Migration, Ethnicity and Solidarity: 'MultinationalWorkers' in the Former Soviet Union

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Abstract

We investigate migrant construction workers' experiences in the Former Soviet Union, examining their attitudes to other ethno-national groups, unions and collective action. Industrial relations and migration studies view migrant workers hypermobility and diversity, under conditions of low union coverage and rising nationalism, as potentially obstructing consciousness raising and mobilizing. Workers participating in our study faced unions indifference, ethno-national segregation and discrimination. Managerial abuses, informality and contestation from below led to spontaneous mobilisation. Lack of institutional channels to solve these disputes drove them into further mobility. However, complex mobility trajectories and collective action translated into increased awareness of collective interests and rejection of nationalist ideologies. The outcome is a 'multinational worker' potentially resistant to nation-state politics and capital's logics but also aware of the values and usefulness of collective solidarities. Thus, previous arguments uniquely associating exit with individualistic attitudes, and post-socialist legacies with workers' quiescence present only partial pictures.

Keywords: migration, labour mobility, solidarity, post-socialism, construction.

Introduction

We investigate migrant workers' experiences in construction in the Former Soviet Union (FSU). We examine their attitudes to social relations at work with workers of other nationalities in a highly ethnically segregated industry, and their views and experiences of unions and collective action, asking what conditions and processes affect their consciousness development. These concerns arise from significant recent debates on union organizing among migrant workers in which a central issue is under what conditions solidarity is forged by unions (Hardy 2015: 188, Marino *et al.* 2015: 1). Workers' consciousness is equated to inclusive solidarity understood as the recognition of common interests among different segments of the workforce. We examine these workers partly because of their reported significant resistance to union organizing efforts (Berntsen 2016; Danaj *et al.* 2018; Rosewarne 2013).

Discussion has recently focused on workers' culture and identity as factors influencing the construction of solidarities (Tapia and Alberti 2018). Cases of successful organizing demonstrate that, even under conditions of social segregation, ethno-cultural difference does not prevent awareness raising or mobilization. However, these arguments are in tension with more sceptical institutionalist scholarship. This posits a vicious cycle whereby low collective bargaining coverage and exclusive solidarities exacerbate divisions (Doellgast *et al.* 2018: 20), as exemplified by the individualistic strategies of hyper-mobile Eastern European construction workers in Western countries (Berntsen 2016; Danaj *et al.* 2018). Cognate contributions highlight how divisions are promoted by the spread of nationalism during neoliberal restructuring (Hardy 2015; Hürtgen 2014, Žuk and Žuk 2018). While worker agency may potentially answer these challenges, it remains a nascent area of research (Doellgast *et al.* 2018: 10). We seek to develop this area by casting further light on migrant workers' perceptions.

Our approach draws on notions of transnational 'mobility power' and of 'multinational worker'. The mobility power concept has been developed within labour process theory (LPT) to challenge reductive characterisations of mobility strategies as mere individual exit

(Thompson and Smith 2009: 913; Smith 2006: 390). Applying the concept to transnational labour migration, some sociologists have argued that 'workers use their transnational exit power to defy employers' assumptions about their availability to work under poor conditions' (Alberti 2014: 865). Similarly, Andrijasevic and Sacchetto's (2016: 226) 'multinational worker' concept explains how workers experiencing international migration are becoming less nationally-bounded in their practice and mentalities.

The FSU region is especially appropriate for exploring conditions affecting cross-ethnic solidarity development. The FSU focus allows the debates' extension to non-western spaces where the nation-state remains fragile (Panarin 2016: 7-15). First, FSU migration is exceptionally high in global terms and temporary labour mobility prevails within it (Mukomel 2014). Second, FSU republics deploy aggressive forms of ethno-nationalism against migrants (Morrison and Cretu 2018; Mukomel 2014:7). Moldova, where research participants originate, has significant migration flows, especially in construction, (Mosneaga 2015; Smith *et al.* 2018) and intensified nationalism, being dubbed 'a notorious case of heavy-handed and callous nation-building' (Van Meurs 2015: 191).

The remainder of the article is structured as follows. First, we delineate our theoretical framework and research question, and provide historical context to FSU labour mobility. After introducing our method, the empirical sections analyse workers' accounts of, respectively, restructuring and migration from Moldova, labour relations and ethnic discrimination, mobility experiences and inter-ethnic solidarities in Russia. Concluding, we define our contributions and identify limitations.

Labour migrant identities, consciousness and solidarities

The global rise of precarity and the decline of industrial workers' traditions of collective organisation and action has caused some IR scholars to focus on workers' identity and identification processes (Tapia and Alberti 2018). Ethnicity and nationality can be used by employers and workers alike to define and reinforce labour market boundaries (Berntsen 2016), or by ethnic-based organisations to build inclusive movements across such divides (Alberti 2014). However, ethnicity is increasingly perceived as a major societal divide exacerbating inter-worker interest-based conflicts (Hardy 2015). Large scale research at European level suggests that increasing temporary migrant employment establishes a vicious cycle between particularistic identities and unions' exclusive strategies (Doellgast *et al.* 2018: 20). Studies of western unions' attitudes to migrants confirm that they declare solidarity but retain national outlooks and are lukewarm on upholding migrants' rights (Marino *et al.* 2015). Post-socialist countries' unions are strongly influenced by neoliberal ideologies (Danaj *et al.* 2018: 221), and are particularly weak both on migrant worker issues (Žuk and Žuk 2018) and international co-operation (Hardy 2015). In institutionalist accounts, wider union coverage and workers' common identities are widely seen as key to promoting solidarities. Institutions feature as the main source of labour's power and inclusive solidarity (Doellgast *et al.* 2018: 10-21).

A recent theoretical contribution exposes persistent limitations in unions' and academic views of migrant experiences (Alberti and Però 2018: 4-6). Mainstream scholarship remains centred on formal institutions focusing on fixed places and identities, in stark contrast with the spatially and experientially transient lives of migrant and temporary workers. These static approaches frequently use rigid ethnic categorizations which can generate implicit racialization of actors. Such impoverished analytical frameworks do not address unions' failure to recognise migrants' strategic potential value in their revitalization. It has already been argued that 'the analytical lens needs to move from an exclusive focus on institutions to the agency of workers'

(Hardy 2015: 197). Yet migrants'' subjective experience, a key determinant of agency, has until recently remained marginal to mainstream IR research (Doellgast *et al.* 2018: 9-10).

