

Perpetuation and transformation of the split-household strategy of labour migrants: the case of a Carpathian village

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This paper attempts to discover the factors that may be contributing to the perpetuation or transformation of the “split-household” strategy of labour migrants from the Transcarpathian region in Western Ukraine. It addresses both structural and cultural factors, contextualises current migration strategies historically, and contributes to the literature on the impact of labour migration on sending communities and family dynamics in migrant families. Looking at the case of migrants from one village, this paper demonstrates that remaining mobile is perceived by migrants as the most certain way of achieving stability in an unstable capitalist order.

Key words: labour migration, split households, Central-Eastern Europe, post-Soviet transition

Introduction

“My father was a labour migrant, I am a labour migrant and my son will be a labour migrant”, says Stepan, who took two weeks off from work in Moscow to visit his wife and newborn son in a Carpathian village in Western Ukraine. This region – one of the least developed “labour-excessive” regions in USSR – used to send thousands of temporary and seasonal workers, including Stepan’s father, to other parts of the Soviet Union. In those days, most temporary and seasonal workers had to return home upon the completion of their job contracts. But today, permanent relocation from rural to urban areas or even to other countries is much easier, as legal restrictions on housing registration (*propiska*) or on leaving the country have been cancelled. Why then does Stepan, like thousands of other Transcarpathian migrants who leave for work with the intention of returning back to their home village, see his son reproducing the same migratory pattern rather than permanently moving to a different place with better job prospects and higher living standards?

Photo 1: Stepan’s wife with newborn son and two older daughters in their unfinished house



Photography: Yevgenia Belorusets

The persistence of temporary and seasonal migration of one family member, rather than the permanent emigration of the entire household, is one aspect that has been mentioned in various studies of labour migration in Ukraine, but which has not been sufficiently expounded upon. Temporary outmigration gives rise to the emergence of split households, with the proceeds from work abroad reinvested into propping up the household in the region of origin as a social, economic and cultural resource to fall back on. Prolonged absence of one of the family members leads to changes in the relations between the members of the household and the division of labour within the household, which in turn starts to affect migration decisions and income-earning strategies of the labour migrants. What keeps this chain of interaction functioning is the fact that the household as such remains in Ukraine, rather than being transferred to the place where the “breadwinners” earn their income.

This paper attempts to discover the factors that may be contributing to the perpetuation or transformation of the “split-household” strategy of labour migrants from the Transcarpathian region in Western Ukraine. It addresses both structural and cultural factors, contextualises current migration strategies historically, and contributes to the literature on the impact of labour migration on sending communities and family dynamics in migrant families. A typical large Carpathian village of three thousand inhabitants was taken as a case study¹. In order to ensure the village resident’s confidentiality, an invented village name of “Vesele” is used in this paper. Most families in this village have had experiences with labour migration, and a new district with newly-built, private homes, some of which are large, two to three story houses, is being developed with the resources brought home by migrants. We focused on this district that currently consists of roughly 30 houses, most of them still unfinished, but already inhabited. Eight of the families participated in our research, and individuals from other households contributed as well. In most families, it is the father who leaves to work abroad, usually in construction, while the wife and children remain behind. Occasionally, the wife may also leave the village, but for shorter periods consisting of several weeks or months, working as a vendor, or traveling to join her husband in the construction brigade, where she may be assigned cooking, washing and cleaning duties. During these periods, the children remain with their grandparents. The main destination is Russia, but we also encountered accounts of migration to Poland and the Czech Republic, as well as to Portugal.

Migration as a solution to economic hardship: path dependency

The Carpathian region in Western Ukraine was one of the least developed areas of the Habsburg Empire and later Poland, Czechoslovakia and Romania (annexed to the USSR only in 1945) and experienced its first wave of transnational labour migration in the late 19th century to North and South America. These experiences were described in detail by a Ukrainian expressionist writer and member of the Austrian parliament Vasyl Stefanyk, representing the Galician social-democratic Radical Party between 1908 and 1918 (Struk 1973).

In the Soviet years, this region was considered “labour-excessive” (*trudoizbitochnyi*), as it was predominantly rural, with poorly developed industry and infrastructure. Workers in the region made a living mainly from agriculture, tourism and resided in proximity to the borders with Romania, Hungary, Slovakia and Poland. As Gijs Kessler, the Head of the Moscow branch of the International Institute of Social History commented (private communication): “the whole concept of *trudoizbytochnyi* is a most peculiar Soviet construction. What existed in these regions was structural unemployment, but ideologically this was not allowed to exist in the Soviet Union. At the same time, the problem could not be alleviated permanently because of internal limitations on migration and mobility - hence the curious term *trudoizbytochnyi*”.

