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Female Migration to the East and to the West: the case of Belarus

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The subject of this research note is female migration from the Republic of Belarus. In Belarus, migration is still predominantly male. According to the current Belarusian statistics, men account for 87.8% of all labour migrants (the Ministry of Statistics, 2013). This situation is determined by market demands: the majority of Belarusian migrants go to Russia where the labour market requires men rather than women, and where men dominate among migrants from Belarus. However, female migration is gradually increasing.

The reasons for the feminization of migration

Until recently, human trafficking (including sex-industry) represented a sphere of migration that targeted predominantly women. Men prevailed in all other types of migration from Belarus. However, the situation in the global labour market is gradually changing. The growth of the service sector in the economies of developed countries has created a demand for corresponding types of activities (services), in which, as a rule, women are employed more often than men. As a result, in these countries "typically female employment sectors have emerged that are filled predominantly by women migrants from less developed countries," including the republics of the former Soviet Union (Tyuryukanova 2000). The growth of female migration takes place in Belarus, although presently these flows are statistically insignificant and poorly researched: rather, they merely indicate a new direction for the process of the inclusion of the country into globalization processes. Due to a lack of qualifications and poor proficiency in a language of a host country, women migrants from Eastern Europe have access primarily to low skilled occupations such as childcare or elderly people care, house cleaning, etc. These tendencies draw the attention of a number of researchers dealing with women migrants (Malysheva, Tyuryukanova 2000; Saarinen and Calloni 2012).

The phenomenon of female migration from Belarus is related not only to economic reasons but also to a number of other reasons, such as the desire to see the world and to improve the level of education. According to the surveys, the number of citizens who wish to travel abroad for work or who have already done so approaches 50% (Beliaev 2013). The statistics fail to provide data on the exact number of women who have actually emigrated. This is due to the situation when the statistics merely register the fact but not the cause of departure, and not even for all countries. The fact that particular segments of labour market in Belarus have recently being subject to a gender bias, which manifests itself in the lack of women, could be interpreted as an indirect confirmation of the growth of female migration. As of 01.01.2013, the number of women was 5,066 thousand, or 53.53% of the total population. In the meantime, a shortage of women is notable in rural areas, where only 24.5% of all women in the country reside (Ministry of Statistics 2013). They are more likely to leave the village than men.

The second issue related to female migration is the issue of education. Despite the lack of women in such segments of labour market as education and medicine, the number of educated women exceeds the number of educated men in Belarus. Amongst the working women, 54.6% have higher and secondary special education, while amongst men, 37.1% have this type of education, and the gap is increasing (in 2000, these figures were 48.7% and 32.8%, respectively). Thus, the growth of women's education stimulates higher expectations on the labour market. In the absence of corresponding salaries, it leads to the growth of dissatisfaction. This, in particular, is testified in the interviews with migrant women: female migrants from Grodno region who know the Polish language and have connections, found employment in Poland; while female migrants from Minsk found employment in Russia in a different capacity (trained school teachers have found employment as governesses in Moscow). Having found a better paid employment abroad, they have thereby increased their standard of living.¹

¹ In general, approximately 10% of female migrants go to Russia, while more educated women are inclined to try to leave for the European Union, even if they know they will not be employed according to their qualifications: their diplomas serve as a letter of recommendation for employment in the private service.

The third problem is employment. Women prevail among the employed population: they account for 51.1% of the economically active population, and 50.7% of them are employed. Men prevail among workers (56.3%), while women prevail in the services sector (68, 1%) (Ministry of Statistics 2013). Throughout the world, women are typically employed in the sectors with lower wages (Tyuryukanova 2000).

Low salaries are not always the main reason that stimulates female migration from Belarus. As it is evident from the interviews, in some cases migration is driven by the desire to improve their status, to increase the quality of life, as well by a drive to new, romantic and adventurous experiences that are inherent not only to men but also to women, particularly the young.