We meet these challenges by embracing multidisciplinary approaches which call for detailed examinations of the cultural processes and web of relationships in which migrants participate (Alberti and Però 2018; Tapia and Alberti 2018). Migration and ethnic studies' contributions are essential to this project for their critique of 'methodological nationalism' (Amelina and Faist 2012: 1709-10). Scholars recognize that the internationalization of capital and recruitment chains have produced a transnational workforce in construction (Rosewarne 2013). Insights of migrants' own views show that transnational mobility is not merely experienced but chosen. These critiques are associated with an intersectional sensitivity (Tapia and Alberti 2018: 3,5) which helps to appreciate migrant status's distinctiveness and its variations across multiple dimensions other than employment (Tapia and Alberti 2018). Intersectional approaches are best combined with a full appreciation of processes (Mooney 2016).

How has this emerging school of theorizing affected understandings of conditions under which inclusive solidarities arise? Migrants emerge as a distinct but non-homogenous category of workers. Multiple inequalities can hamper unionization but it is migrants' own experiences and perceptions which ultimately affect mobilization. Empirical studies of successful organizing show how shared multiple intersections of class and ethnicity may sustain consciousness-raising and collective mobilization (Alberti and Però 2018). However, some comparative employment studies view these conclusions critically (Danaj *et al.* 2018; Hardy 2015). Consciousness-raising celebrated in successful mobilization cases are characterised as 'exceptional' occurrences (Danaj *et al.* 2018: 221). Focusing on 'post-communist' construction workers, these studies find that labour market and workplace integration may lead to unionisation without developing a 'union consciousness'. Acceptance

of precariousness including informal employment is seen as a key barrier to such development (Bonner and Spooner 2011). While some researchers interpret it as adaptation to given labour market conditions (Bernsten 2016: 418), others argue for 'individualistic strategies of flexibility and compliance with the demands of employers' (Danaj et al 2018: 220-221). Here, unions' 'solidarity logic' is contrasted with a migrant 'individualist-instrumentalist outlook' informed by post-socialist legacies. Our evidence challenges this view.

At another level, researchers' shifts from organizations to organizing have insufficiently refocused analyses from empirical studies of collective bargaining in host countries to shared experiences of transnational mobility. The focus on national level organizing discounts the potential for 'global' solidarity to be found among migrants (Žuk and Žuk 2018: 112). Also, 'path-dependency' notions of insurmountable cultural differences remain largely unchallenged (Hürtgen 2014: 213). Yet a study of conflict and change in labour processes has already disagreed with 'path-dependency' arguments by underscoring post-socialist workers' ability to draw creatively on legacies to collectively defend their interests (Morrison *et al.* 2012).

Legacy arguments link individualism to rejection of 'totalitarian' institutions (Crowley 2002) and habituation to informality. Historically, union-sponsored soviet collectives, teams encompassing all workers in a workplace, functioned as control tools but also existed as sites of resistance (Schwartz 2004). The harmonious 'labour collective' construct upheld by paternalist managers helps to explain worker's 'patience' during transition (Ashwin 1999). Research into post-socialist unions has established that the latter can link to these forms to forge 'a strong collective force' (Morrison *et al.* 2012: 332). However, lacking independent representation soviet workers primarily resorted to highly individualised, informal bargaining resulting in high turnover (Filtzer 1994) which has further expanded and internationalised during transition (Morrison and Cretu 2018). Informal bargaining has shifted in employers'

favour but remains a contested terrain which does not preclude collective action (Morris 2017). Mobility power explores the relationship between these combinations of exit and voice.

We therefore take labour migrant's perspectives as our point of departure to address these divergent arguments on workers' attitudes to collective action and unions. Notions of 'mobility power' (Smith 2006) and 'transnational exit' (Alberti 2014) underpin our approach in relation to multinational workers. 'Mobility power' has been used to analyse mobility as a 'possible terrain of resistance' (Alberti 2014: 866) and 'a political field to investigate the making of the figure of the multinational worker' (Andrijasevic and Sacchetto 2016: 221). Here we examine the possible emergence of 'multinational workers', construing migrants as potentially resistant to capital's logics and nation states' politics (Meeus 2013). The nature of migrant worker subjectivities has been indicated but requires further specification than previously achieved. In Andrijasevic and Sacchetto (2016), their participants, post-socialist migrants employed in Foxconn's Czech assembly plant, faced workplace segregation and the hostility of a union solely intent on protecting local employees' interests. However, we know little about attitudes to nationality or ethnicity among them. At present, the concept suggests that multinational workers gain familiarity with international employment but also maximise their individual positions. Therefore their modes of operation may appear similar to those of individualistic entrepreneurs (Voß and Pongratz 1998) as in Danaj *et al.* (2018). A wider account of the 'multinational worker' idea (attitude to nationalism, inclusive solidarities, collective actions and union membership) as reflected in worker consciousness therefore becomes an important issue.

These contrasting findings and arguments constitute the background to our research question: What conditions and processes shape our participants' experiences of and attitudes to workers of other nationalities, unions and collective action in a highly segregated environment and, specifically, how post-socialist legacies and their migration trajectories affect

their consciousness development? The answers carry implications for the prospects of overcoming competitive transnationalism, construed by Hürtgen (2014) as a formidable obstacle to developing a European labour consciousness.

FSU migration, Russian construction and Moldova's restructuring

Migration processes, workers' subjectivities and Russian policies directed at them, have been informed by the long history of mobility across the Eurasian space (Panarin 2016). Their full appreciation requires exploring the relationship between top-down policies of nationality and mobility and bottom-up turnover strategies from the late-soviet period (Chudinovskikh and Denisenko 2017).

In the USSR, restrictions to personal mobility aimed at limiting the influx of rural labourers to cities rather than at controlling national groups (Brubaker 1994: 54). Lacking access to collective bargaining, workers used mobility power and exploited labour shortages to circumvent state job allocation (Morrison 2007). The *propiska*, or compulsory residence system, denied non-permanent residents access to social security, recasting these workers as 'second class' citizens or 'limitchiki' (Filtzer 1994: 27-30). The USSR's dissolution turned formerly soviet workers into 'illegal migrants' (Kozina *et al.* 2004). The present control system strongly reflects these antecedents.

