

Forschungsstelle Osteuropa an der Universität Bremen

Research Centre for East European Studies at the University of Bremen

Changing Europe Summer School II

“Crises and Conflicts in Eastern European States and Societies: Stumbling Blocks or Stepping Stones for Democratisation?”

Warsaw, 2 – 8 September 2007

sponsored by the Volkswagen Foundation

www.changing-europe.org

Volha Vysotskaya: Migration Motives of the Highly Skilled from Eastern Europe to Germany: In Search of Upgrading Social Status

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Publikationsreferat / Publications Dept.

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Language editing: Hilary Abuhove and Christopher Gilley

Abstract

Highly skilled labour migration has become an increasingly significant topic in the new millennium. Despite the changed framework in both the sending and receiving countries, however, economic theories tend to dominate migratory research on the motives for highly skilled labour. At the same time, studies considering the role and interplay of social institutions and, more importantly, the perceptions of the migrants themselves, are largely underrepresented.

The current paper emphasises the psychological dimension and the social environment as motivating factors for highly skilled migrants. The research investigates the migrants' pursuit of life goals as a means for raising their social status. In particular, the realisation of life goals is considered as a motive for the migration of highly skilled individuals migrating from Eastern Europe to Germany. The following research questions are addressed: How do changes at home shape their decision to migrate? How does the attainment of life goals help them to achieve social status? It is hypothesised that the highly skilled migrate in order to improve their social status due to dissatisfaction with their situation in their native countries. Social perspectives on career advancement help to galvanise the highly skilled migrants' decision to move abroad and, alternatively, return home. Narrative interviews were used as a method of inductive exploration in this paper.

The empirical data consist of three interviews with highly skilled migrants during their stay in Germany. The interviewees came from Russia, Belarus and Ukraine.

The analysis of the interviews led to the conclusion that for highly skilled labourers, migration is a channel for the accumulation of cultural capital, which raises individual social status. The initial reason for migrating – realising life goals – led to improved social status both at home and abroad. For some, the acquired status was necessary for positioning themselves in their new society, while to others the capital acquired abroad gave them a sense of belonging to a higher social stratum at home. The research indicates that the previously dominant perspective on the motives of migrants as being primarily economic is too narrow and should be replaced by approaches with greater scope.

Introduction¹

Eastern Europe has had a long history of supplying other countries with its intellectuals. This is also true for the present: after the collapse of the Soviet Union, economic discrepancies “here” and “there” caused a massive outflow of human capital. A number of migration theories developed models to explain the phenomenon (or some of its aspects). In particular, the differences in the supply and demand of labour (Massey, 1993)², the disproportionately low wages at home vs. those in the receiving country and the migrant's high expectations for greater earnings abroad were useful paradigms for explaining the ‘brain drain’ phenomenon, especially in the case of migration to the United States. Despite their position as the most dominant research streams in migration studies for a long time, both the new economics of labour (Stark, 1985)³; (Taylor, 1999)⁴ and neoclassical economics (Todaro, 1969)⁵ theories had only partial reach and thus could not account for highly skilled migrants in particular.

1 The research is a part of the author's doctoral dissertation, which is being undertaken at the Graduate School of Social Sciences, University of Bremen. The author wishes to acknowledge the grant from Volkswagen Foundation and wishes to thank Prof. Dr. Matthias Wiggins for his valuable comments and Ph.D fellow Aigul Alieva for his insights, suggestions and research assistance.

2 Massey, Douglas S./ Arango, Jouaquin/ Durand, Jorge/ Graem, Hugo/ Ali, Kouaui/ Pellegrino, Ali /Taylor, Edward J.: Theories of International Migration: A Review and Appraisal, n: Population and Development Review 1993, pp. 431–66.

3 Stark, Oded / Bloom, David: The new Economics of Labour Migration, in: American Economic Review, 1985(vol.75/2), pp.173–178.

4 Taylor, Edward J., The New Economics of Labour Migration and the Role of Remittances in the Migration Process, in: International Migration, 1999, pp.5–55.

5 Todaro, Michael. P: A Model of Labor Migration and Urban Unemployment in Less Developed Countries, in: *The Ameri-*

At the same time, the importance of highly skilled labour migration became more and more evident, calling for new approaches and perspectives to explain the changing situation. Although the main question remains the same – namely why those who migrate decide to do so – the twenty-first century presents new challenges to migration studies. With Eastern Europe's doors now opening onto the rest of the world and its rapidly growing economies, the migrants' reasons for leaving their families and countries might be different from what they were at the time when the above-mentioned approaches in migration studies were so influential. How do changes at home change motives for migration?

