Lithuania and the New West-East Migration

Recent discussions of migration from Lithuania have understandably focussed on the large numbers of citizens taking advantage of the freedom of movement within the enlarged European Union. Indeed, a diverse and growing body of literature is emerging and has begun to describe this as one element of the “new face” of East-West migration.1

But while the vast majority of Lithuanian migrants are headed towards the West, there remains a significant minority of migrants who continue to head in the opposite direction. Given their relatively modest numbers, they have attracted relatively little attention from either scholars or politicians.

However, given the strategic importance the issue of emigration holds for Lithuania today, and in light of the recognized importance of comparative approaches to understanding the processes of migration,2 the lives, experiences and networks of those Lithuanians recently emigrated to Moscow present an interesting analogue to those of the larger contingent of Lithuanians living in the West.

Indeed, there is a shortage of ethnographic, micro-level analysis of the motivations and effects of West-East migration that could put a “human face” on the phenomenon. The analysis in this paper is offered as a first step towards a broader comparative study that would help to understand the emerging patterns of migration such as circular and temporary free-movement, cultures of migration, transnational networks, and other phenomena that characterize the new migration system in Europe.

Based on a series of structured interviews with recent Lithuanian migrants to Moscow, this paper draws some preliminary points of comparison and contrast between their experience of West-East migration within the post-Soviet space and the much better documented experience of East Europeans in the new European space.

The “New Face” of European Migration

In order to better understand the context in which the movement of Lithuanian migrants to the East takes place, it is important to review the basic features of what many scholars
have begun to characterize as the new paradigm of European migration in general.

First of all, the novelty of the new European system of migration requires the rethinking of several stereotypes that have become attached to the figure of the migrant. Russel King argues that historically significant waves of migration, such as 19th century settler migration from Europe to the Americas, from the Mediterranean to northwest Europe, or refugee migrations after the two world wars, have shaped our thinking about how migration is conceptualized and theorized, and established certain assumptions with respect to how we answer the central questions of migration.

For example, the migrant is typically understood as essentially poor, uprooted, and marginal, and migration is typically thought of as immigration, i.e., unidirectional and permanent, with the process understood in a normative sense, aiming at, if not always attaining, economic, social and cultural integration into the host society. But while these assumptions may have held for prior waves of international migration, King and other scholars argue that they do not necessarily hold for the new forms of migration that characterize contemporary Europe, especially the new East-West migration. The new paradigm of European migration can be characterized as follows.

First of all, many contemporary European migrants are highly educated and some have considerable professional experience, but many are attracted to menial jobs in Europe because the pay they get for relatively unskilled work is higher than pursuing a professional career in their home countries. This phenomenon, which goes beyond “brain drain” and has in fact been called “brain waste”, was especially acute during the 1990s, when the economies of Eastern Europe were in the middle of a painful economic transition.

More recent studies have shown that East-West migration is also one of highly skilled migration, where migrants with high qualifications seek and are able to find work in their profession. Ideally, this type of migration attracts the “best and the brightest” from across Europe to the most rewarding opportunities available on the emerging common European market for labour. However, as noted in a recent empirical study of the market for highly skilled labour in London, East Europeans still often face cultural barriers that prevent the recognition of their qualifications and work experience.

In any case, for both low and high skilled migrants, the motivation for migration is not purely economic, even if they are attracted by the higher wages. A distinguishing feature of the new East-West migration is that many are driven not by the need to survive, but by the desire to see the world, to escape the social confines of their country, or simply to have an adventure. Russel King cites several studies that show how for many recent migrants, especially among the younger ones, “migration itself becomes a desirable act rather than an economic means to an end” (95). Indeed, these early observations are also reinforced by more recent studies of Lithuanian migrants in the UK.