In 2015, Russia hosted over eleven million international migrants although only a fraction is recorded in official statistics (Chudinovskikh, and Denisenko 2017). Estimates for 'irregular' migrants averaged 5-6 million in 2011 (IOM 2017). Most migrants are young males from FSU countries using the visa-waiving system allowing a three-month stay, extendable to one year upon purchase of self-employment permits. A job-rotation system builds on this

scheme, whereas workers leave Russia once their permits expire to be replaced by friends or relatives. These breaks, lasting up to several months, allow workers to recuperate and seek alternative employment but delay career progression and re-settlement. Migrants' coping strategies rely mainly on informal networks and on living transnationally (Mukomel 2014: 138–161). In the last decade, migrants' ethnic and socio-cultural composition has changed rapidly. Migrants tend to be younger, less educated and from rural areas in Muslim Central Asia as opposed to earlier skilled workers of European origin. Russian sources estimate migrant employment by sector at 33% for trade, 26.8% for construction and 17% for private and social services (Mukomel 2014: 85).

The migrant worker condition is primarily determined by two factors: growing 'migrantophobia' and informal employment. Hostility towards migrants plays a fundamental ideological role: migrants, non-Slavic groups and 'cultural others', represent 'outsiders' to unify a nation in 'desperate' need of consolidation (Mukomel, 2014: 3). Russian migration scholarship, however, explains how migrantophobia is nuanced because Russia's population still includes 100 ethnic groups whose identity is informed by multiple legacies (Panarin 2016: 7–15). FSU migrants still view Russia as a 'common house', a transnational space open to all FSU citizens irrespective of current nationality (Vorobyova and Topilin 2014: 176). Migrants confront a dual labour market characterised by high levels of informality and correspondingly high turnover (Barsukova 2015). They are mostly employed in manual jobs with non-standard work schedules, low pay and harsh working conditions (Tartakovskaya and Vanke 2019). Informal skilled migrants achieve higher wages than formally employed Russians but are exposed to non-payment of wages and summary dismissal (Mukomel 2014). Employers' reluctance to declare migrant employees turns legal migrants into illegal workers susceptible to police harassment and deportation.

Construction has the highest concentration of migrant and informal workers (Karabchuk and Zabirova 2018). In 2016, construction employed 6.3 million across approximately half a million enterprises or 10% of all registered businesses (RossStat 2017: 93, 192). Its labour market displays ethno-national segregation. Trade Union membership has dwindled to two hundred thousand (Builders' Federation of Russia 2019). A small minority of Russian residents enjoy formal employment while internal and FSU migrants are subjected to a downwardly-graduated set of provisions (Morrison *et al.* 2014). The system remains fluid as new waves of different nationalities join the labour market. Ukrainian and Moldovan workers enter through transnational networks organised in brigades, nationally-based labour collectives headed by 'brigadiers'. The 'brigade leader' recruits people, oversees their work on site and is responsible for meeting targets and paying cash wages. Intermediaries play a crucial role in regulating employment but are blamed for abuses (Human Rights Watch 2009). Labour relations are governed by individualised practices. Unions are either impotent or indifferent towards migrants' plight; Russian unions call for tighter quotas on labour immigration (Builders' Federation of Russia 2019).

Moldovan context

Moldova is a former soviet republic and one of Europe's poorest countries. Migrant remittances as a proportion of GDP are the highest in Europe. In the 1990s, an ethnically-based civil war followed by commercial battles with Russia strained relations at inter-state level and between national groups (UNDP 2014; Van Meurs 2015). In agriculture, reforms disbanded collective farms, fragmenting land-holding, but failed to attract sustainable investments, depriving rural people of decent jobs (Gorton 2001). Gradual integration with the EU has prompted significant cross-border exchange but has failed to ameliorate working conditions

(Smith *et al.* 2018:1). Privatisation attracts foreign investors seeking advantage from a weak state, widespread poverty and the availability of a relatively skilled and vulnerable workforce. (Morrison and Croucher 2010).

Foreign investments have contributed to enforcing highly exploitative industrial regimes (Smith *et al.* 2018). Unions' timid bargaining drives provoke systematic attempts at expelling them from workplaces. These processes stimulate labour outflows (Mosneaga 2015). Despite significant cases of collective resistance, the predominant response is turnover and emigration (Morrison *et al.* 2012). In 2012, according to Moldova's border-crossing data, approximately eight hundred thousand Moldovans (every fourth country resident) were abroad. The FSU remains the dominant destination with 63% of all Moldovan migrants. Short-term labour migration prevails, with 59% of them leaving for up to twelve months (Mosneaga 2015: 6). Young males move north and east, predominantly to construction. Women's migration is primarily western-oriented, to employment in care and services. Out-migration is strongest from the countryside, accounting for 72% of migrants (UNDP 2014).

Method

We employed a multi-sited ethnographic approach (Amelina and Faist 2012). The research aimed at establishing dialogues with participants and at making comprehensive sense of their views (Morrison and Sacchetto 2018). Data collection consisted of interviews with 36 worker participants and 12 gatekeepers and experts, supplemented by observation of daily life in and out of workplaces. Fieldwork was conducted in participants' places of origin and in the Moscow region. In Moldova, we made three residential visits lasting three weeks each (summer 2010, winter 2012, and spring 2014); while a month long stay in Moscow occurred in 2010, followed by shorter visits in 2012 and 2016.

In Moldova, three villages were chosen for their high rate of migration, ethno-national diversity (Ukrainian, Moldovan and Russian) and multiple migratory destinations. Villages also operate as 'multilocality' (Heusala and Aitamurto 2017), transnational recruitment centres for the construction industry offering information and job opportunities. Participants were recruited through a snowballing process suitable for identifying links between individuals involved in migrant networks and the social relations between them. Most interviews took place in home villages where workers recuperated, allowing relaxed interactions. Following these network contacts, researchers moved to Moscow to interview settled migrants from the villages and approach local workers and gatekeepers.