In the paper, I investigate the realisation of life goals as a motive for the migration of highly skilled labour. The argument is that highly skilled migrants, dissatisfied with their status at home and unable to achieve their goals, leave in order to improve their social status.

Data collection and interview design

The paper is based on the preliminary results of interviews conducted with highly skilled migrants from Russia, Belarus and Ukraine.⁶ Although their economic and political systems are significantly different, these three countries are treated as a single case study due to the common cultural code shared by former Soviet countries.

Due to the scarcity of up-to-date information on the migration of highly skilled labour from post-Soviet countries to Europe in the twenty-first century, the qualitative method was chosen to test the research hypothesis. Accordingly, it was necessary to collect original data rather than rely upon existing research.

The main goal of the interview process was to obtain the workers' perspective on their migration and reasons for leaving their countries and returning home or staying abroad. In-depth interviews were conducted to uncover their motives as well as previously unrecorded angles on migration. I opted against a standard interview method and fixed questionnaires. Instead, I applied a more flexible, narrative-style approach to the interviews, which allowed the migrants to present their stories in their own words. This approach also enabled the gathering of the migrant's prospective and retrospective views on the migration process in general, with emphasis on particular segments. Segmenting the migration process was an important analytical step, as it provided an overview of the migrants' life course. During the interviews, participants described their lives, how they see them, and how migration had changed or affected their lives. On the other hand, the segmenting approach is an important tool for comparing social status in different stages of the migration process. Participants told their stories, citing migration as a turning point in their lives. Indeed, their trajectory changed dramatically when they migrated from one society to another. Throughout the interviews, I focused on the migrants' narrative of their life goals and the effect the migration process had had on them. The accounts were later conceptualised.

Empirical investigation

Psychological dimension:

Highly skilled migrants have to be differentiated from other types of migrants. First, they possess rich cultural capital and thus have better chances of entering a foreign labour market. Second, they occupy a relatively high level in the hierarchy of needs, having met most basic needs. Finally, their rare professional qualifications facilitate mobility across borders (Weiss, 2006).⁷

can Economic Review 1969(vol.59/1), pp. 138–148.

6 The interviewing process was still in progress on at the time the current paper was presented at the conference in Warsaw, 2–8.09.2007. Due to certain limitations, only 3 out of 12 interviews are presented here, for the purpose of illustrating the main argument.

7 Weiss, Anja: Comparative Research on Highly Skilled Migrants. Can Qualitative Interviews Be Used in Order to Reconstruct a Class Position? [46 paragraphs]. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research* [On-

Particularities of the highly skilled as a group impact their life goals, which in turn shape their motives. By virtue of sharing these features, the highly skilled form a class with a common “internalised practical and mental perspective on the world, which responds to the options which people with that particular portfolio have in life” (Weiss, 2006).⁸

As for the possible psychological motives this group might have for migrating, Ferro suggests the following factors: “the relevance of fulfilling an esteem need (need for the respect of others, need for status, glory, recognition, attention, reputation, appreciation, dignity), need for self-respect (including such feelings as confidence, competence, achievement mastery, independence and freedom) and self-actualisation need (characterising people who are problem-focused, incorporate an ongoing freshness of appreciation of life and have a concern about personal growth and an ability to have peak experiences (Ferro, 2006).⁹

Theoretically speaking, there is no universal set of life goals. Most of them are based on the hierarchy of human motivation formulated by Maslow (Maslow, 1943).¹⁰ Keeping in mind the general life goals and specific characteristics of the highly skilled as a group, I pre-selected the following life goals:

- Sense of belonging
- Enjoyment in life
- Self-fulfilment
- Sense of accomplishment
- Security
- Self-respect.

These served as the groundwork for a preliminary hypothesis of life goals. Not all of them necessarily correspond to highly skilled workers. Their relevance to this group was determined after the analysis of the data gathered in the interviews.

