NO LANDS’ PEOPLE: IDENTITIES AND ATTITUDES OF MIGRANTS ORIGINATING FROM POST-SOVIET “FROZEN CONFLICT” AREAS

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Abstract

The collapse of USSR in late 1980’s and the beginning of 1990’s was accompanied by a series of local and regional separatist movements that have rapidly burst out into local violent confrontations or civil wars, resulting in so-called “frozen conflicts” in Abkhazia and South Ossetia (Georgia), Transnistria (Moldova) and others. Since 2014, the Eastern part of Ukraine (Donetsk and Luhansk regions) is undergoing a seemingly similar scenario. Large numbers of people originating from conflict zones have migrated to Western Europe in search for peace, better economic conditions and personal and professional accomplishment. How do these migrants identify themselves once settled in destination countries? How do they define their own “national identity”, as persons originating from unrecognized “States”? In this paper, we compare the cases of these separatist regions in an attempt to offer an insight into a new topic, situated at the confluence of migration studies, geopolitics and ethnology.

Keywords: migration studies, frozen conflicts, separatism, international relations, national identity

Introduction

Migrants “are never allowed to be the individuals each person, dead or alive, actually is. It’s like we’re meant to think of migrants like clones, like each migrant is not a person, just a ‘migrant’” (Smith, 2015). Indeed, each migrant has her/his particular and interesting history that makes the individual different from others. Nevertheless, despite the different migrant’s personalities, the term identity is making reference to certain common conceptions shared by a group of people.

Leaving a place is not without consequences for the one’s identity especially concerning emigration from post-Soviet conflict areas. This is due to the fact that such migrants were already impacted by a reconsideration of identity in the conflict

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areas. In consequence it is rather difficult to understand the eventual evolution of these migrants identity without considering the background they come from. This is why, in this article, the history and the evolution of the post-Soviet “frozen” conflicts will be presented first, concerning Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. It is important to highlight that the term “frozen conflict” is merely used in order to gather together all the territorial conflicts over post-Soviet areas and not to generalize their evolution.

It would be difficult to understand the consequences of such conflict on migrants’ identity without broadening their context. This is why, the second part of the research will expose an analysis on the post-Soviet massive emigration factors and also on the way identity was built and perceived during the Soviet era.

Regardless of the causes of armed conflicts, a great majority of them, if not all, lead to massive civil displacement. This is why the third part of the research will deal with the influence of the conflict on the migrants’ identity. Will the latter be changed due to the conflict? Will it be changed once the migrant emigrated? How can the fact to eventually maintain or choose another identity be explained? These are several questions that this paper will try to answer.

1. 1989-2018: State of play of conflicts on the post-Soviet space in Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine

A thorough understanding of post-Soviet realities in a series of Newly Independent States is not possible without acknowledging and analysing the historical premises that have led (or have been used as a pretext) to armed conflicts. Massive emigration from conflict zones (both, internal and external) is a direct consequence of violence against civilians. Therefore, understanding the genesis of military confrontations is crucial for the latter description of migrations’ characteristics: geographical directions, ethnical composition of migration fluxes, attitudes of conflict zone emigrants (including wartime refugees) towards their country of origin, etc. In this section we present briefly the development of “frozen conflict” situations since the late 1980’s until present time, in an attempt to obtain useful insights regarding subsequent massive emigration originating from these regions.

1.1. Abkhazian and South-Ossetian conflicts in Georgia

The premises of the military conflicts that have marked the past three decades in Georgia have been laid in the 1920’s and 1930’s. After the invasion of Georgia by the Red Army in 1921 and the formation of the Georgian Soviet government, South Ossetia has been incorporated as part of the newly-formed Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic (itself part of TSFSR – the Transcaucasian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic, one of the 4 founding republics of the USSR in 1922), and the Abkhazian Soviet Socialist Republic became a “treaty republic” with Georgia, part of the TSFSR since 1922 (Blauvelt, 2014; Saparov, 2015). In 1931, several years after the instalment of Joseph Stalin (a Georgian ethnic) as
Secretary General of the all-Union Communist Party (of Bolsheviks), and thus as the de facto leader of the USSR, the Abkhazian republic has been incorporated in the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic (GSSR), with the status of an autonomous republic. Besides the Abkhazian autonomous republic (in its North-Western part), the GSSR contained two other autonomous regions, namely South Ossetia in its Northern part and Adjaria in the South-West.

