RADKA KLVAŇOVÁ

The Brother of the Other

Immigration from Belarus, Russia and Ukraine to the Czech Republic

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THE BROTHER OF THE OTHER

Immigration from Belarus, Russia and Ukraine to the Czech Republic and the boundaries of belonging

Radka Klvaňová

Masaryk University
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INTRODUCTION

Post-Cold War Europe has witnessed processes of redrawing political and cultural boundaries (Wallerstein 2010). The Iron Curtain has been dismantled and new alliances and divisions in Europe have been created. The changing geopolitical landscape has been accompanied by processes of both dismantling of existing and elevation of new borders. These borders are not only territorial borders but also borders inscribed onto the bodies of mobile individuals, impacting on their everyday life practices and their self-perception, connecting as well as dividing social groups.

Migration has been tightly connected to the process of redrawing geopolitical and cultural boundaries in Europe after the fall of state-socialist regimes. Subscription to the principles of democracy and liberalism in the countries of the former Eastern bloc, where cross-border mobility was severely restricted during communism, has meant also opening the borders to the more or less regulated arrival of foreign nationals and letting citizens leave their countries without restricting the possibility of return.

Although post-1989 migration in Central and Eastern Europe is in many respects a new phenomenon, it is also in many ways tightly connected to the past. Not only are patterns of migration influenced by past political, economic and cultural links between the regions of origin and destination but also the perception of migration and migrants often reflects political histories in Europe. The national past and collective memory are important features of the context of reception for migrants.

This study contributes to the understanding of the processes of redrawing symbolic boundaries in Central and Eastern Europe by focusing on the case of immigration from three countries of the former Soviet Union – Belarus, Ukraine and Russia – to the Czech Republic. Czechia[1] has experienced rapidly growing immigration over the two decades that followed the fall of the state-socialist regime. It has

[1] I use both Czechia and Czech Republic synonymously throughout the text.

opened its borders to the arrival of foreign nationals in a much less regulated manner than during the period of communism, when the social interactions of Czechoslovak citizens with migrants were rare. With rising immigration, encounters between the native-born and foreign-born inhabitants of Czechia have become a regular feature of everyday life, at least in major cities.

This book revolves around the issue of negotiation of the symbolic boundaries between "immigrants" and "Czechs". It aims at exploration of how symbolic boundaries of belonging are constituted through stigma. The processes of stigmatization and the redrawing of the symbolic boundaries of belonging are studied through two types of stigma identified in the research: immigrant stigma and the stigma of the perpetrators.

STIGMA, SYMBOLIC BOUNDARIES AND THE EVERYDAY POLITICS OF BELONGING

In the world of nation states, interstate migration challenges have established national boundaries. Encounters between newcomers and the native-born may become sites for the negotiation of the symbolic boundaries of the nation as an imagined community of belonging (Anderson 1983). The perpetual formation of nations as political communities of solidarity (Alexander 2006), similar to the formation of any kind of community, is based on the construction of boundaries between those who are similar to "us" and those who are "not like us" (Jenkins 1996). These boundaries are constructed through symbolic representations of "us" and "them" in struggles over classification and division of the social world (Bourdieu 1991: 221). Hence, symbolic boundaries are in fact "conceptual distinctions made by social actors to categorize objects, people, practices, and even time and space" (Lamont, Molnár: 2002: 168). They are used as tools in the struggles over definitions of reality and in the process of separating people into groups of similarity and difference. Symbolic boundaries may also become social boundaries manifested in unequal resource access and distribution. However, as Lamont and Molnár emphasize, both social and symbolic boundaries are equally real in the lives of social actors (ibid: 168–169).

The focus of my work is on symbolic boundaries not as states or attributes of collectivities but as cultural processes better captured perhaps by the term "boundary-making" (see for example Wimmer 2007). Lamont et al. (2014: 10) suggest that cultural processes are constituted at the level of meaning-making and their operation through classification systems is not necessarily instrumental and conscious. Rather, social actors usually use schemas that are taken for granted and are part of the available cultural repertoire of meanings.

Nira Yuval Davis writes about the politics of belonging as a process through which the symbolic boundaries of a community of belonging are maintained, reproduced and contested in political struggles. These struggles revolve not only around determining who is inside and who is outside of the community of belonging but also around the content of membership, ideas and narratives of belonging (Yuval-Davis 2006: 205). The maintenance and reproduction as well as contestation of the symbolic boundaries of national communities do not take place only on the level of the state, institutions and organized groups. These boundaries are policed and contested also in everyday social encounters in which social actors use the tacit understanding of who is "us" and who is "them". Such "border skirmishes" are "part and parcel of everyday cultural politics of belonging, of what is involved in being treated as a member of the community" (Davis, Nencel 2011: 470).

In this book, I study the negotiation of the symbolic boundaries of the nation from the perspective of "newcomers". I focus on the experience of those who moved to the Czech Republic from Belarus, Ukraine and Russia after 1989 and on their reflections of being in the position of immigrants. As people move to a new social environment, they learn what it means to be immigrants in everyday social encounters with the local population. This process can be understood with Cooley's concept of the looking glass self as a formation of a new sense of a social self in social interactions (Cooley, Schubert 1998). It is in the course of socialization that the sense of self is formed in the process of looking at oneself through the eyes of other people and becoming both subject and object (Mead 1967). The competence of seeing oneself from the standpoint of the locals is crucial for orientation and the ability to make sense of one's position in the new environment of immigration.

