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Restrictive Migration Policies and their Effects on Female Migrants: a Case Study

Introductory Remarks and Theoretical Background

Although humankind has been migrating all throughout history, such movements, as Teitelbaum (2005: 200) argues, were controlled to a much lesser extent before the creation of sovereign nation states. More systematic engagement with migration issues both in Europe and in the US can thus be traced into the first half of the 19th century, when nation states were being created. At that time, a much greater need to gather statistical information about the national population as a 'whole' appeared (Kreager, 1997: 154-155). Furthermore, spatial mobility of the population became increasingly linked to political control over people's mobility beyond the borders of newly created sovereign nation states (Bryceson, 2002: 31).

Nevertheless, the political significance and the scope of migration in the European context have increased mainly from the Second World War, and especially from the 1980s (Castles and Miller, 2003: 4). Contemporary Europe is thus not characterised not only by the unification of nation states, but also by an increasing presence of international migrants (Merrill, 2006: 189). For this reason, it seems that migration has become one of the main elements of creating a common economic and social policy of the EU and an important 'challenge' for devising migration policy in most European states (Freedman, 2003: 2).

The process of defining the term migrant itself can be characterised as a process containing elements of inclusion as well as exclusion. If migrants are defined as opposed to non-nationals, they are also categorised as those that are 'non-belonging'. Such a classification is one of the mechanisms through which migrants are restricted in their right to employment, social security and political activity (Kofman et al., 2000: 8). Although discourse about 'open Europe' and 'free movement of people' is gaining ground both in the public and on the political agenda of the EU, most researchers studying migration would agree that one of the main characteristics of migration policy at the European level is its increasing restrictiveness to individuals from the 'third countries', i.e. the non-EU countries. Harsh control over external borders, measures to control migration and migration-related rights and the restrictions on the numbers of recognised refugees and admitted migrants; figure among the main characteristics of such a migration regime, that researchers have labelled as 'fortress Europe'. Right to free movement and related economic, social and political rights are largely limited to EU member-states nationals (Lister, 1997: 46).

However, these issues were not the main focus of 'classical migration theory'. It could be argued that 'mainstream migration theory' placed primary emphasis on economic dimensions of migration. The push-and-pull model of migration, based on neo-liberal economic theory, has traditionally represented almost a 'standard model of migration'. According to the push-and-pull migration model, individuals migrate mainly for economic reasons. Consequently, in these approaches, the decision to migrate, as Anthias maintains (2000: 18) is considered to be a rational choice and

individual agency of the migrants is understood as purely rational economic behaviour in terms of weighing between costs and benefits. On the other hand, those researchers more in favour of Marxist models of migration, have developed approaches that gave primary emphasis not on individual choices and agency, but on the means of production, i.e. the macro system level. Advocates of such an approach did not understand migrants as individuals making decisions, but instead as a labour force category on the labour market (Anthias, 2000: 18-19). Especially in the last two decades, however, migration scholars have begun to give more emphasis to processes of inclusion and exclusion of migrants in new societies. Issues of citizenship, social inclusion and exclusion and political and everyday strategies of migrants, i.e. social and cultural instead of only economic aspects of migration, are gaining increased prominence in migration theory (Al-Ali, web source).

Furthermore, in the last few decades, we have witnessed an increased number of women migrants, and currently, at the international level, women represent almost a half of all international migrants (Carling, 2005: 2). It is in this respect that some researchers speak of feminisation of migration (Castles and Miller, 2003: 67).

However, the migration experiences of women, as many researchers have argued, have been largely overlooked in the so-called mainstream migration studies. Most classical studies of migration, in line with their mainly economic orientation, have adopted the premise that individuals migrating to 'Western' Europe in the years after the Second World War were mainly single white men migrating for economic reasons. Consequently, women as potential migrants were viewed almost exclusively as individuals migrating on grounds of family reunification, arriving after male migrants. As researchers recently evaluating mainstream migration studies and their (non-) focus on the gendered elements of migration, have demonstrated, males were considered a prototype of a migrant, responsible not only for decisions regarding migration, but also acting as the main breadwinner in the family (Anthias, 2000; Lazaridis, 2000; Sharpe, 2001; Freedman, 2003). Women, if analysed at all, were viewed mostly in the family framework in relation to their children, which perpetuated the stereotype of women as wives and mothers (Lazaridis, 2000: 53). Recent studies have given greater emphasis to representations of migrants and the meanings they attach to their lived experiences and consequently, according to Erel and Kofman (2003: 73) researchers have to a certain extent neglected structural factors and migration policy.