These factors lead Adrian Favell to note that East European migrants today are typically not “immigrants,” but rather what he calls “regional free movers” who are taking advantage of open borders “to engage in temporary circular and transnational mobility, following the rise and fall of economic demand, rather than long-term immigration and asylum seeking.” Citing a survey of East Europeans resident in the UK both before and after the enlargement of the EU, he notes that only about ¼ intend to settle in Britain, with the rest engaged in predominantly circular and temporary mobility patterns.

Favell notes that the opportunism of the new European migrants is matched by the
selfish calculations of the West European host states, which promises to “cement” this dynamic into a stable pattern of intra-European migration. For West European countries, this kind of circular migration is very advantageous, since it gives them a large workforce to do the low-end service, manufacturing and agricultural work that their own nationals do not want to do. Moreover, Favell argues that unlike migrants from Africa or Asia, the East Europeans are attractive migrants from a political point of view, since they are ethnically and culturally similar, and thus less likely to antagonize the indigenous populations.

Just as importantly, Favell notes that the “fresh faced neighbours to the East” are likely to be temporary rather than permanent residents, leading to the hope among Western administrators that they will contribute to the local economy as young workers and taxpayers, and depart the country before they become old pensioners and a burden upon the social system.

Lithuanian Migrants
West and East

Indeed, many Lithuanians have come to take advantage of the new forms of mobility available in today’s Europe. According to the Lithuanian Department of Statistics, just over 404 thousand Lithuanians emigrated from 1990 to 2005. The outflow of people was 37.6 thousand in 2001-2002, 22.7 thousand in 2003, 32.5 thousand in 2004, reaching a peak of 48.1 thousand in 2005, the year after Lithuania acceded to the EU. The numbers then stabilized at 27.8 thousand in 2006 and 26.5 thousand in 2007.

As the following table shows, the UK and Ireland have become the top two destinations for emigrants who have officially declared their state of next residence.

Since more than half of Lithuanian emigrants are “unofficial,” and do not declare their destination, these figures are not complete, but show quite clearly that the vast majority of migrants are headed to the “West.”

The number of Lithuanians migrating in the opposite direction is clearly much lower, but again, exact numbers are not known. Using figures supplied by national administrations, the global database of the Development Research Centre on Migration, Globalization and Poverty shows 4583 people with Lithuanian nationality living in Russia, but the actual numbers are assumed to be much higher.

For example, based on their emergency contact lists and regular contacts with the local community, the Lithuanian embassy in Moscow estimates that more than 10,000 Lithuanians live in the Russian capital alone, divided about equally between those who emigrated during Soviet times as well as more recent émigrés.

Thus, in terms of bare figures, the number of Lithuanians who have migrated East is

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Emigrants who have declared their departure by state of next residence</th>
<th>2001–2002</th>
<th>2003</th>
<th>2004</th>
<th>2005</th>
<th>2006</th>
<th>2007</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>14339</td>
<td>11032</td>
<td>15165</td>
<td>15571</td>
<td>12602</td>
<td>13853</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Kingdom</td>
<td>414</td>
<td>980</td>
<td>3525</td>
<td>4223</td>
<td>3223</td>
<td>3659</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ireland</td>
<td>143</td>
<td>276</td>
<td>1009</td>
<td>2073</td>
<td>1313</td>
<td>1616</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USA</td>
<td>1526</td>
<td>2302</td>
<td>2980</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>1771</td>
<td>1540</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>1520</td>
<td>1204</td>
<td>1727</td>
<td>1473</td>
<td>1114</td>
<td>1277</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>293</td>
<td>465</td>
<td>730</td>
<td>794</td>
<td>766</td>
<td>841</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>10443</td>
<td>5805</td>
<td>5194</td>
<td>4998</td>
<td>4415</td>
<td>4920</td>
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clearly much smaller than those that have travelled to the West, but the numbers are not in themselves insignificant. As a migration phenomenon in its own right, and as a point of comparison to the much-studied East-West migration within the European Union, it is worthy to ask why did these Lithuanians emigrate to Russia or other post-Soviet states, how are they adapting to their new surrounding, and what are their intentions for the future?