The following several decades have been marked by a generally peaceful coexistence of the three ethnically specific regions within the Georgian republic, nonetheless a number of public meetings in support of the Abkhazian minority have taken place since the 1950’s (Department of State, 1999). Inter-ethnic tensions between Georgians and the above-mentioned ethnic groups have spurred into demands for larger degrees of autonomy, and even separation from the GSSR. Gorbachev’s perestroika and glasnost’ have served as a trigger for attempts to translate the demands of minority ethnic groups into reality, in GSSR, as well as in numerous other cases in different Soviet republics (for example, in the Azerbaijani SSR, the Moldavian SSR, the Uzbek SSR, the Kazakh SSR, etc.). In many cases, these claims were to undermine the centrifugal tendencies of Soviet republics’ majority population that have stated their will for self-determination, and even for a complete separation from USSR. Subsequently, in a number of cases, the actions of ethnic minorities in Soviet national republics (against these republics’ liberation movements) have been supported by Russia, in the context of Soviet Union’s process of disaggregation in the late 1980’s and early 1990’s.

In 1989, ethnic claims of Abkhazians in favour of a return to the state of 1925 (complete separation of the Abkhazian republic from Georgia and the status of a full Soviet Socialist Republic) and of South-Ossetians regarding the region’s unification with North Ossetia (part of the Russian SFSR) have marked the beginning of conflicts with the Tbilisi authorities. In those years, Georgia itself was accomplishing its fight for separation from the USSR. The year 1990 was marked by the “war of laws” – a series of contradictory decrees and pieces of legislation, emitted by the authorities of Tbilisi and those of Sukhumi (the capital city of Abkhazia). In January of the following year the nationalist government of Georgia, launched a military operation against Abkhazian militias, in a goal to restore the control over the secessionist autonomous republic. These operations have spurred the internal conflict within the Georgian political class, as President Zviad Gamsakhourdia was facing a serious contestation movement of a large opposition coalition. Internal confrontation between factions of the National Guard (loyal to the government of Georgia) and military units supporting the opposition turned into a civil war that destabilized Georgia for the next several years and is still bearing its effects on today’s political realms in this Caucasian country. In January of 1992, after a series of defeats of the National Guard, Gamsakhourdia fled Tbilisi, finding a refuge in Armenia, then in a mountainous region of Chechnya, by then controlled by pro-independence leader Djokhar Dudayev. During the next 18 months Gamsakhourdia was the leader of a Georgian exile government, unrecognized by Tbilisi, nor by the international community. The Russian Federation intervened in the Georgian civil war, supporting (including by direct military operations) the
anti-Gamsakhourdia troops, and backing former USSR Minister of Foreign Affairs Eduard Shevardnadze, who was installed as President of Georgia, head of the State Council in March of 1992. In July of the same year Shevardnadze and Russian President Boris Yeltsin signed a cease-fire agreement, intended as a “solution” to the Abkhazian crisis, accepted by all parties. The agreement provided for the deployment of a peace-maintaining mission under the aegis of the United Nations (UNOMIG), and a larger degree of autonomy of the Abkhazian republic within the Georgian state. Nevertheless, these agreements have been disrespected one month later, when an open military conflict opposing Abkhazia and Georgian troops erupted. One year later, in July 1992, Gamsakhourdia and troops loyal to him were deployed in the Georgian region of Mingrelia, neighbouring Abkhazia. Following several months of combat during which the Abkhazians received important backing from Russian military, the Abkhazian troops established full control over the largest part of the Abkhazian autonomous republic (except for the Kodori valley), gaining even some small portions of Georgian territory. Georgian troops loyal to Gamsakhourdia have been defeated, himself being supposedly killed in a Mingrelian village on December 31st, 1993. The Georgian civil war and military conflicts with Abkhazia and South Ossetia in 1991-1993 resulted in tens of thousands of victims (including among civilian population) on all sides, and hundreds of thousands of internally displaced persons, of all ethnic groups, fleeing the territories of combat both within the two autonomous entities, as well as in the rest of the Georgian territory (Human Rights Watch, 1995).

An insurgency of Georgian paramilitary troops against the self-proclaimed government of Abkhazia took place several years later, in May of 1998, known as “the 6-day war of Abkhazia” and resulting in several tens of persons killed on both sides (including civilian casualties), and an estimated number of 30 to 40 thousand internal refugees, mainly Georgian ethincs fleeing Abkhazian territories. Ten years later, in August 2008, following a series of bombardments of South Ossetian military positions by Georgian troops, the Russian Federation introduced military forces in South Ossetia and Abkhazia and attacked the rest of the Georgian territory. An end to this war was put several days later, mainly due to the efforts of the French presidency of the European Union. Whilst Russian troops withdrew from the Georgian territory (controlled by the Tbilisi authorities), the Russian Federation recognized the “independence” of both South Ossetia and Abkhazia (several other states, among which Nicaragua and Venezuela, also recognized the “independence” of these secessionist territories briefly afterwards).