In-depth interviews were conducted in Russian, Moldovan and Ukrainian with male migrant construction workers, between 2009 and 2012. The participant selection criteria included age (accounting for soviet and post-soviet generations), different types of mobility experience, varied migratory destinations and occupation. A mix of married and unmarried participants helped explore household involvement in decision-making. Migrants' immediate families, where they existed, were included in interviews. Interviews took a life-history approach centred on migrants' strategies, their experiences at work and throughout the migration process.

In addition, one-off interviews were also held in Moscow and Chisinau (Kishinev) with academics from the Russian Academy of Sciences (RAN), Moldova State University and also with labour activists and representatives of national trade unions affiliated to both countries' mainstream union confederations. Industry gatekeepers included an entrepreneur, three managers and two intermediaries. In the case of our expert interviews, information was sought about manager-worker relations and the industry context; in the case of unions, their perceptions of migration and their attitudes and policies were investigated. All interviews were transcribed and subsequently coded by the researcher who conducted them according to

participants' biographies, migratory experiences and our research question. The transcripts and their coding were discussed and analysed by the members of the authorial team. Two tables are provided showing, respectively, participants' characteristics and exemplary arguments on solidarity and collective bargaining. References at the end of quotations refer to their pseudonyms and where they were interviewed.

Table 1. Migration and employment profile of Research Participants

Migration experience (years)		1-4	5-9	10+	Total
		8	7	12	27
Type of migration	Occasional/seasonal	5	1	1	7
	Circular/Few employers/destinations	1	1	0	2
	Circular/Few employers/Multiple destinations	2	1	3	6
	Circular/Multiple employers/destinations	0	3	8	11
	Internal Migrant	0	1	0	1
Type of employment	Informal	6	2	3	11
	Mostly informal	0	3	4	7
	Retired/Mostly informal	0	0	2	2
	Formal/individual contract	1	0	1	2
	Formal	0	0	1	1
	Self-employed	0	1	1	2
	Formal/envelop wage	1	1	0	2
Migrant Status	Illegal/fake registration	2	1	0	3
	Individual/guest registration	4	4	3	11
	Individual work permit/patent	1	1	3	5
	Employer registration/work permit	1	0	3	4
	Russian cit./family member	0	1	3	4
Skills/professions	Skilled builder	3	2	2	7
	Skilled builder+other trades	2	2	4	8
	Skilled builder+qualified worker	3	3	6	12

Table 2. Arguments of participants on solidarity and collective bargaining

Conditions/processes	Worker outlook/perceptions (number of similar responses)			
	N.	Individualist/exclusive	N.	Collective/inclusive
Collective disputes	12	If they do not pay we leave that's it. Arguing is pointless; then again whom would you complain to? Aleks	15	I am not against strikes but need to have a purpose. People strike for their rights, their needs. Gregory
Trade unions	9	I know nothing about unions. Valentin	6	There are no trade unions over there [Russia]; in Europe they defend [workers]. Here they do not exist – if only we saw them. They existed before and did something; they might help somehow, though not in a radical way. Roman
	4	Unions? Conflicts? No way! The boss will tell us to f**k off!. Vanjya	7	They run welfare but it's all a "brother to cousin" business'. Unions should carry out their statutory duties: stand up for workers' rights. Stas
	3	In soviet times we paid trade unions to receive benefits. Alexandru		
Open/closed networks	9	I joined mates from the village on 'zarabotki'. Someone has contacts, we put together the brigade and here we go, building sites, factories and what not. Over there you seek friends, relatives. Nik	9	Last workplace was a big firm in St. Petersburg [but] they refused us a contract. Once we got all arrested for that. Still they rejected our demands. The all brigade mobilised, two days we stopped working. The Russian manager supported us but the [Moldovan] boss was well connected. You're better off with foreigners than with your own kind. I left for this as well. Fedor
	3	There were different nationalities; Uzbeks, Tadzhiks, Russian and Ukrainians. But we did our bit and they did theirs. Asians are all the same they simply cannot do it right, Ukrainians more or less, Russians are lazy. We never share anything with others but rely on our collective. Aleks	6	'The collective was well structured. Everyone answered directly to the boss. We worked individually but there was a high level of co-operation. We know each other well from a previous site. The collective was put together for this project. Collectives are formed in Russia; we did not know each other from home'. Tolik,
Positive/negative inter-ethnic relations	5	The police may harass you but Uzbeks get more of this. We did not get into troubles that much as we did not work with other nationalities. We have our own brigade and we're happy with it. Nik	13	I respect everybody. Everybody is here, like me, to make a living. Fedor

	2	I cannot stand Tadzhiks, Ukrainians too. They're always on the phone chatting, never shut up, stupid too, I worked with them, can't do anything right. There may be good ones, but all these [Asians] are just awful. Sasha	*3*	Statistics show that, if it wasn't for migrants, in Moscow they would have done only a fraction of the developments completed by 2011. Slavic
			4	Once the intermediary who employed us had 3 brigades: us, Moldovans and Ukrainians. He asks to go there, and talk down their work. I refused and they fired us. In the end their own leader did it, Ukrainian to Ukrainians, totally unacceptable. Viacheslav
Geographical outlook		N/A	*4*	There are those who want to join Europe but I would rather like it with Russia. It was like this before. Consider: how many [Moldovans] work in Moscow now? Valentin
			6	I have cousins in Italy. They rate it highly but now it is easier to get jobs in Moscow. Lilian

International labour mobility, multinational outlooks and class consciousness in the FSU

We now analyse participants' accounts of migration experiences. Overall, we find that migration originates in individual survival strategies responding to soviet collapse and post-socialist restructuring. Collectively, migrant workers participate in transnational networks as the politics of production deny them bargaining power. Early experiences in the FSU are bounded by closed networks and ethnically homogenous collectives which activate national divides and competition among workers. However, informal employment generates disputes which stimulate workers' antagonism towards employers and intermediaries, destabilizing networks and prompting further mobility. Accumulation of experiences brings gradual change in views about work and workers: a wider geographical outlook is associated not only with greater individual and household expectations but also with elements of inter-ethnic solidarity.