Why West-East Migration?

Given the painful history of occupation by the Soviet Union, and the large size of the wave of Lithuanians that have recently emigrated to the West, it seems odd that a significant number of Lithuanians would still move house and home to the East, to the metropolitan centre of the former Empire.

And yet a cursory examination of basic economic trends points to an obvious explanation. Russia, along with the other resource-rich areas of the former Soviet Union, has experienced an economic boom over the past decade, driving incomes sharply upward in the main urban centres, particularly among highly skilled workers.

Moreover, large urban centres like Moscow, St. Petersburg, Kiev in Ukraine, and even Almaty in distant Kazakhstan have developed considerably over the past decade in terms of offering the facilities and lifestyles typical of large metropolises the world over. In this respect they stand out from their post-Soviet surroundings as a “state-within-a-state.”

Moscow especially has extremely well-developed communications with other major centres of Europe and thus attracts expatriate workers from all over the world with high wages and rewarding career prospects. Workers of all kinds are in high demand, and the unofficial unemployment rate is a minuscule 0.9%.

The average monthly wage in Moscow city is well over a thousand dollars per month (28834 Rubles in May 2008) and rising 30% per year. For highly-skilled workers, the figure is much higher, and top-notch professionals in fields like business and law command wages comparable to or even higher than in West European capitals.

Lithuanians have clearly been attracted to the booming economy of Russia. Though Russian figures show a steady decline of immigrants from Lithuania until 2004, the trend line shifts upward from that year onwards. Again, these official figures almost surely do not represent the full scale of migration of Lithuanians to Russia, but they do suggest that immigration from Lithuania has risen in tandem with economic growth in its large neighbour.

For this study, twenty Lithuanian migrants to Moscow were interviewed in order to get a preliminary sense of the motivations, experiences and intentions of this significant and growing body of Lithuanian migrants. They were identified through a query to a Lithuanian school in Moscow, seeking Lithuanian immigrants to submit to an interview. The sample cannot therefore be considered to be representative of all Lithuanians living in Moscow, but the interviews do give a strong sense of the nature of the community of Lithuanian migrants in Moscow and some of the main aspects of their experience.

In brief, compared to the “typical” experience of Lithuanian migrants to the West, these interviews revealed significant differences in terms of social status and cultural integration, i.e., Lithuanian immigrants in Moscow...
experienced a rise, not a fall, in their social standing relative to their position in Lithuania. However, the interviews also revealed a strong similarity between Lithuanians in the West in that most migrants to Russia do not see themselves as integrating fully or permanently into the host society. Rather, they maintain strong ties to the homeland and see themselves as likely to return there sooner or later, maintaining a genuinely transnational identity.

Social Status

The social status of migrant workers in Moscow is extremely stratified, ranging from the humblest street sweeper to the top managers of the largest private and state-owned firms. The number of low-skilled immigrants from Central Asia in particular has been extremely high in recent years, such that their visibility has become pronounced and a matter of almost daily public contention. To the casual observer in Moscow, it might seem that only Kyrgyz sweep the streets, and only Tajiks build roads.

Indeed, over the past few years there has been something of a popular backlash against migrants from the south, including dozens of attacks, many fatal, on Tajiks and other minorities in St. Petersburg, Moscow, and other centres. After an outbreak of anti-migrant pogroms in several communities, the Russian Government passed regulations stipulating that only Russian citizens could sell products at markets. Popular television comedy shows such as “Nasha Russia” (a Russian remake of BBC’s “Little Britain”) feature skits that poke fun at “black” construction workers.

That said, Russia also has a long history dating from Peter the Great of bringing in foreign specialists to lead modernization or reform drives. The expatriate population of teachers, business managers, lawyers, accountants, and skilled workers is large, well established and respected in Moscow. Foreigners from the West are so numerous that they no longer are accorded with a special social privilege, but neither are they the subject of any particular envy, since the number of visibly wealthy Russians in Moscow dwarfs any display of affluence presented by the foreigners.

Judging from the personal situation and comments of the respondents, Lithuanians in Moscow belong almost exclusively to the relatively affluent class of skilled, white-collar workers. “All Lithuanians in Moscow are well established, they have excellent jobs. None of us are working here as orderlies in hospitals, nannies or dishwashers,” says Jolanta, a 42 year old mid-level private enterprise administrator in Moscow who was a teacher in Lithuania.

Another respondent, Audronė, a 34 year old mid-level manager in a private company, notes that many recent Lithuanian migrants are engaged in private business, giving them a significant degree of wealth and prestige. The majority of respondents (14/20) reported finding work in their chosen profession, at wages higher than they could earn in Lithuania. Of these, four were unemployed in Lithuania.

Several respondents commented on how Lithuanians are respected in Moscow, in contrast to immigrants from the Caucasus or Central Asia. Indeed, as an ethnic group, the status of Lithuanians in Russia has traditionally been quite high. Respondent Janina (48, teacher) noted that in Soviet times, even though all nationalities were supposed to be equal, there was a strict hierarchy, with Russians at the top and Central Asians at the bottom. In cultural and social terms, the Baltic peoples were basically at the top with the Russians, for they were considered to be Western, principled and orderly, like Germans.
These stereotypes persist, to the benefit of Lithuanians in Moscow today, who enjoy the status of quasi-Westerners. At the same time, as noted by Sylvia, a 44 year old bank clerk, Lithuanians have been able to integrate quite well into Russian society, first of all because they are virtually indistinguishable from Russians in visual terms, and also due to their good Russian language skills and the relative familiarity of Russian culture.

Respondent Dana, 34, a teacher, said that although Lithuanians think of themselves as Europeans, Russian culture and society is familiar to them, and thus a move to Moscow involved less cultural difference than a move to Ireland or the UK would have. In any case, she said that the familiarity of Russian culture was a significant factor in her decision to migrate eastwards.

Cultural Integration and Belonging

When asked about the extent of their integration into Russian society and sense of belonging towards Lithuania, almost all respondents highlighted the ease with which they are able to stay in touch with Lithuania and the Lithuanian language from Moscow. Many pointed to geographical proximity and the well-developed transportation infrastructure (i.e., the convenient and inexpensive overnight train between Moscow and Vilnius), as factors tending to reduce or even eliminate the need to “choose” between Russia and Lithuania.

On this issue the comments of Alina (38, manager of a large beauty salon) are apropos: “My daughters love watching Lithuanian films. Every summer they participate in ethnographic and archeological expeditions to Lithuania organized by the school here in Moscow. During these expeditions they probably learn more about Lithuania than many children who live there. They are growing up in a Lithuanian spirit: they want to visit Lithuania, they want eventually to live there, they believe that it is a wonderful country, and so they are happy to represent Lithuania in Moscow too, and they participate here in all sorts of events which have to do with Lithuania.”

Asked about their attitudes towards their Russian hosts, respondents noted that while some new arrivals have negative attitudes towards all things Russian, this usually passes within a year or two. Of course, there are many difficulties associated with life in Moscow, but these problems cease to be seen as something particularly Russian. A few respondents noted their frustration with having to justify their decision to move to Russia to their relatives and friends in Lithuania. According to Alina: “Moscow is a huge urban center, and whatever you say, there are many more opportunities here than in the small town from where we arrived (Kretinga). I wanted better opportunities for myself and my children.”

Less than half (7/20) of the respondents said that they would return to Lithuania for the sake of their children, even if they are not terribly enthusiastic about their prospects for social or economic well being there. The rest did not express this concern about whether to return or not, because the geographical proximity between two countries and the possibility go there “whenever you want,” has postponed the need to deal with this issue.

Silvija, (33, teacher) notes: “Lithuania is still my true home, and in Moscow, I just work.” Still, she will probably not return to Lithuania for another five years or so. At 33 years of age, she points out that Moscow, as a large metropolis, not only gives her better employment opportunities, but also more social freedom and choices for personal development. In Lithuania she says she was under pressure to start a family, whereas in Moscow she feels freer.
Conclusion

Lithuanian migrants who choose to go Moscow appear to do so for the benefits of high wages and working in their chosen profession, and have generally moved up the economic and social ladder as a result of their move. The physical similarity to Russians and status as quasi-Westerners gives them a privileged social status in Moscow, sharply differentiating them from immigrants from the southern republics of the Caucasus or Central Asia. Meanwhile, cultural familiarity and Russian language skills allow Lithuanians to integrate in Russian society with relatively little friction, and the geographical proximity of Lithuania allows more than easy communication with the homeland, but also the comfort that they are “right next to home.” Few respondents intended to remain in Moscow on a permanent basis, but neither did they describe concrete plans to return to Lithuania. The geographical and psychological “closeness” they feel to Lithuania may play a part in postponing the need to make a clear-cut decision in this regard.

Although this limited data does not allow for far-reaching comparisons between the experience of Lithuanians in Moscow and those in major Western centres like London, one tendency is quite clear. In addition to the relatively high salaries and social status enjoyed by Lithuanians in Moscow, the Russian capital’s status as a large, international city, as distinct from its less cosmopolitan surroundings, is an important aspect of their decision to move and/or remain there.

In this respect it might be appropriate to understand West-East migration not in terms of the movement of Lithuanians to a specific country, but as migration to one of a number of global cities that serve as transnational spaces, above and beyond the traditional geopolitical and cultural divide of East versus West. Indeed, the old Russian adage that “Moscow is not Russia,” takes on a special meaning for the mobile, multilingual, and highly-skilled migrants of the new Europe. The transnational space that has developed in the larger metropolises of both Eastern and Western Europe is a factor that deserves closer analysis in the study of the new European system of migration.

References

1. See for example the special issue (2008, Volume 34, Number 5) of the Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies.
7. www.stat.gov.lt
8. The figure of people with Lithuanian nationality living in Russia is to be distinguished from the 86,199 people born in Lithuania now living in Russia, which includes the many ethnic Russians born in Lithuania during Soviet times, who returned to Russia since independence [http://www.migrationdrc.org].

10. Ibid.
11. Maskvos Jurgio Baltrušaičio vardo lietuvių etninės kultūros bendrojo lavinimo vidurinė mokykla Nr 1247.

Violeta DAVOLIŪTĖ

LIETUVA IR NAUJOJI VAKARŲ-RYTŲ MIGRACIJA

Šiulaiškinės lietuvių migracijos studijos skiria dėmesį dideliams migruojančių žmonių srautams, besinaudojantys savo judėjimo laisve padidėjusioje Europos Sąjungoje. Mažiau ryškios tendencijos, kaip antai lietuvių migravimas į Rusiją ir kitas posivietines valstybes, gresia pavojus likti nepažeistoms. nors į Maskvą ar Almatą persikelusių žmonių skaičius labai mažas, palyginus su Londone ar Dubline įsikūrusių lietuvių skaičiumi, pirmųjų gyvensenos, patirtys ir prisitaikymo prie transnacionalaus gyvenimo būdo suteikia informatyvių žinių, palyginus su gerokai didesniu Vakaruose gyvenančių lietuvių kontingentu. Remiantis atliktais interviu, straipsnyje nagrinėjama Lietuvos emigrantų į rytus – klestine ekonomikos Maskvos ir Almatos miestu – patirtys, kreipiant ypatingą dėmesį į sociokultūrinus klausimus, liečiančius migrantų integraciją ir tapatybės politikos formavimą.