1. Society with opportunities

For Tatsiana, the first interviewee, a clash of values emerged in the two societies in which she found herself. After her first short visit to Germany she saw the differences in educational opportunities, her peers’ interests, their self-involvement and subtleness in everyday lives. The lifestyle in Germany was just the opposite of what she and her friends had experienced at home in Russia. The ability to enjoy everyday life with what one already has rather than hunger for what one lacks influenced her decision to move to Germany. Things were quite different in Russia: marrying a very wealthy husband, being acquainted with “useful and necessary” business people, owning a private apartment and a car, and holding a job in a prestigious company were the hallmarks of a successful life rather than love, happiness and satisfaction with relationships and one’s work. Tatsiana considered herself lucky to have won a stipend to go to Germany. For her, migration was an opportunity to break her ties with the group she never had wanted to be associated with:

“Even if there are such things at home, I could not achieve them without having certain relations, connections and “blat” (блат), which I didn’t. That meant I could not take that route there. Going to St Petersburg and finding good work there was a dream. I had no one there to help me get started.”

line Journal], 7(3), Art. 2. Available at: <http://www.qualitative-research.net/fqs-texte/3-06/06-3-2-e.htm> [Date of Access: February, 12, 2007].

8 Weiss, Anja: Comparative Research on Highly Skilled Migrants. Can Qualitative Interviews Be Used in Order to Reconstruct a Class Position? [46 paragraphs]. Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research [Online Journal], 7(3), Art. 2. Available at: <http://www.qualitative-research.net/fqs-texte/3-06/06-3-2-e.htm> [Date of Access: February, 12, 2007].

9 Ferro, Anna: Desired Mobility or Satisfied immobility? Migratory Aspirations among Knowledge Workers, in: Journal of Education and Work, 2006 (vol.19/2), pp.171–200.

10 Maslow, Abraham: A Theory of Human Motivation, in: Psychological Review, 1943, pp.370–396.

For Tatsiana, looking for a university, funding her studies and making her own life in Germany was more realistic than living in Russia.

The realisation of her ambitions was so much easier and realistic in a new country. To do so, she did not need to prove that she had enough money; instead of staying in what she called a “materialistic society”, she opted for a “society with opportunities”.

“Even if I have to return one day, I know I will be much stronger and what I have learnt here will be an asset in making my life”.

2. I want to be my own boss

The *human capital* accumulated abroad elevates the social status of a migrant upon returning home. The interview with Boris from Ukraine shortly before he returned home after 6 years of living in Germany illustrates the point. Having worked as a software programmer at a research institution, he was resolute in his decision to return back home:

“I have to return home because of urgent family problems. But even if I hadn’t, I would go back anyway. Here I would not advance beyond this point... at home, I want to be a boss”.

He was not talking about founding a company. On the contrary, he was about to settle in Dnepropetrovsk (in Ukraine) and create a little computer organisation. What he stressed in his interview was the idea that his newly acquired skills would give him the confidence to achieve his goal of self-fulfilment.

3. I deserve to do what I want

The interview with Anna provided another example. Her achievement and success in realising personal goals motivated her to stay in Germany and continue her advancement. The interview was conducted in the final months of her Ph.D. studies. She intended to move to a post doctoral position in a research institute after that. For her, migration was at first simply an opportunity to achieve something she could never do at home. But after 6 years abroad, she observed that living in Germany had made her persistent and successful in realising her plans:

“Migrating to Germany made it possible not only to achieve what I have always wanted but has also made me extremely ambitious. To me, it (migration) has always been a challenge. It is not sufficient to merely stay here, but to do what my utmost. I could never think myself of working as a hairdresser: I deserve to do what I want”.

Data analysis

The analysed interviews were saturated and the following life goals were conceptualised in the following table:

Table 1: Life Goals for the highly skilled

Key indicators for the concepts		Life goal types
1. Society with opportunities: shared values (education, happiness, individualised society) vs. “connections”, “blat”, materialistic values; society without opportunities	→	1. self-realisation
2. I want to be my own boss: applying acquired capacities	→	2. self-selection
3. What I deserve: constant upward mobility	→	3. self-fulfilment

In order to analyse concepts representing life goals in more detail, key indicators taken from the interviews were utilised. The life goal types were developed from the sum of relevant indicators. Indicators could have overlapping content as long as they were part of a unit describing a unique concept (each group of indicators signifies a unique concept). Three life goals were determined. Obviously, they are not the only life goals that apply to the highly skilled. The objective of singling out these particular goals was to illuminate the workers' motives from a psychological perspective.