Seasonal labour migration (*shabashnichestvo*) from this region to other parts of the USSR was already common in Soviet times (Valetov 2010; White 2007). Commuting from the

villages in the mountains to nearby towns for work during the week and staying at a workers' hostel and returning home for the weekend was also common, especially since permanent migration to Soviet cities was restricted (Gang/Stuart 1999). The latter post-war Soviet trend of weekly or longer-term commuting of "typically young, male and manual or low-skilled laborers" is described by Fuchs and Demko (1978:178), who point to the fact that in the 1970s, less than 1% of these labour migrants had higher education and that their incomes on average were much lower than in the city:

Because commuters are "largely peasants restratified as workers for eight hours a day", a potentially serious problem of social justice has also arisen. This "new working class", created through involuntary commuting, is deprived of urban housing, cultural facilities, and educational services, which in effect have become reserved for those who earlier migrated to the cities or for white-collar, technical or administrative workers. [...] The commuters also find that their children are denied access to the better educational facilities, which are in the major urban centers, raising the possibility that group disadvantages will be perpetuated (Ibid: 180).

In November 1990, one year before Ukraine became independent, 44.5% of Ukrainians said they would agree to work abroad, and 10.5% stated they would consider leaving forever. This figure was twice as high in the Transcarpathian region (Shamshur 1991: 259). Almost a million exit permits were given to Ukrainians in the first half of 1991 to visit friends and relatives in Poland, Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia. Shamshur (Ibid: 264) suggests that:

The bulk of this category of migrants is made up of "commercial tourists" engaged in trading and other business operations abroad who cross the frontier repeatedly under the guise of "personal reasons", quite often utilizing false invitations from foreign citizens, still necessary to get entrance visas and exit permits. It can be assumed also that this group conceals a good deal of job-searching migrants: according to some estimates, migrants looking for jobs abroad make up about half of the travelers for "personal reasons".

The break-up of the Soviet Union and economic restructuring brought about a significant decline in industrial and agricultural production in Ukraine in the 1990s. GDP reached its lowest in 1999, when it was 40.8% of the GDP of the Ukrainian SSR in 1990, and it was only in the early 2000s that the economy began to grow. This growth was uneven, benefiting mainly large industrial centers and metropolitan areas, but even there development was halted by the financial crisis of 2008-2009; at the end of 2009, Ukrainian GDP reached 85.6% of the country's GDP in 1990. For many people living in small towns and villages, labour migration remains the only solution to poverty and unemployment².

Today, the official average salary in Transcarpathian region is among the lowest in Ukraine (2,075 UAH in January 2012, compared to country's average of 2,722 UAH) and only half of the average salary rate in Kyiv (4,148 UAH). According to the State Statistics Committee of Ukraine (www.ukrstat.gov.ua website accessed on April 26, 2012), this region had the highest rate of emigration in 2011, both in absolute numbers and as a percentage of the region's population.

Taking all this into account, considering such a long history of labour migration from the Carpathian region, it is not surprising that labour migration is currently perceived by the local population as the most obvious solution to economic hardships and the lack of opportunities. This 'cultural' factor is an example of path dependency, in which outcomes of a decision-making process at an earlier moment in time influence the decision-making at a later moment in time (Afontsev 2010). We do not have enough evidence to claim as a definite fact the impact of the experience of temporary or seasonal migration in the Soviet period on choosing a split-household strategy rather than permanent emigration today. But we can raise such a

hypothesis, especially considering a higher decline in rural population in equally poor regions of Northern and Central Ukraine, where peasants do not have as much experience with prior temporary migration as a model and reference point, and instead choose to leave their homes for good.

Structural and cultural factors that prevent permanent migration

Of course, path dependency is only possible if structural conditions are similar, or if “old means” can be successfully adapted to “new ends”. The question as to which structural factors account for the “split-household” strategy has been extensively researched in different geographical and temporal settings. Explanations include the seasonal character of employment in the regions of destination and/or the seasonal character of unemployment or underemployment in the region of origin, a transitional or temporary economic downturn in the regions of origin, or administrative/legal barriers against permanent migration. There are also cultural factors, such as attachment to a specific cultural identity of remaining connected to the region of origin, and desire to have one's children grow up there.

Photo 2: Children only see their fathers three or four times a year. Sometimes their mothers migrate as well and the children remain with grandparents or other relatives.