Aims and Scope of the Paper

In my contribution, I thus try to demonstrate how migration policy is lived by individual migrants and more precisely, what the possible gendered effects of migration policy can be. In vein with a certain neglect of women's experiences in mainstream migration studies, I chose to focus on the migration experiences of women, more precisely, on the influences of restrictive migration policies in their everyday lives. In this vein, I examine the processes that (re)produce their multiple forms of marginalisation and exclusion in connection to their third-country nationals status (see also Anthias and Lazaridis, 2000: 1). I have chosen to analyse the experiences of women from the former Soviet Union living in Slovenia.¹ The main rationale behind the decision to study this group is that although

¹ I will partly utilise data I gathered in the framework of the international project 'FEMAGE - Needs for female immigrants and their integration in ageing societies' of the European Commission 6th Framework Programme

statistical data demonstrate that migration to Slovenia is primarily a male phenomenon, most migrants from Russia and Ukraine that are the most important countries of origin among the former Soviet Union states to Slovenia, are females. Furthermore, the prevailing discourse about women from the former Soviet Union is essentialised and stereotypical and does not take into account the diversity of their experiences. These are narrowed in public discourses to exotic dancers, prostitutes or mail order brides. The main representation of women from 'Eastern Europe', as Passerini et al. argue (2004: 19) is that they are victims or sexually threatening individuals endangering the social community. Such a discourse contains ideological connotations: as Slovenia is trying to establish itself symbolically as belonging to the 'Western European' countries and such an attempt to 'belong' is linked to the exclusion of all supposedly 'Eastern' and 'Balkan' elements (see also Zorn, 2003: 17).

I presume that neither gender nor ethnic group are homogenous categories and consequently examine the heterogeneity and complexity of individual experiences at the intersection of gender, ethnic group and socio-economic position. I therefore examine parts of life histories of female migrants, which demonstrate mutual linkages between their individual experience, and the social context in which they act (see also Cole and Knowles in Ward, 2007). I argue that the analysis of individual experience can reveal a great deal about the wider socio-political context of migration policy formation and implementation. I therefore assume that the widening of the EU and the opening of its external borders increase the differences between EU and third country nationals and contribute to vulnerability and insecurity among third-country migrants.

I would concur with researchers from the Peace Institute that have investigated the gender dimensions of migration policy in Slovenia within the framework of the project FEMIPOL - Integration of Female immigrants in labour market and society – policy assessment and policy recommendations (Pajnik et al., 2006a). They have argued that migration policy in relation to gender is formulated in a generalized manner without taking into account the specificity and vulnerability of women. Consequently, there exists a gap in studying the specific position of female migrants both in public policy and in research.

Both the interviews with key actors in migration policy within the framework of the FEMIPOL project (Pajnik et. al, 2006b) and the focus group with stakeholders in migration policy conducted within the FEMAGE project (Černič Istenič et al., 2007) reveal a surprisingly similar picture: the recognition of the specific position of female migrants has not yet been put on the agenda of migration policy stakeholders and women are conceptualised mainly as 'following' men that are seen as primary migrants. But what do the women themselves tell us about their migration and experiences in Slovenia?