Since the end of the 1980’s, the population of Abkhazia dropped more than 50%, from an estimated number of 500,000 (in 1989, according to the last Soviet census) to 243,000 (est. 2015) (Abkhazian State Statistics Office). Military conflicts in the region have been followed by ethnic cleansing, massacres and forced mass expulsions of Georgian ethincs; in 2014 the total estimated number of

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internally displaced persons from the region of Abkhazia is of 227,700 and from South Ossetia – 35,000 (State Commission on Migration Issues, 2015). Ethnic cleansing of Georgians in the Abkhazian region has been recognized and condemned by the OSCE during its Summits in 1994, 1996 and 1997 (OSCE, 1994; OSCE, 1996; OSCE, 1997), as well as by the UN General Assembly resolution A/RES/62/249 in 2008 (United Nations General Assembly, 2008). External migration in the period 1990 – 2013 amounts to 890,100 persons, 74% of them migrating to the Russian Federation (State Commission on Migration Issues, 2015). The percentage of Georgian emigrants to post-Soviet republics amounts 86% if Ukraine, Armenia and Uzbekistan are counted together with Russia as destination countries. The total population of Georgia (according to the 2014 census) excluding the occupied territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia is of 3.720 million, this figure is significantly lower than the country’s population of 5.40 million in 1991 (including the two secessionist regions).

1.2. Transnistrian conflict in Moldova

The Transnistrian region is a territory situated in Eastern Europe, in the Eastern part of the Republic of Moldova, along the Dniester River. It has been subject to various political influences across its History passing from Moldovan to Turkish or Russian rule. After World War II until the end of the Soviet era, it was a part of the Moldovan Soviet Socialist Republic. Such political shifts triggered some controversial issues for the legal statute of this territory. Therefore, even though, nowadays, this territory is, de jure, part of the Republic of Moldova, the former Soviet Republic which acquired its independence after the Soviet Union collapse, Transnistria is also, de facto, a self-proclaimed government supported by Russian political, economic and military forces.

Republic of Moldova’s Declaration of independence adopted on August 27th, 1991 was not perceived in the same manner throughout the country. Some political forces saw an opportunity to reunite the young Republic with Romania (King, 2000), due to the former annexation by USSR from the Romanian Kingdom, triggered by the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact (in 1940, then in 1944, at the end of World War II).

On the other side, nostalgic pro-USSR forces were sceptic concerning the general rise of nationalist movements that tended to put an end to the Soviet rule and authority. This is why, in 1991, the Transnistrian region administration, the so-called “Supreme Soviet”, asked to join the USSR (CSCE, 1994). Since then, the political forces present in the region started a political propaganda against the main political changes of the newly created state, the Republic of Moldova. The main propaganda of separatists consisted in communicating a fear that Russian speaking minorities will be endangered by an eventual rapprochement between the Republic of Moldova and Romania. In the attempt of the separatist paramilitary formations to capture governmental facilities, several civilians and police forces died.

On March 2nd 1992, the Republic of Moldova integrated the United Nations community. After this major event for the newly created republic, the separatist
forces started a massive attack, backed by the Russian 14th army dislocated in the territory, against Moldovan governmental forces. In consequence the Moldovan president at that time, Mircea Snegur, authorized a military intervention in the region. Although the main separatist propaganda consisted in creating an aura of some kind of ethnical war between Russians and Romanians, such a characteristic of the war failed since, both Russians and Romanians fought on both sides of the conflict. The war caused civil and military casualties of around 279 persons on the Moldovan side and between 294 and 1093 persons in the Transnistrian region\(^2\). Around 100,000 civilians left the region.

The conflict lasted until July 21st 1992, when the ex-Russian president Boris Yeltsin and the Moldovan president signed the Agreement on peaceful resolution of the Transnistrian conflict in the Republic of Moldova, which put an end to the armed conflict (United Nations, 1992). The concluded agreement set also a tripartite Joint Control Commission (JCC) formed by representatives of the Republic of Moldova, Russian Federation and the Transnistrian region, which aimed at solving the conflict in the region.

The JCC main mission was to prevent further military escalations by establishing a demilitarized zone near the river borders. Russian, Moldovan and Transnistrian peacekeeping battalions were deployed from July 29th 1992 onwards (Vahl et al., 2004). Later, in 1994, the OSCE joined the JCC as an observer and mediator. Nowadays, the Commission is composed also of observers from Ukraine, European Union and the United States.