Migrant worker perspectives on mobility and restructuring in Moldovan villages

Initially, participants conceptualised migration as 'zarabotki', which means temporarily leaving their place of residence to earn a living. They left reluctantly and with no resettlement expectation:

'People unwillingly go abroad – should we stay here and starve?' (Gregory Moldova 2010)

'I went to Russia for the first time in 2003: "just for a while"; it lasted three years. When I had to go back I was offered [by schoolmates, *Authors*] to go to St. Petersburg'. (Ivan Moldova 2010)

The older generation directly relates the need for 'zarabotki' to the collapse of soviet structures. The younger generation is immediately funnelled into migration networks or joins them after disappointing work experiences at home. Inability or unwillingness to resettle and growth in job opportunities abroad turn these seasonal migrants into hypermobile workers. Their place of residence becomes a 'multilocality' where their country's perceived social and political decline reinforces migration decisions.

In the researched villages, workplaces have all been privatised. New firms, participants maintain, strictly enforce a low wage regime with endemic wage arrears exacerbated by seasonality of employment. Dima comments on worker reactions at a sun-flower oil plant:

'If only the whole brigade managed to strike we would never have migrated to Russia. We do not have unions. . . . Workers have to manage on their own. Maybe it is better. I believe protests help, but not here. Why do foreigners own the factory? . . . There are plenty of skilled workers and labour is cheap. In France [we could have] earned fifteen hundred Euros.' (Dima, Moldova 2010)

In this typical account, migration is presented as a sequel to perceived failures of collective mobilization. Further testimony suggested that the predatory nature of new capital and the absence of unions were complemented by the withdrawal of welfare and perceptions of state corruption. Families are fragmented in the process; women may migrate to Italy rather than join the men because low wages for women in Russia make it unpalatable. Families experience distress, but also expand their network internationally, reducing their dependence on intermediaries. Dima and Gregory display acute awareness of the political and economic

constraints affecting migrant workers but also their determination to circumvent them. These workers reflect negatively on the new social order in their 'country of origin'. Slavic, now settled in Moscow, laconically summarises participants' views: 'in Moldova I was never legally employed: I never did anything for my country, yet I never had anything from it' (2012). Remarkable for its absence in migrant accounts, is any hint of nationalist feeling, irrespective of individual nationality.

The older generation's tendency to look 'abroad' to cities in Russia and Ukraine has soviet legacy roots. Russia is perceived as an accessible, familiar destination: 'Travelling there is cheaper, we know the language and the currency is familiar. Who is going to help you over there? [i.e. in Western Europe, Authors].' (Valentin, Moldova 2012). The younger generation has expanded its horizons beyond Russia: 'Russian [high] wages end on the Moscow ring road. Here, only a revolution will fix things; I'd rather go to Italy' (Tolik, Moldova 2010).

In sum, migrants largely react to re-structuring as proposed by the 'multinational worker' approach; failing collective action to defend their position, they make pragmatic but well-informed decisions between destinations and use exit possibilities to defend their interests. Migration has become solidified into a preferred option, despite its difficulties, as workers have learned to negotiate them.

Migrant experiences in the FSU: segmented markets, segregated workplaces, homogeneous collectives

Early migrant experiences are shaped by a migration system that fosters labour market segmentation, workplace segregation and civic discrimination. Informal recruitment by intermediaries, informal employment by shadowy firms and functional divisions of labour via

ethnically homogenous collectives increase dependency on management. Isolation from local workers and communities is reinforced by unsupportive migration authorities, police discrimination and media-fuelled public hostility. These processes can result in feelings of indifference and attitudes of competitive individualism hampering solidarity among migrants and between them and local workers.

Discrimination in pay and employment follows citizenship, nationality and place of residence. Participants often argued that Russians enjoyed higher pay, formal employment, holidays and welfare entitlements:

'I think Russians have it easier at work. They have contracts and can go to court for non-payment of wages.' (Valentin, Moldova 2012)

Labour processes do not necessarily push workers together. Informal recruitment tie them to ethnically homogeneous collectives which rarely work in close proximity or interact meaningfully when they do. Slavik reports from a building site:

'Uzbeks, Turkmens, Khokhli, Moldovans and Byelorussians work there, few Russians. Our brigade is made up of Moldovans from Transdnistria. People know each other: the brigadier recruits his own people. Site superintendents are Russians, the managing director too, the president is European.' (Slavik, Transdnistria 2010)

Workers' accounts depict a highly structured ethno-national hierarchy: Russians occupy the pinnacle, performing managerial roles or qualified professions; Slavic and internal migrants fill skilled jobs; Central Asian workers are confined to 'dirty', non-mechanised work.

In these circumstances, workers are led to indifference: 'I do not care who gets paid what, as long as they pay' (Dima, Moldova 2010). In Andrei's account nationalist politics poisoning relations between different Moldovan nationalities are directly linked to mobilization failures:

'In the dormitories there are Moldovans and Russian speaking [Moldova's minorities, *Authors*]. Many Moldovans don't like Russian-speakers: "why you don't speak Moldovan? Don't you respect your country? – "I don't want to!". We could have organised industrial action, but it came to nothing. It could have helped to raise wages. They rely on us: the locals do not work so fast: "you Moldovans work like slaves with quality and speed" they say. The collective was not friendly.' (Andrei, Moldova 2010)

Harsh working conditions, lack of co-operation and differential treatment can fuel ethno-national antagonism favouring employer's dividing tactics. Feelings of isolation and suspicions towards other nationalities are more pronounced in the accounts of participants like Petru, Andrei and Slavik who spent less time abroad with only one or two employers. Their experience suggests that these perceptions prevail during the earlier stages of migration. Petru worked mostly on small sites at the edge of towns with no right to exit the workplace perimeter:

'Over there I feel an outsider: I am working as a gastarbajter [guest worker]. We never go shopping, only work, for fear of the police. With Armenians I never talked. They do their job, we do ours.' (Petru Moldova, 2010)

His account poignantly illustrates how workplace segregation and public discrimination combine to produce subjective experiences of social exclusion. Labour market segmentation and workplace segregation reflect public attitudes and also state and union practices. Federal

Trade Unions announce formal inter-ethnic solidarity but local union structures adopt a different approach. The powerful Moscow branch of the construction union, as one interviewee concedes (speaking in secrecy), 'officially oppose illegal immigration; in reality, it is hostile to migrant workers as such' (Interview with Construction Trade Union Federation officials, Moscow 2010). Slavic captures the actual impact of these policies in a pessimistic portrayal of his struggle to integrate:

'Here I never feel at ease. Accommodation vacancies read: 'Slavs only'. On mass media they're constantly ranting about illegal migrants. On public transport you can feel their eyes on you. I cannot even own my car. It's my wife's because she's Russian.' (Slavic Moscow 2010)

Slavic feels targeted because of his dark complexion and 'southern appearance'. Other migrants report gradual shifts in Russian attitudes and repressive police tactics, targeting Central Asians:

'We heard that Russians hate Tajiks and Kirgiz, not Moldovans. They do not know the language – the police stop them and they cannot answer basic questions. They work as slaves in Moscow. They work twelve/thirteen hours a day – we could not keep up with them despite using equipment and they had just shovels – still they hate them.' (Gregory, Moldova 2010)

The effort that Central Asians are reputed to expend adds a further reason in addition to their ethnicity and religion for Russian unions' hostility to them. Ukrainians, Byelorussians and Moldovans are discriminated against as foreign labour but ambiguously 'rescued' as supposedly reflecting a reasserted Slavic or Christian identity. This is well exemplified by one employer's arguments about customer relations:

'They [customers] do not want to see them – Tajiks, Uzbeks, Caucasians and all the rest. For the customer, Byelorussians are fine, Ukrainians too, Moldovans can pass. The others, forget it! Despite that, I can say that some Tajiks and Uzbeks can do pretty fine work.' (site manager, Moscow 2012)

National stereotypes are used to reinforce and naturalise divisions by asserting each nationality's status. Stereotypes often litter workers' narratives, apparently providing discursive support to the divisive strategies pursued by employers and the state. These discursive practices reflect worker's perceived need to reinforce their own status in an informal and therefore constantly shifting hierarchy.

Thus, early migrant experiences link precarious work and migration status to ethno-national divisions as factors hindering consciousness development and solidarity. However, the very bases on which this migration system is predicated, the brigade system and informal employment, contain elements creating instability and planting the seeds of worker-management disputes.

Beyond segregation: informal bargaining, collective protests and exit strategies

The brigade system has two interrelated features. First, it leaves the employment relationship in the grey area of informality fostering both abuses from above and contestation from below which result in high incidence of low-level individual and collective disputes. Second, it cannot solve these problems, rather it is the normative labour collective that is evoked by workers to raise grievances and take action.

All participants, with a single exception admitted to major irregularities in their employment relationship and migrant status. Workers are aware of the wage premium it can attract:

There was no contract, we raised the issue constantly to get a work permit but they refused, to avoid taxation.' (Valentin Moldova 2012)

[In Moldova, Authors] 'I worked in different factories since I was 19. They never employ legally.' (Victorio Moldova 2011)

Research participants were universally involved in disputes related to wages arrears or other aspects of the employment relationship. Intermediaries are singled out as primarily responsible for abuses: 'I have my share of experience with intermediaries! A lot of work to do and no one wants to pay for it!' (Sergei, Transdnistria 2010). Workers, however, can defend their interests and learn the skills of self-defence.

Some participants' accounts (see table 2) indicate that workers can collectively raise grievances surrounding such issues. The labour collective represents the basic social unit for mobilising and engaging in informal bargaining:

'We were 2 Moldovans and 20 Ukrainians, the food was rubbish. We raised it with top management and sorted it out. The site superintendent was pocketing the food allowance. The Ukrainians were scared to talk. Sometimes one person is enough to motivate the collective, even those who're afraid.' (Tolik, Moldova 2010)

Collective disputes clearly prove that migrant workers are neither incapable of nor ideologically hostile to collective action. Crucially for some, such experiences call national loyalties into question and provide fertile ground for inter-ethnic solidarities. Workers' accounts are also witness to the strategic limitations of the labour collective as a bargaining vehicle (Filtzer 1994). The lack of formalised bargaining channels means that, once the collective's potential is exhausted, migrants resort to individual actions which generally result in further mobility, as exemplified by the trajectories of more seasoned migrants:

'In 2002 I specialised in fitting windows. My expectations grew but [the employer/village friend, *Authors*] could not pay more. At [another employer] one morning we stopped working because of unpaid wages. The brigade leader: "come on, let's get to work". Once he failed to pay again, people started to quit. I went to his office - locals are afraid to - knocked on the door and wrote a statement: I demand to be paid". You just go and take the wage by yourself.' Many are leaving [the new employer] because he withholds wages. (Slavic Moscow 2010)

Biographically, Slavic mobility strategy breaks with circular paths of migration based on structured networks, opening up opportunities for new recruitment channels, jobs and workplaces. Breaking out of national loyalties initiate a dynamic relationship between turn-over, collective disputes and growing assertiveness about worker rights.

Other participants instead (see table 2) responded to the vagaries of informality by increasing their reliance on family and friends:

'Unions? Conflicts? No way! The boss will tell us to f**k off! To avoid disputes, jobs must be chosen well, using connections, asking around. I work for a mate but others just showed up,

they pocket a pre-payment and start working knowing nothing, that's how problems start.' (Vanja 2012 Moscow)

These strategies vary. Vanja like Nik, Aleks and Viacheslav chose to stay put at the 'ethnic firm' Slavic first left. They trade better opportunities for the stability afforded by personal loyalty and multiple ethnic and familial links. In their case, personalised bargaining leads to accommodation ruled by paternalistic relations. Others, however, rejecting any allegiance to management and employers, embrace instability but rely on homogenous brigades. Here, employment relations are described as violent confrontations with no room for either vertical or horizontal solidarities:

'I worked in Ukraine, building all sorts, then Russia, cleaning windows, in Moldova too, at the sage processing factory, expensive stuff, the American owners make millions. Home you earn 100 dollars, here up to 2000. After that there's no come back. I cannot stay in one place for long. I heard stories of intermediaries cheating in Russia – even among village acquaintances – the brigade tracked him down and bit him up, the Russian accomplice too.' (Sasha 2012 Moscow)

Despite their differences, these strategies all reduce exposure to collective bargaining or workplace interactions with other nationalities, and are often associated with low appreciation of tradeunionism (see table 2). Cross-referencing migration strategies with views on collective action confirm that awareness of rights is positively associated with high individual mobility. Participants display a wide range of views on collective struggles. Significantly only Slavik, who served time for contraband in soviet times, embraces an ideological rejection of unions as socialist institutions. The older generation associates unions

with traditional socialist service functions while the youngest participants have scarcely heard of them. However, those with broader mobility experiences contribute to more articulate assessments. These migrants draw a clear distinction between collective protests and formal institutions, they denounce official unions' poor performance in the FSU and in some cases contrast them with western European counterparts. These workers may lack 'union consciousness' but are very conscious of unions' unwillingness or inability to represent them.