Migrating to Slovenia

All my interlocutors migrated to Slovenia in the 'post-socialist period' that is after the break-up of the Soviet Union. Most of their stories could be classified as 'marriage migration stories'. For these women, it seems that getting married to a partner from Slovenia was the most important turning point in their lives. What many of these women challenged in their accounts, was the prevailing stereotype of Soviet women migrating to 'Western' or 'more developed' countries mostly for rational

economic motives in order to secure themselves 'a better life' than the one they had in their country of origin. Most of them thus explained that the reasons for their migration were by no means economic, as they had what they often termed a 'good life' (in terms of a job, accommodation, economic security) in Russia and Ukraine and most of them stated husbands (and later children) as the most important reason why they had chosen to come and why they plan to stay in Slovenia at all. They presented such a decision as not a carefully thought-out rational plan but more as a process of constant 'negotiation' and communication between both partners about their migration.

In addition, given the more restrictive tendencies in migration regimes (Schengen agreement, visa regimes for some non-EU citizens), marriage was not so much a matter of tradition, but more a matter of necessity and the precondition on the basis of which these women could gain a more permanent legal right to stay in Slovenia in the first place. Women from Russia and Ukraine who married a man with Slovene citizenship and moved to Slovenia were in a way inferiorised in relation to them due to their position as a migrant and their yet non-resolved legal status in the host country. This status was to a large extent depended on them staying married with their Slovene husband. None of our interviewees had actually experienced for example a divorce during the time their more permanent legal status in Slovenia was not yet determined, but many of them articulated this problem when referring to other women who found themselves in situations of such power inequalities between partners.

Another group were women who had come to Slovenia through contacts with other migrants i.e. social networks (e.g. Russian or Ukrainian people already living in Slovenia) who had invited them to come to Slovenia to work or in some cases to baby sit for their children. These women often recalled how they wanted to explore and see the world. They had not expressed this motive in economic terms, but more in terms of self-realisation, autonomy and freedom. However, coming to Slovenia to work (although sometimes with a tourist visa) was the easiest and often the only possible way for these women to enter Slovenia in the first place, although work was in their self-representation not a prevailing reason for migration. The major turning point for them was usually meeting their future husband and consequently staying in Slovenia on a more permanent basis. What is also of great importance is that women were usually reluctant to speak in much detail about their experiences while working in private households, i.e. in the private economy. This may point to the precariousness and instances of exploitation of third-country workers in the private economy, once again strongly connected to the restrictive tendencies in current EU migration regimes.

Some women came to Slovenia to study at the university, which was usually done through the initiative of their parents, who had already established some (usually business) links in Slovenia and had a fairly developed social network there. In this regard, their migration was often not framed as an entirely voluntary one. However, they also framed their migration in terms of self-realisation and possibilities for personal development, rather than stating study as the primary element in this process.

Integration and Inclusion in Slovenia

Female migrants reported on many problems and complications when applying for visas, permits, etc. ('narratives about papers, documents'), not only in Slovenia, but also in their home countries. Expenses for translations and acquiring all the necessary documents from their countries were a problem given the poor economic situation of many of them. Also problematic was gaining a

Schengen visa to travel to other EU countries, since Slovenia was not yet in the Schengen area at the time of the interviews. Travelling to neighbouring Croatia was also difficult. They also reflected on the cumbersome and lengthy procedures at the borders. One explained how policemen came to check whether she was actually living with her husband at her permanent address, since it was presumed that her marriage to a Slovene national might be 'fake'.

They also expressed a great concern over the issue of double citizenship, which they are presently not allowed to possess, except in exceptional cases, when having special merits for Slovenia. Another problem articulated by the interviewees arose if a woman already acquired Slovene citizenship, and had had to give up her Russian/Ukrainian citizenship. This was especially problematic if she chose to return to Russia or Ukraine, which could create further opportunities for her inferior position in terms of social, economic and political rights there. Giving up Russian or Ukrainian citizenship has many negative practical consequences for them: they need to obtain visas in order to visit Russia and/or Ukraine, and real estate issues (e.g. having property in Russia and Ukraine) become extremely complicated. Another problem was the recognition of their working years in Russia and Ukraine when exercising retirement rights in Slovenia, since bilateral agreements between countries have yet become ratified. The women I interviewed often articulated the 'vicious circle' of not being able to get a job without citizenship and the necessity of having sufficient economic means to support themselves in order to even obtain citizenship.