Social environment dimension

All three interviewees stressed the importance of quality of life rather than simply focusing on pure economic or material gain. Some highly skilled migrants living in Germany stated that despite all the chances and opportunities available to them in Germany, they preferred to return home. In other cases, some migrants resisted returning to their countries of origin and tried to stay. Although the issue of economic gain was important for the interviewees, they were talking about it in a very specific context. In particular, they said that they felt better off in Germany not merely because they were paid more (the cost of living is much more expensive), but because they could afford most of the things they had wanted: “...to be able to afford something is more important than having money per se”. Some of the migrants attributed little importance to economic gain. Some other common features are traceable and elucidate the motives of the highly skilled. The interviewees saw themselves as realising their ambitions in life via the migration process. Their narratives demonstrate that migration to Germany was instrumental in upgrading their social status. In order to understand the migrants' behaviour, then, one has to consider not only the external factors ('push/pull' factors), but more importantly, their individual characteristics and self-positioning in a certain space (in Bourdieu's sense).¹¹

There are also some differences among the interviewees that underscore the importance of social status as a motive for migration. Specifically, we cannot see an upgrade of status (at least objectively speaking) in all three cases. However, even in the cases in which the migrant's status did not rise in the new country but remained the same or even sank, the migrant nonetheless perceived his or her position as a positive asset. What was important to these individuals were the material goods they accumulated, values in a new country that they associated with the betterment of their positioning within the society. This means that the realisation of life goals can coexist with the unchanged or even lowered status of a highly skilled migrant. This aspect seems to be crucial vis-à-vis return migration and circular migration, but more investigation is necessary.

Most migrants aim at accumulating human capital and raising their status in a new society. They want to be perceived by their peers (colleagues, friends, co-workers) differently than they were in their sending countries. However, this may not always be the case. Another explanation of why a highly skilled worker migrates might be the impossibility of raising his or her status in the receiving country. If this is the case, a migrant is more likely to return home, improving his or her status with the capital accumulated abroad. Again, this is another aspect worthy of investigation in the research on return migration.

Based on such features, the highly skilled form a distinct class with some shared properties, i.e. an “internalised practical and mental perspective on the world, which respond(s) to the options that people with that particular portfolio have in life” (Weiss, 2006).¹² In this sense, by adhering to non-materialistic values, the highly skilled resemble the Weberian status of honour (interested in status order) with a particular life-style. “If mere economic acquisitions and naked economic power still bearing the stigma of its extra-status origin could bestow upon anyone who has won it the same honour as those who are interested in status by

11 Bourdieu, Pierre: Social Space and Symbolic Power, in: Sociological Theory, (vol.7/1), 1989, pp.14–25.

12 Weiss, Anja: Comparative Research on Highly Skilled Migrants. Can Qualitative Interviews Be Used in Order to Reconstruct a Class Position? [46 paragraphs]. Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research [Online Journal], 7(3), Art. 2. Available at: <http://www.qualitative-research.net/fqs-texte/3-06/06-3-2-e.htm> [Date of Access: February, 12, 2007].

virtue of style of life claim for themselves, the status order would be threatened at its very root” (Weber, 1946).¹³

In any case, for highly skilled migrants, migration is a channel for the accumulation of human capital. Their initial objective of realising their life goals facilitated the raise of their social status, either in a host country or upon their return home. For some, the acquired status was necessary for positioning themselves in a new society. For others, the gained capital provided a sense of belonging to a higher echelon of society at home.

These findings confirm Weber’s view of highly skilled migrants as a group or status order (Weber, 1946)¹⁴ that rejects purely economic acquisitions and ranks its social position above the “chase for the material”. Migration for them is not only an opportunity to elevate their careers but also to realise and fulfil non-material life goals, like self-fulfilment, self-selection and self-realisation.

Status is therefore a useful analytical tool for understanding both the self-positioning of migrants in home and host societies and the actual (non-material) motives of highly skilled workers for migrating.

The oppression of not only living in a community but also thinking, as it were, in a “communal way” has always served as a strong push factor for migrating, even in the 1990s. The present post-Soviet societies still possess this feature. However, some of them are also demonstrating tendencies towards an extreme or “wild” individualism. Highly skilled workers, with their distinctive characteristics and life goals, may find themselves playing the role of the black sheep in post-Soviet societies. When they migrate, they might therefore voluntarily shed the values and lifestyle that had been common “at home”. There are numerous examples of migrants who prefer to have friends that are host-state nationals (e.g. German or French). Another pull factor for migration is the position that highly skilled workers occupy abroad and the status that the particular society “automatically” confers upon them. Being highly skilled in Russia and Germany may entail a different social status.

13 Weber, Max. *Class, Status and Party*, in: *Social Stratification in Comparative Perspective* Second Edition, 1946, pp.21–28.

14 Weber, Max. *Class, Status and Party*, in: *Social Stratification in Comparative Perspective* Second Edition, 1946, pp.21–28.