



Unequal and Mobile: Moving and Working in the Age of Flexibility Jakob Hurre

On average, Americans move almost twice as often as Europeans. And moving in American means more often, when compared to Europe, not just moving to another street or a town nearby but really turning one's back on one's home region: whilst only about 1.6 per cent of EU citizens live in another EU state than their own, more than 40 per cent of Americans are living in another state than the one they were born in.

From the perspective of the Czech Republic, where people are even less mobile than the average Europeans, it is striking to observe how Americans' readiness to move to a better place alters the continent's geography: on the one hand there are the booming "Sun Belt" states with cities such as Denver, Colorado, Albuquerque or New Mexico, where the population has increased by up to a third within a single decade. On the other hand there is the farming counties of the Great Plains or many old-industrial centres of the Mid West, which are affected by a dramatic exodus of businesses and inhabitants.

Flint, Michigan, the home town of Michael Moore, is just one example of a city ruined by this mobility. After the closing of several car factories, which used to be Flint's economic backbone, it was the more affluent and better educated who left the city, a city which soon experienced a collapse of public finances and turned into a hotspot for crime and social problems.

Low mobility of Czechs

The mayors of Most, Ústí or Ostrava should be thankful that their citizens did not leave at a similar pace after the local heavy industry began, in the 1990s, to turn people out onto the street. As demonstrated by a recent survey, moving to a "better place" continues not to be an option for most Czechs living in areas with economic problems. Only 29 per cent would consider moving if confronted with unemployment.

These recent findings are only one stone in the mosaic of a rather immobile society; surprisingly the Czech Republic has a positive migration balance when compared with a number of Western European countries, where wages are up to five times higher. Furthermore, even-though the period after 1989 saw the rise of significant regional differences between poor regions and economic centres, the flow of people between poor and rich regions is almost balanced. The often-lamented brain drain from the provinces to Prague happens, yet is mostly limited to young people with higher level of education. As a visit to any tourist shop between Vaclavské náměstí and the Hradčín confirms, the rapidly growing number of low-skilled jobs in the capital's service sector does not attract the unemployed

from Karvína or Broumov in the Czech Republic, yet mostly people from places further east like Humenné in Slovakia or Ivano-Frankivsk in Ukraine.

The combined impact of two economic factors, rent regulations and welfare payments, explain why Czechs are not only less mobile than Americans but also less mobile than most of their neighbours in the east and the west. To a recipient of welfare payments living in a flat with regulated rent in Ostrava, moving to Prague for a badly paid job would require a drastic reduction of comfort. Due to the situation on the housing market, they would most likely have to share a room in a workers hostel. Despite this sacrifice, the economic benefit would be minimal. A job in Great Britain might be a better choice; but still, is it really worth the effort? And what about the flat back home?

For people from Slovakia, Poland and Ukraine, countries with less generous or barely existent welfare states, the calculation looks different. In addition to this, the low living costs in rural Eastern Europe allowed for the emergence of temporary migration patterns that link intensive periods of work with periods dedicated to the family. In case of the United States, closely calculated welfare payments come hand in hand with a cultural tradition, which stresses self-responsibility, flexibility and geographical mobility.

Work flexibility

The American pioneer-culture's traditional valuation of mobility is reinforced by the demands of an increasingly deregulated and globalised economy, in which the relationship between many businesses and communities are eroded. In the view of Richard Sennett, author of the "The Corrosion of Character" (1998), the extreme demand for flexibility which characterises the American economy is dangerous not only for regions and cities in decline, but for the very character of the people. In the account of the American sociologist, the culture of flexibility has led to a pattern of frequently changing places of residence, increasingly superficial neighbourhood relations, and a growing contradiction between values proclaimed and values lived. However, most economists agree that it is exactly this greater flexibility and mobility which has allowed the American economy to outperform its European counterpart.

From this economic perspective, Europe's striking differences in regional unemployment rates are less the result of inefficient regional development schemes, and more symptoms of the Europeans' unwillingness or inability to adapt to changing economic and geographic patterns. Not only because of the welfare paid to unemployed people in poorer regions, but also because the economy in growth clusters might not grow at the highest possible pace due to lacking supply with labour, the resulting geographic mismatch between labour supply and demand is seen as expensive for society at large.