Migration to the West differs from migration to Russia in terms of gender. Amongst labour migrants who have left to work in the United States and Germany, the number of men and women is approximately the same, and the number of women is increasing (Belta 2013). The number of men and women who leave the country to change their place of permanent residence is also approximately the same (Beliaev 2013). In 2009, 48% of migrants who went abroad to be employed officially were women (Ministry of Statistics 2009).

The specificity of labour markets in different countries determines the gender-specific migration of Belarusians. According to a sample survey in 2012, women accounted for only 9.4% of migrants working in Russia, while their share in the other directions of migration (33.3%) was close to their share of the economically active population (49.5%) (Chubrik, Shimanovich 2013: 7).

During the post-Soviet period, several key directions of female migration became visible. Here, three streams of female migration from Belarus can be distinguished. While all three streams are numerically small, they share remarkably similar problems in each direction.

Female migration from Belarus to the countries of the European Union

According to the statistics, among the Belarusians who went to Italy, the difference in the number of men and women is three times (23.9% men and 76.1% women). These differences are mainly related to the fact that migrants go to Italy, as a rule, to work in the services sector, most often as servants in the houses of middle-class people, where women are of particular demand. After the procedure of employment in the U.S. has become more complicated than it used to be in the 1990s, Italy became the most attractive country for many female migrants from Belarus. This is evidenced by the average age of female workers: amongst the female Belarusians traveling to Italy, a high proportion of women aged over 40 years (48.7%) is present. This fact suggests that amongst those women who go to Italy, many find employment as domestic workers in families, although statistics on this matter are absent.

A similar pattern of female migration is observed in Lithuania, where the share of female migrants aged over 40 years is close to 50%. However, in case of Lithuania, the situation is more complicated: a number of registered Belarusian firms and public oppositional political organizations employ citizens of Belarus.

In general, according to the latest census, two-thirds of migrants (men and women) from Belarus travelled to the following 5 countries: Lithuania - 21.0%, Poland - 18.7%, the US - 8.5%, Germany - 8.3%, and Italy - 5.7%. The CIS countries are not included into this data set (Ministry of Statistics 2009).

If one compares the number of multiple-entry visas issued to Belarusians to enter Italy and Lithuania in 2010, their percentage of the total number of visas issued to these countries amounted to 87% and 36%, respectively. In 2011, the ratio was 67% and 34%, respectively. In 2011, Italy granted the highest number of multiple-entry visas to Belarusians. Poland granted the highest number of all types of visas to Belarusians (approximately 244 thousands of visas), and Lithuania came second (approximately 144 thousands of visas). The percentage of multiple-entry long-term visas issued by Poland amounted to more than 90% of all such visas issued by the countries of the European Union (Yelisyeu 2012: 7, 12). This is an indirect confirmation of temporary employment in these countries.

Germany is a popular country of destination for female Belarusians, especially for the purpose of marriage. The number of international marriages is steadily increasing. In 2010, 4,800 such marriages were concluded, and in 2011, their number exceeded 5,300. In 2010, 5.8% of marriages were concluded between persons where one spouse was a foreigner. A large number of women who marry foreigners come from Minsk: in 2011, about 25% of marriages registered in the Minsk City Wedding Palace were international (Kochetkova 2013). Germany is the most popular country. Its citizens marry Belarusian women more often than citizens of over fifty other countries around the world. As noted by journalist O. Mytko, some young females consider a marriage to a foreigner as a strike of luck. This is due to the fact that they believe that a foreign spouse will provide a good standard of living for his wife. This motif attracts young Belarusians to foreign suitors (Mytko 2012). Since Germany is known for its economic stability, women consider German candidates most appropriate and geared towards a serious relationship. An expression has emerged as a result - "to marry Germany." During the first ten years of the new millennium, nearly one third of all Belarusian emigrants went to Germany (excluding the CIS countries).