Being a migrant is often associated with the stigma of different ethnonational origin since the nation state establishes migrants as exceptions to the norm of sedentariness and as culturally distinct subjects (Wimmer, Glick Schiller 2002). Accordingly, "immigrants' difference" often "obtrude[s] itself upon attention" in the social interactions of migrants with the non-migrant majority population and causes disregard for other attributes that make claims on them (Goffman 1986: 5), thus also discrediting the migrants. Goffman differentiates between various types of stigma, including a specific "tribal stigma" of race, nation or religion. Immigrant stigma can be regarded as a tribal stigma because it refers to the different ethnonational origin of its carrier. Although often experienced on the individual level as a source of shame, the tribal character of the stigma of ethnonational origin extends beyond the individual level to the collective level (Bui 2003, Rivera 2008).

In his influential work, Goffman (1986) outlines how stigma influences perception of the self as well as the acceptance of individuals by others in social encounters. He demonstrates how stigma impacts on the course of social interactions and on the ways people aware of the stigma associated with their social identity manage social encounters. Research following Goffman's work focuses on examining diverse types of stigma (for an overview, see e.g. Link, Phelan 2001) and centers on the responses of various stigmatized categories of persons in situations of stigmatizing encounters, on the "management of spoiled identities" (Goffman 1986). Further, I draw inspiration from work by Michelle Lamont and her colleagues and their studies on the cultural processes of identification, racialization and stigmatization (Lamont et al. 2014; Lamont et al. 2013; Lamont, Mizrachi 2012a; Fleming et al. 2012). Working predominantly with the concept of stigmatization, they define it very broadly as "misrecognition, prejudice, stereotyping, racism, discrimination, exclusion, etc." (Lamont et al. 2013: 5). They see the everyday responses to stigmatization as "rhetorical and strategic tools deployed by individual members of stigmatized groups in reaction to perceived stigmatization, racism and discrimination" (Lamont, Mizrachi 2012b: 366). Social actors respond to these social processes by redefining their social identities, shifting the symbolic boundaries between the self and the other and promoting alternative classification systems.

In this study, I explore how those who have moved to the Czech Republic from Belarus, Russia and Ukraine experience and negotiate stigmatization processes. I focus on two types of stigma – the stigma of the foreigners/immigrants and the stigma of the perpetrators – and discuss how they operate in the process of construction of the symbolic boundaries of belonging. Lamont et al. claim that processes of stigmatization are universal to human societies (Lamont et al. 2013: 4) but their concrete forms as well as responses to them are historically situated in national contexts with respect to the histories of intergroup relations, collective myths and socio-demographic profiles (Lamont, Mizrachi 2012b). The present study shows that the immigrants from Belarus, Ukraine and Russia respond to their stigmatization in various ways depending on the context of the social interaction. While they use their ethnonational belonging to claim cultural proximity to the Czech core group or to dissociate themselves from the polluted image of the "Russian perpetrators", their narratives also evince a tendency to blur ethnonational boundaries and to perform alternative identities. I see the processes of stigmatization as well as migrants' responses to them as a part of the everyday politics of belonging; thus, they are processes of reproduction and contestation of the symbolic boundaries between different communities and groupings and the broader processes of nation building (Yuval-Davis 2006; Davis, Nencel 2011).

THE BROTHER OF THE OTHER: IMMIGRANTS FROM BELARUS, UKRAINE AND RUSSIA IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC

A recent book that represents a first attempt to provide a summarizing view on predominantly post-1989 immigration to the Czech Republic is called *Migration and (i)migrants in Czechia: Who are we, where do we come from, where are we going?* Drbohlav et al. (2010) summarize the Czechs' attitude towards different ethnonational migrant groups based on the review of a series of public opinion polls (1991–2001) in the following way:

> *The Czech public has continually the most positive attitude to the citizens of Slovakia. This logically reflects a common coexistence in one*

state formation for more than 70 years and also cultural and language proximity. Cultural proximity caused by Slavic origin is probably also an important reason for sympathy towards Poles. Among the selected groups and the mapping of their "popularity," there follow Germans and Jews; nevertheless, their "popularity" (positive attitude) falls below 50 percent. Negative evaluation outweighs the positive in the case of the Vietnamese and a definitively negative attitude is related to inhabitants coming from the Balkans (perhaps because of the fact that their activities are associated with various kinds of criminality in the eyes of the respondents), to the citizens of the former Soviet Union (occupation from 1968 has, by the way, never been forgotten) and to the Roma (who adhere to a different way of life from how the majority society lives and what it is used to) (Drbohlav et al. 2010: 124, author's translation).

The results of public opinion polls are among the most common representations of ethnicized "host society-immigrant" relations in research on migration[2]. The above-mentioned account tells a story of a rather strong distance between Czechs and the "citizens of the former Soviet Union" (disregarding their diverse ethnonational ties). While the authors assign "cultural proximity" to Slovaks and Poles as Slavic "relatives", they explain the lack of Czechs' sympathy towards citizens of the former Soviet Union (a large part of them being also Slavs) by their status as former "occupiers". These immigrants are linked here to the past both by their categorization as citizens of the former Soviet Union and by the speculative explanation about the reasons for their negative perception in the eyes of Czechs. In contrast, other research accounts dealing with migrants from the former Soviet Union conceptualize them as "culturally proximate" and emphasize cultural and language proximity as an important resource for immigrants' social integration (see for example Leontiyeva, Nečasová 2009[3]). Both of

[2] Such research, as well as public dissemination of its results, tends to reify ethnonational groups and reinforce ethnic boundaries.

[3] The authors in fact use a question mark in their title of a book chapter "Culturally proximate? Integration of immigrants from the countries of the former Soviet Union" (Leontiyeva, Nečasová 2009), which suggests some uncertainty about this label. In the chapter, they do not further discuss the issue of cultural proximity of the immigrants but throughout the text, they point several times