The deskilling (performing jobs that were beyond their educational qualifications, which were almost uniformly at a higher or university education level) and/or long periods of unemployment or doing occasional jobs after coming to Slovenia are characteristic of the situation of Russian and Ukrainian female migrants. This could be, at least partly, attributed to the fact that Slovene language is often a prerequisite for applying for jobs, especially those requiring higher educational and professional skills. Economic and other contacts with Russian speaking countries or for example jobs in translation and teaching the Russian language were often a good starting point for integration in the labour market in Slovenia. Many of these women were using their knowledge of Russian as an asset. Most of the women found jobs through social networks – i.e. through friends and colleagues. I talked to two women in self-employment. For one, self-employment was a strategy she resorted to after being unsuccessful in finding a job, for another one, regulating her work status as a third-country national was a prerequisite on the basis of which she could stay in Slovenia at all. My interviewees also resorted to doing occasional jobs, which were in some instances not legally regulated, like those in the service sector, e.g. in restaurants. Limited job opportunities and complicated and lengthy procedures for their legal employment in EU member states coupled with ethnic discrimination, produce instances of exclusion and delayed entry into the labour market which presents a significant obstacle in entering the labour market on a more permanent basis.

Conclusions

I would agree with Floya Anthias (2000: 21), that transnational movement of the population includes contradictory processes that contain mutually competitive discourses: the idea of human rights and equal treatment of all individuals is coupled with racisms and nationalisms experienced by individual migrants. Such a contradiction can be identified in EU discourses that promote rhetoric of freedom and openness on the one hand, and on the other, create new stratifications in terms of who is entitled to mobility and free movement across international (EU) borders (Passerini et al., 2004: 8).

It seems that a conservative, restrictive approach to migration management has contributed to an increasing insecurity and vulnerability of third-country nationals residing in the EU. The rights of marriage migrants in Slovenia are conceptualised mainly in relation to their partner, which can create opportunities for subordination of particular women. Stories of female migrants from the former Soviet Union point to some weaknesses of such a migration regime. Firstly, marriage is one of the few available options on the basis of which migrants can gain the right to reside in Slovenia on a more long-term basis in the first place. Such a model therefore favours a classical model of family life (marriage as an institution) over other forms of extra-marital community. Secondly, the rights of a spouse are linked to his/her partner, which can be potentially threatening in cases of divorce.

The procedures to obtain visas are complicated and lengthy and the recognition of pensions between the countries has not yet been arranged. The inability to gain dual citizenship can further hamper the transnational movements of migrants across national borders due to complicated visa procedures. Women also face a sort of 'cultural racism' based on stereotypical assumptions about women from the former Soviet Union. The 'sexualised' images of women from the former Soviet Union as exotic dancers and prostitutes that prevail in the 'general public' negatively affect their experiences both with border controls and in their integration into the new society.

Restricted job opportunities for third country nationals make working in the informal sector an important source of income, which creates further possibilities of exploitation. This is corroborated by the fact that female migrants coming to Slovenia to work in the domestic sector (e.g. babysitting) did not generally wish to talk a lot about their experiences. Coming to work to Slovenia is another option for migrants from third countries to gain legal residency in Slovenia. However, the meanings attributed to such a migration were usually not framed in economic terms by my collocutors. They spoke rather of the possibility for 'self-realisation', 'individual fulfilment' and 'gaining new experiences and insights'.

It is precisely for this reason that classical statistical typologies do not encapsulate the diversified nature of today's migration processes. A wide range of motives, often quite radically different from the statistically ascribed category (e.g. labour migrant) can be behind the process of migration. Furthermore, these motives and orientations change over the life-course. For example, meeting a partner in Slovenia was the turning point for some of these women, who had not initially planned to stay in Slovenia. Typologies, as Brettell maintains (2000: 102), present us with a static and homogenised picture of a process that differs widely among individuals and changes throughout time. And it is precisely through the collection of individual life stories that commonsensical, generalised and simplified interpretations of 'Others' that we are familiar with mostly through the media, can better be problematised and challenged.

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