Brides from Belorussia have become popular amongst the Western suitors since the collapse of the Soviet Union. A significant number of women from the former Soviet countries were married in the United States and in the countries of the European Union through various marriage agencies. "Bride visa" became popular not only for marriage but also for "marriage tourism", when a woman traveled abroad at the invitation of a potential husband, who was found through a marriage agency, for a personal meeting. If not the marriage itself, then a trip abroad at the expense of the candidate seemed attractive. As of today, the interest in a marriage with a foreigner is again increasing. According to the program "La Strada", which works on problems of safe travel abroad, in 2011, the number of questions addressed to the "hot line" regarding marriages and family issues abroad increased significantly (17%). Germany occupied one of the first places as regards the number of calls. In 2012, the majority of over 2,000 calls addressed the issues of foreign marriages of female Belarusians (Guseva, 2013).

The majority of today's Belarusian brides are predominantly young urban women with tertiary education. On this basis, the emigration of women in this category was termed the loss "of highly educated brides." In addition, young educated Belarusians are also oriented towards employment in Germany. Thus, 77% of women who went to work in Germany in 2011 were aged 20-39 years. According to L. P. Shakhot'ko, young women prevail in the category of migratory losses of persons with tertiary education. The expert links these losses to a number of factors: 1) a significant outflow of young educated women into the countries of Western Europe and America for permanent residence; 2) their departure with a fiancé visa. "Belarus is becoming the supplier of brides for Western countries", states the expert (Shakhot'ko 2011: 140).

Regardless of numbers and reasons for traveling abroad (labour or marriage), this is a precarious trend because it suggests the increase in the total loss of most highly educated young Belarusian citizens. In the conditions of declining fertility rates, such losses of individuals with higher education will have an impact on Belarus in the long term, if not immediately. The highest proportion of women with tertiary education is amongst those traveling to Germany and the United States, that is, to those countries where migration is likely to be permanent.

Migration to Russia

Russia ranks first among countries where Belarusian women go for marriage. Germany and Italy occupy the second and the third places, respectively. According to the Ministry of the Interior, in 2012, Russia headed the list of countries where Belarusians were subjected to sexual exploitation (Guseva, 2013). According to the Ministry of the Interior, private persons and organizations in Russia, Poland, Germany and other countries provide Belarusian females with opportunities for marriage and employment. These opportunities, however, might also entail a possibility of sexual slavery.

Particularly in case of the Russian Federation, women face fraud or violence. According to the program "La Strada", 70% of cases of exploitation of Belarusians occurred on the territory of the Russian Federation (Belarusians ... 2012).

The reasons behind the fact that young Belarusians fall victims to sexual slavery abroad include their ignorance of the law, naivety, and skillfulness of traffickers. As the data collected by the experts of "La Strada" testify, at the time of recruitment 84.6% of victims were unemployed / not enrolled into any educational institution. They have also assessed their financial situation as poor. Additionally, 70% of reported cases of human trafficking, whose victims have turned to the program for help, took place in Russia (BelTA 2012).

Because human trafficking is simultaneously a form of illegal migration, its analysis is extremely important. In many countries, the scale of trafficking depends on the degree of unemployment and poverty of the population, and the value of labour migration. Belarus does not fall within this rule. According to a special study conducted in five post-socialist republics (Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, Bulgaria and Romania), "in Ukraine and Belarus, the level of human trafficking was disproportionately high relative to the level of labour migration" (Human ... 2006: 4). According to these data, labour migration from Belarus accounts for approximately 8% (less than any of the other four countries). With regard to human trafficking, among the five countries surveyed, Belarus occupied the third place after Ukraine and Moldova (Human ... 2006: 5). The reasons for this situation are not fully identified.

As regards the scale of legal labour migration of female Belarusians to Russia, comprehensive data are absent due to the fact that Russia and Belarus are part of the Union State, where a mandatory registration inside the alliance is absent. Following the general migration statistics, one can assume that the number of female migrants in Russia does not exceed 10%.

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