Photography: Yevgenia Belorusets

The underlying idea is that in the absence of such factors, labour will ultimately flow to the region where it is most needed, and families will eventually follow. We see this transformation from a split-household strategy to permanent emigration happening with many Polish working-class migrant families. After accession into the EU, more full-time employment opportunities and possibilities for permanent emigration to wealthier EU countries like Germany or the UK appeared. According to White (2009), many families who earlier had “dual location livelihoods” began to question “whether this migration strategy was really working”, which led to a change of livelihood strategies that increasingly involved entire families, often including children, rather than the emigration of just one of the family members:

It can seem too expensive and complicated to continue to maintain two households, leading to a feeling that, as one mother said, 'it was easier to live here (in England)'. The prospect of his remaining away for a still longer period, of unpredictable duration, also becomes intolerable for emotional reasons, and

this too is the time when worries about marriage break-up become even more acute.

It is evident from this quote that the decision to permanently migrate to a foreign country comes not from the existing possibilities for migration per se, but from these possibilities being perceived as economically preferable and emotionally desirable for all members of the household. In contrast to White's study, my respondents mentioned that it is cheaper for them to support their families at home rather than to take them along. They also preferred to keep their home in the village as a place where they could return "no matter what", as one of my respondents remarked; "even if I lose my job, or lose my health, I know that I have a home to return to, no matter what".

The rural-urban migration in the late 19th and early 20th century Russian Empire had a very similar migratory pattern as the one we see in Vesele village today. It also resulted in "split households" with wives and children remaining in the villages, and men migrating to the cities in small groups consisting of neighbors or relatives ("brigades" or "artels") where they formed non-family households to save on living costs – exactly the same thing respondents in our study are doing. Two of the reasons listed by Timur Valetov for keeping the links to the village and even investing their revenues into their rural households in the Russian Empire at turn of the century seem relevant for our case: keeping the village as an "option of last resort", since work in the city did not guarantee social security in case of old age or illness, and the inability to provide for their families in the expensive urban environment, where more money had to be spent on housing and food than in the villages (Valetov 2008:165). Therefore, we may conclude that one of the reasons for the persistence of the split-household strategy in both periods is the value of the household as a social safety net.

The cultural importance of family ties should not be neglected either. The problem of labour migration from Western Ukraine is widely discussed in media and raised by politicians during electoral campaigns as an evil that "ruins families" and "creates orphans with living parents". During the "Orange Revolution", Viktor Yushchenko, whose electorate came predominantly from the economically depressed villages and small towns, repeatedly stressed that when he came to power, no one would have to leave the country in search of work, and promised to create five million new jobs within five years. During the last electoral campaign less than a year ago, another candidate for presidency, Arsenii Yatseniuk, sponsored a publication of stories told by children whose parents left for work in the West. The right-wing populist party "Svoboda" also promised to create new jobs for Ukrainians to allow labour migrants to return home and find work there, while adding a xenophobic, anti-migration point to the party program, whereby immigrants to Ukraine are perceived as taking jobs away from Ukrainians.

We see that labour migration has received media attention and retained political significance during the last two decades, precisely in the framework of family disintegration and leaving one's "Motherland". The problem also received a great deal of attention from religious organizations (a majority of the migrants' families from Western Ukraine are practicing Greek-Catholics) and NGOs. They urged Ukrainians "not to look at work abroad through rose-tinted glasses", in regards to problems migrants may face abroad and "family break-up and community disintegration" at home in Ukraine.

This conservative response, stressing the importance of the family and patriotic values over personal financial gain, has become a dominant "critical voice" on this issue, marginalizing possible alternative critical accounts of labour migration in this region. In this paradigm, interiorized by many of my respondents, the migrants are expected to feel guilty for being away from home and to compensate their absence by making the effort to improve their families' living standards. Large private houses, small family businesses, and education for children – all this would not have been possible without the support of those family members who migrate in search of work abroad. Migrants use these examples of the positive impact of economic remittances as a proof of their desire to invest in their homes of origin and to eventually return there when living conditions and job opportunities improve. They also tend

to reproduce media and conservative politicians' statements on labour migration as an unfortunate temporary side-effect of the "transition period", while I believe that in the "transition to capitalism" explanation, an emphasis should also be placed on capitalism, with a subsequent question on the place of Ukraine in the capitalist world-system. Both the temporary and systemic consequences of these processes should be analysed in more detail.