Though such measure gave more weight to the political negotiations, the legal status of the separatist region was never solved. While the so-called Transnistrian government insisted upon its independent status, the Moldovan Government tried to negotiate a special legal status for the region within the Republic of Moldova. The Russian troops began to decrease as the negotiations replaced the armed conflict. Nevertheless, Russia did not withdraw the former 14th Army from the region, despite its international engagement to proceed to a total evacuation, expressed in 1999 at the Istanbul Summit of the OSCE. Later it was clear that in order to maintain a constant and constructive dialogue, negotiations had also to be organized around less controversial subjects like the economic relations between the separatist region and the Republic of Moldova and other cooperation in the field of education, energy etc. This is why, on April 24th 2018, the JCC enacted a protocol which would allow Transnistrian vehicles for personal use to travel outside the Moldovan borders. Also on March 20th 2018, the first diploma of the University of Tiraspol “Taras Shevchenko” was recognized by the Moldovan Ministry of Justice\(^3\). The aim of such initiative is to create a single


\(^{3}\) The certification of diplomas from the Transnistrian region has started, Government of the Republic of Moldova, 20 March (retrieved from https://gov.md/ro/content/procesul-de-apostilare-actelor-de-studii-din-regiunea-transnistreana-demarat).
educational policy. Nevertheless, according to the ex-president of the OSCE Mission in Moldova, William H. Hill, the outcome of negotiations “is vague”, notwithstanding some progress4. Such an outcome is at least partly due to geopolitical influences exercised both from Russia and from the European Union concerning on the political priorities of the region.

In 2014 the European Union enacted the visa free regime for all the Moldovan nationals. Such a measure also triggered a stronger migration movement in the region, given that many of the inhabitants detain a Moldovan passport. In 2016, more than 30,000 Moldovan nationals from the region asked a biometric passport in order to beneficiate from such regime (Cenusa, 2017). On the other hand, the Moldovan – European Union Association Agreement also created some important economic privileges that lasted until 2016, for the local economy of the Transnistrian region. Despite all the advantages that the Transnistrian economy could obtain due to the regulation of local companies by the Moldovan law, the so-called “Transnistrian government” does not intend to cut off the ties with the Russian Federation. The latter is also providing important economic aids, but it is mainly due its military support, which maintains the de facto Transnistrian administration, that the Russian Federation is an essential ally for the Transnistrian region.

Last but not least, the military conflict in Eastern Ukraine changed public’s attitude towards Russian foreign policy, including the Russian role in the resolution of the Transnistrian conflict (Beyer and Wolff, 2016). During the last year the Moldovan and Ukrainian authorities instituted joint border control in several points that connect the Transnistrian region with Ukraine. Therefore the Transnistrian economic activities are, at least partly, submitted to the Moldovan Border legal regime5.

These recent evolutions in the region conducted the actual “Transnistrian President” Krasnoselsky to denounce “an economic blockade organized by the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine”6. In response to the “economic blockade”, several Transnistrian military operations were organized in the Security (demilitarized) Zone. Nevertheless, some Transnistrian economic agents are already acting partly under the Moldovan legislation in order to maintain their

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exports and have access to the European Union markets, which are more interesting for exportations than the Russian market.\(^7\)

Due to an instable rhythm of negotiations, it is hard to predict a long term outcome concerning the resolution of the conflict. Nevertheless, given that the main negotiation successes were achieved by partly integrating the Transnistrian region into the Moldovan legal space, it is expected that such a conjuncture would prepare the ground for more controversial negotiations like the legal status of the whole region and the Russian military presence.

### 1.3. The war in Donbass (Eastern region of Ukraine)

Donetsk and Luhansk People’s Republics (DPR and LPR) are since few years new self-proclaimed political entities in Eastern Europe. These two separatist territories were created in April 2014 and declared their “independence” from Ukraine in May of the same year. As Transnistria, these two autonomous republics are not recognized by any member state of the United Nations. Russia’s role is also ambiguous, as Vladimir Putin ordered last year that Russian administration services recognize “official” documents provided by the DPR and the LPR, such as passports.\(^8\) This fact is certainly useful for region’s inhabitants, as it allows them to go to Russia to work or study for example. In this part, we will describe how the context of the Ukrainian civil war can be related to the two other cases that we are working on (Republic of Moldova and Georgia) and how the migration process affects these two regions, especially emigration to Western Europe.

The Ukrainian Civil War began after the demonstrations of 2013 known as the Euromaidan movement – a name formed with “Euro” because of its pro-European orientation and “Maïdan” (Майдан) as it’s the Ukrainian word for “Square” and used to name the Square of Independence in the centre of Kiev – which led to the removal and the exile of the pro-Russian President Viktor Yanukovych in 2014. Protesters wanted to get closer to the European Union (EU) instead of Russia. But this successful revolution revealed the divisions within the Ukrainian society as some other demonstrations rose as a reaction to the Maïdan revolution in February 2014. These new protesters were defending Yanukovych and didn’t want Ukraine to replace Russia by the EU as its main ally. They were mostly Russian speakers and ethnically Russians settled in Ukraine before the fall of the USSR. These latter, pro-Russian demonstrations were numerically more important in the East of Ukraine, especially in the Donbass region (Donetsk and Luhansk), in some other cities such as Kharkiv and Odessa and in Crimea.