In summary, informality provides material for individual and collective disputes turning some migrants against intermediaries, brigadiers and managers. Questioning national loyalties intensifies turnover but also favours collective over individualised bargaining. Experience of small scale struggles consolidate, at least in principle, their belief in the plausibility and usefulness of collective action. The use of labour collectives for mobilizing contradicts simplistic assumptions uniquely associating post-socialist legacies with individualistic attitudes. However, it also confirms the collectives' historical limitations (Schwartz 2004) leading migrants to opt for exit, consistently with the mobility power notion postulated by LPT (Smith 2006). Breaking out of closed networks allows for meaningful interactions with other nationalities fostering inclusive solidarity. Workplace relations are not the only terrain testing worker's allegiances. Other factors are identified which potentially contribute to inter-ethnic solidarities attitudes.

Mobility strategies, geographical outlook and multinational consciousness: The making of the hyper-mobile multinational worker

Most participants' migration trajectories are characterised by frequent changes of employer and, to a lesser degree, of jobs and geographical destinations. These workers are not formally trained builders and held a multiplicity of other jobs. Also, learning on the job led

them through different trades and typology of building before joining their preferred brigade or profession.

Worker-driven turnover is motivated by higher expectations and self-confidence supported by professional growth and expanded labour market knowledge. Accumulation of experiences fosters gradual change in views about workplaces and the people in them.

'At first we worked with this enterprise with sites in different towns. We had a contract with them and they registered us. I left because of [an argument about] wages. Then a neighbour offered a job in Moscow. They paid in stages but not all we had agreed. They told us that's the way the intermediary works and we left. In Kaluga I worked in a meat-processing factory. From our province they all seem to go there. Locals got the easier jobs. We were left with the worst tasks. It was hard: short breaks, no weekends. Up north there were no locals only newcomers, all nationalities: Moldovans, Khakhli [pejorative for Ukrainians], Tadzhiks and Armenians. Beautiful, clean town. I never asked colleagues for anything but lent a hand when approached. All builders are paid the same: I could ask for more but I did not want to. Anti-migrant feelings are mostly directed against 'dark-skinned'. I do not know why. I treat everyone the same. With Bashkirians we've got more to talk about than with our own.' (Valentin Moldova 2012)

Valentin's poignant account captures the variety of production regimes, work settings and labour market practices many participants experience (see table 1). His trajectory combines rejection of unfavourable employment relations with withdrawal from ethno-nationally segregated spaces. Variation in workforce composition and informal relations across sites,

however, can stimulate solidarity attitudes even among participants developing low mobility propensity and collective orientation.

'There are friends, Armenians, Ukrainians, many nationalities but I can only work with my kind, Moldovans, friends and relatives. I say, who works on sites? Not Russians for sure, only Moldovans, well, Tadzhiks too, Ukrainians maybe, anyone but not Russians. We rarely deal with locals yet once in [Russian town, Authors] they treated us like dogs. The delivery guy shouted: "take the glass down"; "how can you talk like this", I replied, "f**k you!". When we're all from abroad this doesn't happen, I mean I'm Moldovan, you're from Tadzhikistan but we're both in the same place, a foreign land, and so we have normal relations!' (Vanja, Moscow 2012)

Intersectionality demands exploring other dimensions effecting migrant strategies. Engagement with host societies generates demands informed by aspirations to build or reunite a family, access social benefits and better job opportunities. As the current system does not accommodate these demands, workers respond with further mobility as discussed by Vioriel:

'When I lived with my wife I felt almost like at home [in Russia]. With family it is another matter. Once you get a job then you must take it seriously. My life plan changed. Here in my own country [Moldova] I would have never achieved such a wage and pension. Russia is better for work but I shall never move there. I was born here and I remain Moldovan after all.' (Viorel, Moldova 2012)

Despite a 'gender order' legacy which marginalised male parenthood (Ashwin 2000), reconciling work with family life is a key issue for our male migrants. While adhering to the gendered role of breadwinners, these workers display widespread concerns with both family cohesiveness and active fatherhood. Families directly contribute to developing complex household strategies. Migrants geographical outlook and solidarity attitudes are also effected by experiences shared within extended family networks:

'I do not know about discrimination; my family is like this: father in Moscow, mother in Italy, sister in Romania.' (Victorio Moldova 2011)

Thus, migration initially rationalised as a survival expedient, translates into complex individual and household life trajectories. Mobility expands workers' geographical outlook, as postulated by the multinational worker concept, but also affects migrants' politics as it generates demands which challenge State nationalist projects (see Table 2) and traditional gender roles.

Mobility experiences, post-socialist legacies and inter-ethnic solidarities

New experiences produce changes in participants' attitudes and behaviour in relation to all dimensions initially affected by segregation (workplace relations, labour market, social and political environment). New attitudes show in concrete descriptions of positive inter-ethnic relations:

'The collective changed often: first there were Russians and Khakhli. It wasn't good with them. With Russians from St. Petersburg there were no such problems. [Now] on the construction site there is universal friendship, from the Moldovan to the Chinese. They do not speak Russian at all, only their boss. We didn't chat but helped each other, like comrades.' (Ivan Moldova 2010)

Seeking better employment leads many participants to engage more meaningfully with workers of other nationalities or join multi-ethnic collectives (see table 2). Professional growth shifts their attention towards professional characteristics and finding a common language. Soviet heritage furnishes a shared normative environment. Its wider acceptance across ethno-national divides is well exemplified by a Russian brigadier depiction of work relations:

'We have like communism or socialism: we come together and decide everything collectively. The brigade leader pays wages. We all get the same wage - we enjoy universal camaraderie. There is no room here for national antipathies.' (Vitya, Moscow 2010)

These arguments are articulated through powerful historic class notions of morality. Fairness is founded on the autonomy of the workers' collective governed by work-related qualities, such as *spetsialist*, denoting skill level, but also by human attributes, notably *poryadochnij* denoting trustworthiness and moderation, both important ingredients of a *khoroshij chelovek* or good person: 'on site never an issue, we worked with Georgians, normal people. The same with Tadzhiks' (Mihail Moscow 2012). These foundations of workplace morality can provide Russian and FSU migrants with a common language.

