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Happy to work in the Czech Republic - Slovak Roma on Czech construction sites

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Abstract:

A report from Eastern Slovakia tells stories of people who build Czech motorways and railways. The article is an English translation of a Czech article published in A2 cultural weekly.

The coffee that Feri and I are having is rather strong and contains too much sugar, a cigarette is naturally close at hand. "I have come home to give my family a hand... and to have a rest, too," says Feri, 40. It was for a month and a half that his work in the Czech Republic kept him away from his home village not far from the town of Michalovce, Eastern Slovakia. He spent part of his salary on painting the living room walls, some money was paid for beer and brandy when Feri went to the local pub to have a chat, and the rest went into presents for his grandchildren. "You know, the work is quite hard and you never stop, not even at weekends... But next week I am going there again. Now, why would I stay at home?! You never get work here, not if you're a gypsy," says Feri about his career prospects. For years, his life has been subject to the same rhythm: Slovakia – Czech Republic, Czech Republic – Slovakia... He broke the cycle only once as he tried his luck in Britain where two of his three children live with their families. But his was not a success story. "I would never go to Britain again. What for, anyway? You slave away, pay the rent and save nothing. Britain is not for me. I am happy to work in the Czech Republic," says Feri, and his wife – washing the dishes – adds: "Well, what would we do there if we found no permanent work anyway?" Thus, having spent several months far away, they both returned to the well established way of bread-winning provided by a local Roma businessman Vali.

The official statistics of May 2008 say more than half of 71,591 Slovak residents living in the Czech Republic have come to work here. The Czech Statistical Office also says 30,217 men (and 16,468 women) from Slovakia do not live permanently in the Czech Republic but migrate to the country to work; unregistered workforce, including Feri, would add greatly to those numbers.

The following day finds me sitting in an almost new, air-conditioned Volkswagen Passat driven by Vali, the owner of a company called Labol which gives work to Feri. Speeding along the motorway to Prague, Vali is busy answering his mobile phone. When he is off the phone, he explains his business trips to the Czech Republic. For that is where he spends about half the week. "I have been going up and down like that for seven years," he says. He is just taking an invoice to one of the biggest construction companies specializing in motorways. At one point, we make a stop at a place where one of his working groups is planting new trees along the motorway. Another stop comes later with another section of the motorway under reconstruction, and Vali has a friendly chat with an acquaintance, a construction manager who gives him tips for future contracts. Before setting up his own company, Vali had worked for a Roma businessman, first as an ordinary worker, later promoting to the company's executive manager. Vali later went his own way and became his former company's competitor on the same market where minor firms are subcontracted by several dominant construction companies.

Vali the employer, donor, and councillor

While still employed by Vali, Feri worked for Koršar, a Roma entrepreneur living in the same village as Feri. He is said to be less trustworthy in dealing with his employees, and most of his workforce is illegal (*pro kalo* in the Roma language); yet, the salaries and working conditions that he offers are definitely worse. Whereas Vali pays an hourly wage of approximately 75 Slovak crowns (EUR 2.50) which earned Feri about 20 thousand crowns (EUR 666) in the five weeks, the other entrepreneur pays one quarter less. And even Vali employs several workers without a contract until they prove they are worth trusting. Most of them come from the same village or region as he does. But Vali makes sure that good relationships are not limited to business. Each year, he invites his employees to a New Year's party with live music. Last Christmas, as most of his workers relied merely on social allowances back home, Vali arranged a bargain of pork products from a pig feast. And the workers' wives come to ask him for advance payments when in financial need; for example, a couple of days before they receive social or maternity benefits.

In addition, Vali is one of the three Roma members of the local community council. "Vali has really done a lot for the local community," says mayor of the village of Dluhoš. He

lauds the local Roma: “I am proud of most of them. As far as I can remember, the Roma in our community have always been at work ... And when they lost work in Slovakia, they went over to the Czech Republic.” Still, such words of praise from the local mayor tend to be an exception rather than the rule here in Eastern Slovakia.

Stolen hours

When arranging the trips to the Czech Republic, Vali first finds and pays for the accommodation. He then gives his employees a deposit towards the travel costs, and they get on board the night bus or train. At a place agreed in advance, they are met by the party leader who is in charge of the whole working group, of distributing work and monitoring the quality. Another responsibility of his is to keep the working records of each of the workers. And this is where disputes and exploitation come into play. “That villain of a leader stole some of the hours I had worked. I say, we worked from dawn to dusk. I'll have to count my hours myself next time, but how if I can hardly read and write?” says Dežo who worked for Koršar for two months, earning a mere 14 thousand Slovak crowns (EUR 470).

The working day starts between six and six-thirty in the morning and finishes at six or seven in the evening, with a short break for lunch. Each of the workers receives a weekly advance payment towards meal costs of about one thousand Czech crowns (EUR 40). Some will warm up some sausages and canned meals in their dormitories, others use the local canteen. The usual diet in the short breaks every hour or two includes coffee, cigarettes, biscuits and the cheapest flavoured sparkling water from chainstores. In their free time, most of the men keep to their dormitories, their social life consisting of occasional visits to the pubs, discos or bars.

Those who made it

Far from being a merely economic issue, working migration affects these people's social identity, too. It gives them a sense of self-realization and self-esteem as the family's breadwinner, someone capable of feeding the family budget. “If you are ready to work and take care of your family, you go either to the Czech Republic or Britain. Anyway, it gives you satisfaction if you bring back money to your wife and kids. Social allowances are hard to live on,” says Iko who worked in the Czech Republic for several years, and now supports his pension by working on construction sites in his village. Migrant workers do give a substantial part of their salary – and social allowances – to their wives and families to cover food costs, but they also know it is important to spend some of the money on “showing off”, be it repair works on their houses or buying a new lawnmower. And the working experience is a frequent topic in pub stories. So Feri – a rare visitor to

the local pub prior to his Czech work stint – can now afford to invite his friends for a pint of beer. And this earns him their respect. They have come to appreciate him as someone who “has made it” in life and is able to look after himself and his dear ones, although it takes long periods of absence to achieve that.

Jan Grill is currently doing his PhD at St Andrews University.

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Translation David Mraček.