The positive relationship between (domestic) labour mobility and national economic growth rates is seldom disputed. There exist, however, disagreements on the question how labour migration affects the regions or countries "left behind". In the tradition of western modernity, where "growth" and "progress" are often taken as something like synonyms, it seems almost inconceivable that a region might actually benefit from the loss of people. However, at least in theory, the free flow of workers from disadvantaged regions to growth clusters could lead to an easing of the situation on tense regional labour markets. According to such models, unemployment goes down and wages stabilise after "superfluous" people leave. Those who champion this model point again to the example of the United States, where differences in

regional average income and unemployment are indeed much smaller than in the European Union. Yet critics point out that the reality is, of course, much more complicated than the economic model. As demonstrated by the example of Flint, the outmigration might well further accelerate an existing negative development trend, because it is typically the young and better educated that leave places where opportunities are scarce.

Selective migration

There is no better place to observe the dangerous results of selective migration than Eastern Germany, a region where the exodus of labourers has happened at an even higher pace than in the old industrial cities of the US. Also after fifteen years of outmigration to West Germany, the unemployment rate continues to hover around twenty percent. However, somewhat paradoxically, one of the region's most serious obstacles for economic development has become the lack of a qualified workforce.

The example of Eastern Germany demonstrates how the sudden lifting of restrictions in access to more developed labour markets could lastingly ruin the chances of regional development. This is interesting also in regard to the new member states of the European Union. Quite contrary to public perception, it is not so much the old member states that have to be afraid of the influx of "Polish plumbers". If someone should be concerned at all, then it is certainly the new member states, which might soon lack the human skills needed for the modernisation of their economies. Already within the first year after the EU enlargement, Poland began to experience drastic shortages in different branches like medicine, ship-building and bus-driving. Not surprisingly, the Polish government is thinking about filling the emerging gaps with up to 100,000 qualified migrants from Ukraine. Certainly, this would be good news for skilled Ukrainians. At the same time, however, the worrying question arises: will there be a country at the end of this chain which will not have a possibility to attract urgently needed bus-drivers, health care workers or plumbers from a place that is even more desperate?

Cohesion policy

The example of Eastern Germany is instructive also in another regard. The German government poured billions and billions of Euros into the former East, following its constitutional obligation to "create similar living conditions in all parts of the country". The same objective is held by the European Union's Cohesion Policy. However, in case of Eastern Germany, where many projects were also supported with money of the European Union, the economy proved unable to catch up with the one of the western states. Meanwhile the gap is increasing. Similar observations can be made in many other disadvantaged regions that are the subject of support from the Cohesion Fund. Paradoxically, the price for the lowering of differences between the countries seem to be larger regional differences within these countries.

The traditional cohesion policy's limited success to reduce regional differences within states and the common market's unsatisfying economic performance are the reason for a subtle change in European policy. One of the pillars of the "Lisbon strategy", which should transform the common economic space into the world's most competitive, is the support of labour mobility. This year, 2006, was even named *European Year of Workers' Mobility*.

Mobility versus migration

Supporting labour mobility is certainly not an easy objective to achieve on a continent, where the fear of the migrant worker has for decades belonged to the folklore of every election campaign. This heritage is mirrored in the European Union's telling usage of the word pair "mobility" and "migration". When defining the movement of EU citizens to other countries or within their home country, the EU aims to promote "labour mobility" as something positive. This is different when compared to the use of the word "migration", which appears mostly in the context of control and prevention, and is used in regard to persons from third countries seeking to enter "Fortress Europe."

As demonstrated by the portraits of mobile workers from Moldavia, Ukraine, Slovakia and the Czech Republic written for the "Work is Elsewhere" exhibition and catalogue, this distinction is, of course, artificial. It would be foolish (and potentially destabilising for regions that do traditionally depend on labour migration such as Transcarpathia), if the support of labour mobility would lead to the actual replacement of Ukrainian "labour migrants" with "mobile workers" from poorer EU member states such as Slovakia or, in the future, Romania.

Does the European Union's support of labour mobility herald the coming end of traditional regional development policies, which have the objective of minimizing social differences and providing opportunities for people where these people are at home? Hopefully not.

Europe is not America. Labour migration has an important role in balancing regional development. It can be the only feasible way of creating income in a certain region or the best strategy for transferring know-how. But it is also a force that could lead to the devastation of century-old cultural heritage or stimulate a revival of ethnic or national conflicts between the receiving society and the new-comers. New-comers, who are, after all, not only "mobile workers" yet migrants, people; people that will bring their specific culture, language and children. Wise policy should not hinder them to exercise their right of free movement. It should also provide information about opportunities abroad and protect the rights of those who decide to give it a try. Yet the first policy priority needs to remain bringing work and opportunities to the places where people are at home.

The author is an urban planner and Multicultural Centre Prague's co-ordinator of the exhibition "Práce je jinde / Work is elsewhere" (22. 11. – 21.12. at the Prague Main Station). The internet version is available at www.plotki.net/wie.