Despite ethno-national segregation, mobility experienced lead workers to realise that social mobility depends less on ethno-national hierarchies than on informal connections. A clearer understanding of labour market dynamics, combined with exposure to casual xenophobia and institutional racism, helps shifting most migrants' focus away from inter-ethnic competition:

'Well, how can I describe the way [locals] treat us, like any other migrant. No better or worse than Uzbeks or suchlike. I believe we are dealt with the same way: "here they come, the *gastarbajtery*!" [he exclaims with laughter] I wonder though, what Russians would have done if not for these *gastarbajtery*? Without us they would have achieved nothing! (Sergey, Moscow 2012)

The general assertion of migrants' value to Russian society reflects wider solidaristic feelings (see table 2). The term *gastarbajter* is widely used as pejorative synonym for 'migrant', indicating a disposable workforce. Some participants though employ it ironically both to challenge their status in the host society and reassert their contribution to its development. The notion of 'migrant' is reclaimed to describe the commonality of their condition and to articulate ideas of migrants' status as workers worthy of respect.

Conclusion

Embracing approaches which focus on migrant subjectivities (Tapia and Alberti 2018), we asked what conditions and processes shape attitudes and experiences our research participants have of social relations. We explored their views of labour market institutions, unions and collective action and their attitudes to workers of other nationalities.

Our first contribution is to show that the migrants' attitudes are not uniquely nationally-bounded. They are empirically consistent with the 'multinational worker' idea even in this apparently inhospitable nationalist context. Nor are they simply and immutably individualistic. They firmly located their migration decisions in the context of a lack of collective action possibilities to contest re-structuring (Meeus 2013; Morrison *et al.* 2014). Initial experiences in host-countries match the negative outcomes predicted by institutionalist models (Doellgast *et al.* 2018). Closed networks and ethnically homogenous collectives produced segregation and competition among workers, breeding indifference and inter-ethnic animosities and favouring employers' divisive tactics. However, with time these were transcended. Solidaristic ideas came to co-exist with and at points to supplant more individualistic ones.

We identify three pillars of migrant worker consciousness. First, migrants resisted the assumptions of official nationalistic policies and came to recognise commonalities with workers from other ethno-national groups. Their consciousness may therefore be described as 'multinational' in a sense that transcends the more individualistic/calculative practices identified by Andrijasevic and Sacchetto (2016). We argue that the notion of transnational worker inclusive solidarity constitutes a missing dimension in their conceptualisation. Migrants question 'with their feet' their own nationalist elites' demands to bear the brunt of restructuring in the name of nation building, while explicitly questioning ethnonational differences in host countries. They recognise other migrant workers as such, even while using pejorative terms for them. Such co-existence of seemingly contradictory perceptions has been noted in other contexts as not inimical to the construction of inter-ethnic worker solidarities (Lichtenstein 1995).

Second, they developed the view that unions are appropriate vehicles for collective action, combined with awareness of local trade unions unwillingness or incapacity to represent them. Their hyper-mobility, low attachment to specific jobs and customary use of individual

bargaining may obstruct traditional union forms of organising and mobilising (Berntsen 2016). Nevertheless, below the institutional level, these workers have understandings that at least do not preclude the development of workplace solidarities. We therefore suggest that the 'multinational worker' cannot be disregarded as a force for reform within FSU unions.

Third, solidaristic ideas appeared among our research participants. The prevailing frames of reference chimes with pre-1990 cosmopolitan and collectivist attitudes. The soviet concept of the 'labour collective' with its communitarian implications persists despite its mobilizing limitations. Its principles of popular morality constitute an alternative way of judging individuals as workers, but also, crucially, as human beings. These norms are not limited to older participants. Younger migrant workers have adopted them. Nor are they simply static 'legacies': participants rejected the marginality of male involvement in family life associated with the 'soviet gender order' (Ashwin 2000) and recognised that other national groups had similar needs.

Thus, these migrants' perspectives clearly demonstrate that precarity and mobility under conditions of weak unions and hostile social trends may obstruct traditional forms of organizing but do not preclude the emergence of understandings favouring collective action. Post-socialist legacies offer normative grounds through which they overcome ethnic differences and nationalist ideologies.

Our second contribution regards the circumstances under which this consciousness arises. The circular migration system proved unstable: because of informality manager-worker disputes occurred and workers used the labour collective to mobilise. These instances fostered many participants to embrace collective action while questioning national loyalties and ethnic divides. At a subsequent stage lack of institutional channels led to extensive worker-driven turnover. These processes challenge the idea that exit is uniquely associated with acceptance

of pro-market ideologies and individualistic attitudes. Biographically, mobility strategies broke circular migration paths, opening up opportunities with new recruitment channels, jobs and workplaces. Participants deploying these strategies experienced complex trajectories allowing them to either engage more meaningfully with workers of other nationalities or to join multi-ethnic collectives. Geographical outlook and solidarity attitudes are also impacted by experiences shared within extended family networks. Changes to their consciousness included greater awareness of unions, collective interests and institutional racism.

As strategies diverge, exposure to these conditions vary, leading to different solidarity outcomes as shown in table 2. This category of workers cannot be reduced to a single entity. Our findings begin to unravel the multiplicity of factors and dimensions bearing on worker behaviour and the different meanings they attach to them. The value of the multinational worker construct lies in the full appreciation of class subjectivity in determining these outcomes.

How widespread these workers' understandings are remains uncertain, and the generalisability of our findings beyond the FSU is also unclear. The consciousness we found is undoubtedly affected by the FSU's fluid identities and weak institutions, and particularly by Moldova's modest size, borderland location and high migration rate. Yet research in Asia and Africa also suggests that 'populations far from longing for national renewal channel their desires for improved standards of living in transnational directions' (Briggs *et al.* 2008: 634). Equally, construction unions internationally are seen to shift towards agendas 'designed to breach the borders of the nation-state and to embrace transnationality as an organising agenda' (Rosewarne 2013: 289). Hopefully, research in other international spaces will further develop our understandings of multi-national workers' strategies and subjectivities and how they relate to union strategies.

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