I gave him the medicine, measured his blood pressure... If you are the only person who is near the old person, you have to do everything. I helped him in getting dressed, in washing, in everything, everything.” (Interview of Svitlana, 8.11.2003.)

This heterogeneous nature of domestic work makes it potentially endless and the work load extremely heavy. Informants complained that they were afraid of just sitting around or taking breaks during the day although they felt tired. This is related to a sense of being constantly controlled. Part time domestic work (or full time but done on an hourly basis in different homes) is preferred as it gives the worker the autonomy to control time and manage the work better.

In terms of informal labour, this is related to the violation of labour rights, i.e., collective labour contract, which stipulates daily and weekly rest. Interviewees also claimed that they were seldom paid extra for overtime. Irregular practices were also present that in the labour contract between the employer and migrant domestic workers did not correspond to the real working conditions. For instance, fewer hours were declared in order to pay less social security taxes.

However, immigrants are not passive victims. Most do not stay in bad working conditions but quit unrewarding jobs. Stories such as the following where the migrant worker suddenly decides to quit a bad job abound in the interviews:

“I went to work in one family of three people and ended up working for ten people. For 550 euros a month. Already in the morning I cleaned the garden and so on. So one day, it wasn’t a holiday but a “red day” in the calendar [a bank holiday]. I said to the signora: I’ll go now.
She asked me why? I said: “today is holiday. All my friends have a free day.” She said: Your friends! I am the head in this house. Who are you? You are nothing. And continued shouting: What do you do? You don’t do anything in this house.
You know what I said to her? “I don’t feel like being nobody! Signora, I am yours? Have you bought me on the marketplace? No, what I feel, I will tell you and I don’t feel like nobody – goodbye.” And so I went.” (Interview of Elina, 3.2.2004.)

Being treated with respect and not like a ‘slave’ - like many of the interviewees describe in their worst experiences – is the most important prerequisite for work. Thus, in most
cases the reasons why workers quit their jobs are not related to pay, i.e. in maximising profit, but to being treated humanely. Extreme cases of abusive treatment involve depriving the worker from basic physical needs such as sufficient food.

There are some legal measures available for migrants, such as denouncing the employer, although the procedural times can be long and expensive. I want to stress once more that the immigrants I interviewed were by no means victims, but took action when it came to finding better jobs or fighting for their rights.

**Conclusions**

In this article I have discussed domestic labour migration in the context what is characteristic to a Mediterranean migration model: especially vast informal labour markets. I have argued that the lack of coherent and realistic migration policy generates irregularity as the demand for migrant labour grows. Moreover, what emerges from the ethnographical data concerning Ukrainian and Polish migrant workers is that irregularity is a concern especially in relation to freedom of movement, crossing borders. As contemporary migrants continue to hold strong relations to their countries of origin and as these women carry the responsibility for their families, it is transnational mobility which becomes the crucial question for the women and for social justice in general. I have also discussed the inherently personalised nature of domestic and care work arrangements. The dependency of a domestic worker of a particular family is enhanced by the migration legislation that ties the legal presence on a territory to a valid work contract.

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