With the break-up of the USSR, new opportunities for migration emerged as Ukraine became integrated into the global economy, but also new challenges, as Ukraine ended up on the semi-periphery of this world-system, supplying wealthier neighbors with cheap labour power for construction (male migrants) and care work (female migrants). But their precarious status in receiving countries prevents permanent emigration and reinforces the split-household strategy. As Morokvasic suggests in her seminal article "Settled in mobility", temporary labour migration that results in split households has become not just a temporary reality for many Central and Eastern European workers, but a permanent feature of their daily lives.

Ending the split-household strategy

The workingman's living conditions deteriorate when he migrates for work abroad, has to save on housing, food, clothes and medical aid in order to bring back more money to his family. He often lives on the construction site with his fellow workers or even experiences periods of temporary homelessness and frequents soup kitchens for the destitute. At the same time, however, his wife and children's status improves; as they are able to decorate the newly-constructed house with the most up-to date materials, buy good furniture, clothes, food and cosmetics. One might claim that while the migrant husband is an illegal and precarious worker abroad, his wife and children enjoy a middle-class status back home.

Photo 3: While migrant men suffer from precarious employment abroad, their wives and children enjoy a middle-class lifestyle at home, thanks to economic remittances.



Photography: Yevgenia Belorusetz.

This interesting tendency was also noted in other countries and historical periods, where migrant men suffering from difficult working conditions were able to provide a comfortable lifestyle for their wives and children back home. Burds (1998) writes about the wealth generated by labour migrants from late 19th century Russian villages, from which women and children benefited much more than migrant men. Linda Reeder, writing about mass male

migration in Sicily in 1880-1920s, highlights that the “goals and desires of the women who remained behind informed many of the choices made by male migrants” (Reeder 2001: 375) and that migration of the husband was considered as “a sacrifice for the good of the family” (Ibid: 379). She shows that migrants’ wives acted as managers of their husbands’ incomes, and could spend that money as they saw fit, including buying or building new houses (sometimes without waiting for the husbands to return) and consumer goods to show off the family’s improved status:

The wives of migrants moved their families into roomy, two-story houses, preferably with small separate kitchens off one room. The average size and the net worth of the buildings owned by these women were twice that of those owned by women whose husbands remained at home. As soon as the families moved into their new homes, women began to replace their old furnishings with new, store-bought iron bedsteads, tables and dressers. In purchasing homes and furnishing them with rugs, lamps, and mirrors brought in from Palermo and Agrigento, these women took the initial steps to fulfill the dreams they had invested in migration (Reeder 2001: 388).

According to Reeder, the dark side of such attempts by migrants’ wives “to purchase the physical appearance of the bourgeois world” is the increased dependence on the goodwill of their husbands as well as a weakened ability to control the husbands’ earnings. This gendered division within the household is also a contributing pattern to promoting the split-household strategy, as the husbands are expected to act as breadwinners and provide for their families at any cost, while the wives are expected to care for the “home fire”, a common perception of the woman’s “mission” in conservative rhetoric in Ukraine. However, rather than simply reproducing traditional views on family composition, observed migrant families in Vesele offer a combination of a traditional rural patriarchal social organization and new patterns that encourage children to leave the village to receive higher education and wives to become small entrepreneurs in their home villages. Interestingly, migration reinforces both trends (“traditional” and “modern”) at the same time, despite these trends being quite contradictory³.

Children leaving the villages to get higher education could be interpreted as a first sign of the end of the split-household strategy. Since it is apparently no longer considered necessary that children make their lives in their region of origin, permanent migration has become a prospect for the next generation. One of the respondents even blamed himself for spending so much time away from his family trying to earn enough money to build a big house, being aware that his children would not live there: “The house turned out to be very expensive to build and to keep up. Moreover, my older daughter is leaving home this fall to go to college, and my son will leave in a few years. They never had a chance to live in the rooms upstairs that were planned as their bedrooms, and now they never will! Their rooms will remain unfinished and empty”. Children, therefore, have become agents that can break the split-household cycle, even though the parents’ attitude to this change is ambivalent, as witnessed by the respondent quoted above.

The second alternative to the split-household strategy that these workers envisage lies in trying to earn enough money to become entrepreneurs at home. This strategy is often suggested by wives, who manage their husbands’ remittances intelligently to plan the new business. The wife of one of the respondents dreamed about building a small private pharmacy, where the couple would then work. Another one wished to develop green tourism. Recently, her husband built a small bar and motel by the main road together with his brother, which nevertheless has not brought the expected profits for either family, and the brothers take turns going to Portugal every other year, while their mother looks after their common business. Men, in turn, are increasingly willing to acknowledge the active involvement of women in the public sphere. However, this acknowledgement remains ambivalent. For instance, one respondent who wished to create a small firm selling and installing “European” window frames and roof tiles did not see his wife contributing to his business. His wife

remained silent during the interview although she was also encouraged to share her experience with us. But this same respondent spoke favorably of the female mayor of their village, describing her as a “strong woman”.

Conclusion: in search of stability

All the above mentioned entrepreneurial responses revolve around the individual well-being of the families and are aimed at bringing them stability on a local scale, without challenging the instability of the economic order on a global scale. Such individualization and sharp public-private distinctions are only reinforced by labour migration⁴. Our respondents tended to focus on the livelihood strategies that offered them the greatest personal stability over the long haul. Children's education and entrepreneurial activity are perceived as potential stabilizing factors by an increasing number of migrants. Currently, however, temporary labour migration that results in split-households seems the most stable of all alternatives.

Looking from a structural point of view, in a global capitalist economy that relies on an increasing number of migrant workers in precarious jobs, economic and social remittances sent to home communities guarantee that migrants will have a place to return to and a social safety net to fall back on. From a cultural point of view, conservative views on family responsibilities and patriotism are perceived by migrants as values of “rootedness” and stability that encourage the return to their home communities.

Therefore, our study showed a mix of structural and cultural factors contributing to the perpetuation of the split-household strategy of temporary labour migration, but also a change in the specific combination and relative importance of each factor. It also pointed to path-dependency in perceiving temporary and seasonal migration as the most obvious solution to poverty, as well as in the destination of most migrants. Unofficial labour migration from the village where we conducted our study to Kyiv, Moscow and other large Soviet cities, as well as to rural areas for seasonal work, already occurred in the 1980s. In the 1990s, the possibilities for westward migration materialised, with the Czech Republic and Portugal being two of the most popular destinations in this particular village. However, with tightening border control and visa procedures, most people in this village have once again changed their preferred destination to Russia, where one can stay legally for up to three months, although work is considered illegal without a working contract; therefore, in all of the families we interviewed, the work carried out in Russia was done so in the shadow economy. We may conclude that a strategy to avoid the insecurity of illegal work in the EU makes temporary migration to Russia a more secure option. More generally, remaining mobile is perceived by migrants from the village Vesele as the most certain way of achieving stability in an unstable capitalist order.

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Notes

¹ This is an ongoing research project and the first stage of the fieldwork took place in July-August 2011. In July, together with a documentary photographer Yevgenia Belorusets, we gathered preliminary data on the Carpathian region and visited several villages and towns to decide on the location for our case study, choosing

the village Vesele, based on our own observations and on consultations with scholars familiar with the region. In early August we went together to Vesele where we rented a room in one of the private homes in the new district for one week. During this week we gathered visual data (photographs, short videos) on the infrastructure and social life in the village, on the migrants' households, including the interiors and exteriors of their homes, family portraits (often with the father away at work), collected copies of photographs and letters that labour migrants send to their family members at home, and conducted interviews with migrants' families.

² Neighboring countries both East and West of Ukraine (Russia, Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, and Romania) are among the most common destinations for labour migrants, due to cultural and linguistic similarities and past experiences of migration. Another destination is South-Western Europe (Italy, Spain and Portugal)

³ We noticed changes in family composition and division of labour within the household (for example, women took up many of the traditionally "male" jobs while their husbands are away, and they were able to afford giving up some of their previous chores by buying equipment like washing-machines or purchasing products with additional money from their husbands, instead of producing them on their own). We also noticed changes in the job opportunities offered to migrants' children (young people pondering whether to remain in their home towns or villages, migrate to larger Ukrainian cities or leave for temporary work like their parents), as well as in the social status of families of migrants compared to those rural dwellers that do not have family members working abroad.

⁴ The attitudes towards the public sphere and public services are quite ambivalent, contrary to the preoccupation with the private sphere. Many of our respondents have complained about the absence of pre-school day care for small children, which they would have liked to have had (the building of the pre-school was closed down almost a decade ago for renovation). They have, however, not taken any steps either to demand that the local authorities finish the renovation or create an alternative community pre-school themselves. There does not seem to be much solidarity or concern regarding other urgent issues, like the deteriorating state of the local hospital (most women prefer to go to the nearest town to give birth to their babies), or the fact that only the central street is paved, or that the gas pipe that runs through the village does not provide villagers with gas.

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