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\(^7\) Babici I. (2016), Slowing of the production process and of exports, or Why is Transnistria not attractive for investors, *LACT (Laboratory of Analysis of the Conflict in Transnistria), University “Lucian Blaga” of Sibiu (Romania)*, 23 August (retrieved from http://www.lact.ro/2016/08/23/ivan-babici-incetinirea-activitii-de-productie-si-de-export-sau-de-ce-transnistria-nu-este-atraactiva-pentru-investitori/).

(Sebastopol and Simferopol). Whereas this oblast finally integrated de facto the Russian territory after a controversial referendum in March 2014, the situation in the Donbass became more complex as the demonstrations evolved in armed separatist movements. The new Ukrainian government decided to send military forces to stop the insurrection but the rebels, thanks to military support probably coming from Russia (even though the Kremlin never recognized it), resisted to the Ukrainian army. To face this crisis, two major international summits known as the Minsk Agreements were held in the capital of Belarus in 2014 and 2015. Nevertheless, these agreements which were supposed to stop the military combats and to establish a ceasefire were not and are still not (June, 2018) respected by both parties as the OSCE explains it (Prentice et al., 2017). More than 10 000 people, including large numbers of civilians, already died because of this conflict according to the UN (UNHCR, 2017).

In Donbass, contrary to the situation in Abkhazia and Transnistria, the conflict is still open. Speaking of a “frozen” conflict in Ukraine would be a mistake. If there are separatist territories such as in Moldova and Georgia, the current situation can’t be compared when we are looking at migrations. Indeed, most of the time, migrants coming from the Donbass are not considered as migrants but as refugees. Contrary to the concept of migration which implies the idea of a choice – even if in fact it is often the consequence of some issues – the status of refugee implies that people were forced to leave their own country against their own will because of war or other political reason. However, this kind of “emigration” also implies that people will go back to their motherland as soon as the political situation will become safe once again. We will now focus on the profile of those migrants and, discuss their destinations.

As we are studying a territory which is still the theatre of an armed confrontation, it is hard to obtain reliable data concerning migration. However, it seems that most of the migrants are internally displaced people. According to the Ministry of Social policy of Ukraine, there were almost 1.5 million internally displaced persons in Ukraine in December 2017 (IOM, 2017). Many of them are planning to return to their home when the conflict will end and an important part already did, mostly elderly people aged over 60 (IOM, 2017). When leaving the Ukraine, most refugees from the Donbass region decided to move to the Russian Federation, which is logical as it is geographically the nearest country. As most of the inhabitants of the Donbass are either Russians or Ukrainians speaking Russian, it is also the closest country for them in terms of culture. According to the BBC, in 2015, more than 600 000 Ukrainian refugees stayed in Russia. Many other

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Ukrainians who don’t want to be implied in the civil war went to other neighbouring countries such as Poland, Romania and Moldova for example\textsuperscript{11}.

However, there is also an increase of the number of Ukrainians who migrate to Western European countries. According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), “The number of Ukrainians residing in the EU is constantly growing. In 2015, there were 905,200 of them. They constituted over 6\% of all foreigners from third countries in the European Union. The majority of Ukrainians reside in Italy (238,000), Poland (336,000), Germany (112,000), the Czech Republic (113,000), and Spain (84,000) (IOM, 2016, p. 11).

Whilst the war is obviously the most important cause of this massive emigration, we may also notice that the economic situation with a huge inflation and low wages was a key factor before the war. But once again, the EU wasn’t the main destination. However, Western Europe seems to be attractive for some precise categories of migrants such as for educational purpose (IOM, 2016). Germany, Spain and Italy are also the main destination for asylum seekers, even if their number remains low (IOM, 2016). Indeed, most of them did not get the status that they need to stay as refugees, even if countries such as France don’t consider Ukraine as a safe country anymore since the beginning of the war\textsuperscript{12}.

Western European countries are not a privileged destination for Ukrainian migrants and we don’t hear a lot about them as some pro-Russian media remind us by comparing them with other people migrating towards Western Europe like Syrian or African people\textsuperscript{13}. Even though these comparisons make no sense because of the difference of numbers between these communities in Western Europe, the question of the identity that Ukrainians migrants and more specifically the ones coming from the Donbass are claiming is crucial for understanding their identity choice in their destination country.

2. Emigration and identity in post-Soviet states

Since its creation as an outcome of the Socialist Revolution of 1917, Soviet Russia and USSR (since 1922) has implemented in its regions inhabited by ethnic groups different from the Russian majority a series of “national identity experiments”. The measures implemented by Soviet authorities ranged from mass russification of local populations (ex: Eastern Ukraine), to displacement of autochthon ethnic groups and re-designing the local and regional ethnic equilibrium (ex: Caucasus, Crimea), to subversive attempts to create a new “ethnic


\textsuperscript{13} Bechet-Golovko K (2019), Ukrainian Refugees: These Migrants That Nobody Wants to See, ReseauInternational.net, 09 September (retrieved from https://reseauinternational.net/les-refugies-ukrainiens-ces-migrants-que-lon-ne-veut-pas-voir/).
identity” (ex: Romanian-speaking minority on the Left bank of the Dniester, in Soviet Ukraine).

Massive emigration from “frozen conflict” zones after the downfall of the USSR has affected, among others, regions with altered national identities. In this section we describe the main traits of massive emigration originating from the post-Soviet space after 1991 and outline several aspects that are considered to be crucial for the national self-identification of migrants originating from “frozen conflict” regions.

2.1. Massive emigration from post-Soviet countries after 1991

The implosion of USSR at the beginning of the 1990’s was accompanied by an endemic economic and financial crisis that generated deep social despair in the 15 Newly Independent States (including the Russian Federation). Tributary to centralized economy during the Soviet years and conceived as a unitary industrial system serving primarily the military needs, industrial production units suffered the most after the rapid downfall of the Soviet Union, leaving within the timeframe of several months millions of people without jobs, with no professional or personal perspectives, on the edge of a disaggregating society. This was particularly true in small Soviet republics (besides Russia, Ukraine, Belarus and Kazakhstan – the “big four” of Soviet-era economy), deprived of any perspectives of development and social stabilization (Bertin et al., 2008).

In the following years, the trends that have been observed in the post-Soviet republics ranged from a relatively rapid economic recovery (in the case of Baltic States), to continuous deepening of the economic crisis, with a continuous fall of living standards (in republics like Moldova, Armenia, Georgia, etc.). Economic despair reigning over the post-Soviet countries during their first decade of independence generated a large scale vague of economic emigrants. Due to geographic proximity, no-visa regime and linguistic and cultural proximity (the vast majority of non-Russian post-Soviet ethnics were fluent in Russian), large numbers of migrants chose the Russian Federation as their country of destination. In the following years (especially since the beginning of the 2000’s) large numbers of migrants chose Western- and Central-European countries as a destination (Vremis et al., 2012).

A number of push- and pull-factors may explain this phenomenon of massive emigration. In the case of persons originating from the secessionist regions of Moldova, Georgia and (later on, since 2014) Ukraine, economic reasons have added to those related to military conflicts: indeed, fleeing a region at war was the only possible way to save their lives and that of their families. In a situation of quasi-absence of proper conditions to be hosted within their countries (poverty, lack of infrastructure and legal framework, lack of professional and personal perspectives), the choice to emigrate towards the Russian Federation or a European country imposed itself as self-evident. Thus, secessionist regions have undergone an even more accentuated de-population trend than the rest of the “countries of origin”. For example, Transnistria has lost approx. 37 % of its population since
whereas the same indicator in Abkhazia amounts to about 52 %15 (to be compared with a loss of 19 % for the rest of the Republic of Moldova (Paladi et al., 2015), and 17 % loss for the rest of Georgia, over the same period of time). Large numbers of persons originating from the secessionist regions have undergone displacement more than once: first as Internally Displaced Persons (during periods of military conflicts), subsequently from the country of origin towards another country. The main pull-factors to be cited in this context, besides economic prosperity (relative in Russia, more prominent in Western countries) and social stability, are to be attributed to possibilities, for many persons fleeing conflict areas, to recover the feeling of personal security for themselves and for their families (Guzun et al., 2017).

Understanding the phenomenon of massive emigration originating from separatist regions in Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine is conditioned by a study of these persons’ identity – first of all, national and cultural. Given the complexity of issues faced by their native regions during the past several decades, defining such an identity becomes a matter of interdisciplinary studies and is subject to adjustments in a continuously changing context. In this Chapter, we intend to give some insights on possible interpretations of the notion of ‘identity’, as potentially perceived by people with such a complicated recent history.

2.2. Identity and nationalism: theoretical approach and Soviet-era context

In this part we will discuss the notion of identity and more specifically, the idea of national identity. The traditional approach distinguishes two types of nationalism formulated during the 18th and the 19th centuries. The first one is the German definition, promoted by thinkers such as von Herder and Fichte. According to them, the nation is based on common language and culture. This conception is called “ethnic nationalism” as it is mainly based on ethnic attributes, thus one’s nationality depends on the person’s birthplace. This German vision of nationality is opposed to the French one which advocates for a “civic nationalism”, based in theory on individual choice. The famous sentence of the philosopher Renan is probably the clearest way to express this conception of the national idea: “the nation is a daily plebiscite” (Renan, 1882).

More recently, the concept of nation was criticized and analysed once again by different thinkers. Most of them show that the nation is not something “natural” but merely a construction established by elites during the past centuries in order to federate the people under a new entity, the nation-state. Benedict Anderson speaks of “imagined communities”: they are “imagined” because one will never know all

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the other members of the nation, and they are a “community”, as the nation is thought of as a “deep, horizontal comradeship” (Anderson, 1991).

In the cases that we are working on in this article, the analysis of Ernest Gellner and the research of Rogers Brubaker could also be insightful. For Gellner (Gellner, 1983), if in a nation-state there is a community which doesn’t share the same “ethnicity” (here meaning “culture and language”) as the dominant one, a new national claim will appear. In the case of Transnistria and Donbass, the abandon of the Russian language as an official one was one of the reasons causing the outburst of separatist movements, therefore confirming this analysis. According to Rogers Brubaker (Brubaker, 1996), three kinds of forces may enter in conflict inside the nation: the “nationalizing nationalism” that emerges when a minority ethnic group becomes a majority in a newly-formed nation; the “trans-border nationalism” which consists in the attempt of another country to get a territory because of the presence of people of the same ethnicity on it; and finally, the “minority nationalism” which is quite similar to the marginalized ethnicity as defined by Gellner. In our study, we could consider the cases of separatist regions of Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia as belonging to the “nationalizing nationalism” category, combined to a context of “trans-border nationalism” (sustained by Russia in the case of Crimea, for example) mixed with “minority nationalism” in the case of Abkhazia and South Ossetia (also sustained by Russia). In order to conclude on the idea of identity and nationalism, after having seen that it plays a crucial role in modelling countries’ and regions’ states of stability, we could also criticize its primacy, seeing that there do exist other attributes to individual identity (religion and family, for example) that could be more important for expressing peoples’ identity.

In USSR, the role of the national identity was nevertheless crucial and it is necessary to analyse the Soviet definitions of nation and nationalism in order to understand the conflicts in post-USSR countries, including the difficulties and challenges faced in this respect in the post-Soviet space. First, it is essential to note that the Russian word “национальность”, (pronounce ‘natsional’nost’) means ethnicity. There is a different word to express the citizenship, which is “гражданство” (pronounce ‘grazhdanstvo’). This link between the terms ‘nation’ and ‘ethnicity’ shows how much this last principle is important to define one’s identity in Russian. In USSR everyone had the Soviet citizenship, but on every passport the nationality, indicated in the famous “point five”, was different: one could be considered as Russian, Ukrainian, Moldovan, Abkhazian, etc. During the second half of the 1970’s, it became an obligation for every USSR citizen to get a passport at the age of 16. Whilst this document was used by the Soviet administration to discriminate on the basis of ethnicity, it was at the same time an instrument for every citizen to build his/her own national identity, especially when the parents belonged to two different ethnic groups as in this case the child had to choose the ethnicity of one of them.

After the October Revolution, Lenin accepted a federation of Republics in the name of “peoples’ self-determination”, and nationalism remained a key factor of individual identity even if it didn’t fit well with the Marxist doctrine. Even Stalin with his aggressive centralization and russification, added to mass deportation of
ethnic minorities, didn’t succeed in the eradication of the national feeling of any minority group.

Finally, after the fall of USSR, most of the old Soviet Republics founded their sovereignty on this national identity. If in some cases this was done by avoiding most troubles (ex: the Baltic States), in many cases it led to ethnic conflict such as in Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. The main reason for this tragedy is the return of nationalism as the main ideological totem after the fall of Soviet socialism, adding to a will to restore traditions which were shattered by Soviet administration.

As we have seen, the national and especially ethnic identity was and still is crucial for people and is with no doubt one of the cause of persisting conflicts in Eastern Europe. We will now look at its possible role in the definition of migrants’ identity.

2.3. Identities in separatist regions of Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia: modern realities vs. sensitive historical considerations

The population’s identity is often an essential element for the survival and sustainability of a State. This is especially crucial during the early stages of an attempted formation of a State, as it is the case for the separatist territories of Transnistria, Donbass, South Ossetia and Abkhazia. How was the perception of “identity” transformed after the creation of these de facto States? In many ways, these regions have common points concerning their process of transformation, from territories that are (were) parts of already existing States to unrecognized de facto States. One of the common elements is Russia’s role in this process, be it official or “unofficial” (i.e. not assumed by Russian leadership). The latter could also be explained by the Russian policy that tends to avoid the spread of Western presence in ex-Soviet republics. Nevertheless, the way “national identity” of these de facto States was built and perceived, differs despite a certain degree of similitude. What are the common and what are the different elements concerning the question of “national identity” in these unrecognized States?

The region of Transnistria is populated by several ethnolinguistic groups, mainly including Romanians, Russians and Ukrainians. In order to reinforce the identity of the de facto state, the local separatist administration tends to create a “Transnistrian nationality”, derived from the name of the region. The local separatist authorities encourage public initiatives which aim to spread the idea of a supra-nationality, “the Transnistrian people”. Such a concept is close to the French perception of the State nation where, despite the presence of different minorities, all of them are French because they are born or live in France. Therefore, the Transnistrian passport law reflects a new conception of nationality, where the

mention of ethnic affiliation in the passports is optional\textsuperscript{17}, which is different from the Soviet “nationality”, defined as a conjunction of Soviet citizenship and compulsory ethnic affiliation. In this attempt to “create” a new people, the local administration tends to accentuate the difference between the ethnolinguistic groups, for example, by stating that Ukrainians from Ukraine and Ukrainians from Transnistria are slightly different. Such a “new nation” is reinforced by the education system in the region. For example, the “Moldovan language” taught in Cyrillic alphabet tends to highlight the difference between “Moldovans” and “Romanians”. Although such politics is intensively implemented, in practice, the local population is not entirely convinced by such a new approach with regards to their identity. Also, in practice, the dominant language is Russian. A great majority of people living in Transnistria still perceives the variety of ethnolinguistic groups as a criterion of nationality. For example, Moldovans that leave this region consider themselves mainly as Moldovans. Also, large numbers of Russian-speaking persons from Transnistria, possess the Russian passport, which is a way, especially for the young generation, to emigrate and seek better perspectives in Russia\textsuperscript{18}. A recent study revealed that the majority of migrants originating from Transnistria do not envisage in the near future to go back to the region, or to invest in it (Ostavnaia, 2018). This could clearly indicate that most of them will not spotlight their “Transnistrian identity” but probably refer to themselves based on their ethnical belonging.

The Donbass separatist regions of Donetsk and Luhansk also promote the creation of a new identity, based on the idea of being a citizen of the \textit{de facto} “Donbass republics”. This new concept seems to be acceptable for a non-negligible part of the local population: already 18 \% of Donetsk inhabitants consider themselves as “citizens of the Donetsk People Republic” (Korzhov, 2006). Such an idea is being actively reinforced by the fact that the majority of the inhabitants in the region of Donbass were more attached to their region than to their country as a whole (post-independence Ukraine), unlike inhabitants of Western Ukrainian regions such as Lviv. The consequence of such disparity between the different regions of Ukraine is partly explainable by disastrous post-Soviet consequences for the economy of Eastern Ukraine’s regions that once were the shop window of socialism. Unable to become a “great region” forged by strong economy and social stability again, the inhabitants of Donbass, unlike the inhabitants of Lviv, gradually lost their confidence in the central authorities and developed a spirit of opposition towards the politics of the central power (Korzhov, 2006). Concerning the language policy, although formally there are two of official languages, Ukrainian and Russian, the latter is the main language in practice.


In the Georgian separatist regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, it is even more difficult to speak about the construction of a new identity, since, for example, the Abkhazians are a specific ethnic group that had, in their history, periods of autonomy, unlike the “Transnistrian” or “Donetsk” “nations”. The Abkhaz people for example, perceived Georgians as an enemy since the latter populated the territory of Abkhazia as a consequence of Stalinist deportations of Abkhazians in the 1930’s and 1940’s. Nevertheless, the de facto Republic of Abkhazia is strongly supported by the Russians in order to contain Western influence in Georgia. The official languages are Abkhazian and Russian, though the latter is highly used in the region.

Conclusion

As we have seen, Abkhazia with Georgia, Transnistria with Moldova and the Donbass region with Ukraine are engaged in conflicts which will probably not be settled in a definitive manner in a foreseeable future. Situations of military conflicts followed by economic despair and lack of social stability led to a massive emigration from regions already dealing with significant and complex difficulties since the fall of USSR. Thus, the question of the identity of migrants originating from non-recognized states arises: how do they identify themselves in the countries of destination (mainly Russia or Western Europe countries)? Considering the legacy of the Soviet ideology, the ambiguous definition of nationality in Russian – which is an official language in each of these separatist states – and the ethnic composition of the separatist states which are completely different as Abkhazia is mainly composed of Abkhaz whereas Transnistria is formed of approximately a third of Moldovans, a third of Russians and a third of Ukrainians, and Donbass population is mainly Russian or Russian-assimilated Ukrainian; we could assume that defining an identity might be delicate for these migrants themselves. Moreover, finding a common pattern model of self-identification does not appear feasible at this time.

This issue had not been treated before in the academic field and giving a thorough answer to the questions that have arisen during our research is rather hazardous given the scarcity of statistical research data. However, some hypothesis can already be formulated, basing initial assumptions on the prevalent character of ethnic belonging vs. genuine regional (or “state”, even though un-recognized) identity. