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Does Mobility within the dentities? The Case of Slovak Migrants in the London Region

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Abstract

This working paper sets out to understand the impact of the free intra-EU mobility and national belonging on shaping the identities of young migrants within the European Union (EU), with a particular case-study of Slovak migrants in the London area. Through exploration of the individual journeys and stories of 19 young Slovak migrants, the paper explores how the process of migration and mobility impacts
belonging, as well as the role that their national identity and citizenship plays in this process. Results empirically demonstrate that free movement and expanded mobility have on the whole not eroded the distinct national identities and citizensh

impacted their self-identification in any way. The

After the split, both nations had to, at least to some extent, redefine their identities. This was easier for the Czech Republic, that historically had a more rooted national identity, than it was for Slovakia. Indeed, this was one of the arguments of Slovak nationalists who requested the split from the Czech Republic in order to create a true Slovak national identity. Czechs and Slovaks were always two different nations with their own separate identities despite being politically incorporated into one state. Their independence thus did not significantly compromise their respective national identities but merely transformed political lives in their countries. The re-established borders did not have any strong effects on migratory

Transnational experience thus allows migrants to grow and maintain bonds to both the country of origin and the country of settlement. As such, some scholars have begun to argue

terminology seek to normalise free movement and intra-European mobility in order to encourage Europeans to adopt a distinct European identity (McCann and Finn 2006).

The idea of a European citizenship is central to the Europeanisation process of integration, cohesion and harmonisation and it encourages mobility, nowadays taken almost for granted over the past decade and more. Nonetheless, celebrating mobility is not always well-received by nationalists. The evident growth of populist right-wing parties across Europe and the recent Brexit event that was largely fuelled by anti-immigrant sentiment demonstrate the extent to which nationalist feelings prevail, even in a supranational setting such as the EU. The next section will discuss what postnational theory says about the concept of citizenship.

Citizenship and national identity in postnational theory

1992a: 289). As such, citizenship can help in conceptualising how identities and belongings are

et al. 2005: 7). This means that it is not simply a political and legal status, but also a dynamic socio-cultural process that consists of rights and status as well as identity (Joppke 2007). Werbner and Yuval-Davis (1999: 4) defined citizenship as a

or the French restrictions of *jus soli*

non-graduate workers. Table 1 summarises the main socio-demographic characteristics of the 19 interviewees.

Table 1 asic characteristics

Gender	**Age**	**Education status**	**Year of arrival to the UK**
M - 7 F - 12	20-25 - 2 25-30 - 5 30-35 - 8 30-39 - 4	current students - 5 graduates - 5 non-graduates - 9	2000-2004 - 5 2005-2009 - 5 2010-2016 - 9

Interviews were conducted in an informal manner and were loosely structured and divided into several different sections: personal and family background, migration history and motivations, employment experiences in migration, life satisfaction, identity issues, social inclusion, travel and remittances, policies for migrants and future plans.[4] For the purpose of this thesis, I chose to focus predominantly on the emotional data included in the identity issue section where the notions of home and belonging were addressed. The sections on motivation for migration and future plans were also analysed as they reflect -identification as migrants.

Data analysis

Interviews were analysed in an interpretivist paradigm that aims to understand the lived experiences and qualitative aspects of migration; an approach that focuses on meanings rather *et al.* 2007: 19). First the transcripts were read with an aim to pinpoint sections that are related to identities, belonging and self-representation of migrants. The second stage involved re-reading the transcripts in order to capture and summarise common themes that surfaced from individual interviews. Lastly, the data was integrated into the text in order to demonstrate the broader implications. Through examples and quotations of migrants themselves, this paper reflects on some of the concepts commonly referred to in postnational theory and transnationalist approaches such as *citizenship*, *rights*, *identity* and *belonging*.

Given the informal nature of the interviews and my own position as a Czech student-migrant living in the UK, I was perceived 1980: 56), which made respondents keen on sharing their stories. Hence, there were no difficulties encountered during the process of collecting the data. It is worth mentioning that since Czech Republic and Slovakia used to be one country, these now separate nationalities maintain very close relations due to their shared history, similar culture and mutually intelligible languages. As such, I did not encounter any issues with the language or confidentiality in this low-risk research. Aware of the possible biases my own identity as a Czech migrant could bring to this research, I used

[4] These were the categories of questions and themes prescribed in the YMOBILITY project interview schedule, which I used for the dissertation on which this working paper is based.

the translated and transcribed text

subconsciously formed (Spradley 1980: 55).

In addition, short follow-up questionnaires regarding the results of Brexit referendum were designed to collect feedback on re Slovak citizenship-holders living in the UK in the aftermath of Brexit. Eleven out of the 19 respondents were able to return this questionnaire to me on time. In line with the continuation of the discussion presented above, the rest of the paper will focus on the development of identity and belonging as analysed by the 19 Slovak migrants living in the UK.

Migration trajectories

Motivations to migrate

The circumstances under which people decide to leave their home country play an important role in how they give

Petra (37): Well, I met my boyfriend then and he always wanted to go abroad and learn English. So, he sort of persuaded me to join him. So, I joined him three months after he

Twelve years later, Petra works as an office manager after completing her BA degree at a UK University and is considering buying a house in Oxfordshire with her (now) husband. These stories demonstrate that the causes and circumstances of migration are not static and often change. Furthermore, the temporary mind-set -identification. Eva, who came in 2007 after she finished her MA degree in Slovakia and now works as an office assistant,
UK for nine years:

V: At what age did you migrate?

Eva (33):

was more like a trip. You know, in the sense that you want to earn some money but also have an experience. But it's definitely not migration because I was never planning to stay here this long. The initial plan was to stay here for three months and then to go somewhere else.

the rights of free movement and settlement are some of the aspects that allowed my respondents to differentiate themselves from those whom they saw as migrants in the conventional, negative sense.

The reluctance over the term migrant might also be a result of the Slovak language and the communist history of the country. The word *emigrant* is, still today, strongly associated with people who were fleeing political prosecution when Slovakia was a part of the Eastern bloc. The word *migrant* is thus not commonly used to refer to modern migration as we know it

which certainly has an impact on their self-identification. The following section examines whether migrants experience a shift from a national to a European level of self-identification.

Remaining in England – reflections on belonging and identity

Leaving the home country and settling in a host country, whether temporarily or permanently, o

2015: 3). Living away from home thus comes with certain risks and disadvantages. The most frequently cited shortcomings of migration mentioned by the informants were detachments from their support networks, being away from family and friends, losing time with ageing parents, leaving everything behind and having to start from the beginning. However, despite realising the downfalls of migration, participants were also aware of the advantages that their experience brought. These included particularly the advancement of social soft skills such as coming into contact with their own independence, being forced to rely on themselves, taking responsibility for their own lives, and gaining more resilience in comparison with their peers left behind, who are more dependent on social networks.

The new skills, social interactions and experiences lead to a dialectic interplay between -representation and social categorisation, which in turn changes their values and re-negotiates their identities (La Barbera 2015: 3). Nonetheless, the detachment from family and friends especially in the early stage of migration can lead to feeling isolated or socially excluded, which does not reflect the idealised image of the receiving country that migrants often form before their arrival. Therefore, migrants may t and

(La Barnera 2015: 3). Consequently, when migrants visit or return to their home country again, they can often experience a disillusionment with

idealization and disillusionment both in the receiving country and in the country of origin, [that]

La Barbera 2015: 3). This condition was indeed expressed by many of my respondents, when reflecting on their sense of belonging.

Eva (33):

belong anywhere. Well, maybe not anywhere but more

Gabika (30):

between those two countries and those two cultures. So I am no longer a Slovak, but I

but in such a way that makes me not fit i

a responsibility to the nation-state.

The impact of intra-EU mobility on migrants' identities

reference to the national identity, which again suggests that identity and space are indeed incontestably linked.

Imrich (36):

Ondrej (31):

the moment, it seems that their lives in Britain are unaffected if they remain EU citizens,

uncertainty. The post-Brexit sample findings revealed that, although migrants feel disappointed, they do not necessarily feel that their right to remain in the UK is threatened, at least for the time being. This suggests that they in fact attribute their rights not only to European citizenship alone, but to democratic and liberal norms of the British government. Moreover, the UK government has released a statement in the Slovak language that there has been no change to the rights and status of EU nationals in the UK as a result of the referendum, ensuring those who have been in the UK for over five years an automatic permanent right to reside, with no need to register for any documentation to confirm their status (Gov.uk 2016). According to this

It remains to be seen what changes Brexit will bring for those EU nationals living in the UK. However, for the time being, it appears that the initial wave of panic is over and their migration trajectories, rights and identities continue to be unaffected by Brexit thus far. There is, however, a lot of uncertainty surrounding Brexit and to comprehensively understand its identity and sense of belonging would require further research revisiting the question once the negotiations are over.

Conclusion

This paper has investigated the extent to which Slovak migrants living in the UK shape their identities and senses of belonging through the expanded mobility that their European citizenship allows. My research aim was to assess the transnational intra-EU migration and mobility processes together with the continuous role of the nation-state and national citizenship -identifications and notions of belonging.

I gave a historical overview of Slovak nation-state formation in order to demonstrate the creation of a national identity through the struggle for national self-determination, which influenced the citizenship legislations that are, until today, intertwined with a perception of nationality as territorial belonging. While citizenship can be officially understood simply as the attachment to the state at the institutional level, I have empirically demonstrated how the nation-state discourse makes people imagine they belong to a national community with a shared culture and values.

This has given a better context to my research question and argument against the claims of postnational scholarship that attributes rights to supranational organisations and the universal human rights discourse and, as such, diminishes the value of national citizenship (Jacobson 1997; Soysal 1994).

My study has argued that rights are still primarily derived from the national laws of sovereign nation-states, and institutionalised through the concept of national citizenship that allows states to expand or extract rights of migrants through the politics of sovereignty and citizenship. This points out that states are sovereign actors that are capable of closing as well as opening their doors to migrants, and that the citizenship regimes of both host and sending countries , that consequently shape their senses of belonging and identity.

The nation-state discourse contradicts the inclusiveness created by European membership and mobility, as it functions to reproduce nationalist discourses which prevent migrants from getting detached from their home country. On the other hand, the inclusiveness of a European citizenship that gives EU migrants legal status, allows migrants to develop multiple belongings and to maintain temporary mind-set, as well as enabling them to differentiate themselves from migrants in the conventional negative sense created by the national discourse.

European citizenship allows Slovak migrants in the UK not only to stay, but also to develop a feeling of belonging in England, while simultaneously sustaining their national identity and close links with the country of origin. These multiple allegiances create an of not yet belonging here but no longer there (La Barbera 2015). Young Slovak migrants are thus presented with both opportunities and barriers to belonging.

The freedom of movement for EU members seems to be having an impact on how migrants understand their belonging. M thus cannot be understood

hegemonic cultural norms and values and categories of both the receiving country and the (La Barbera 2015: 7).

The post-Brexit findings further revealed that migrants senses of belonging and identity have not been affected, at least thus far, as they

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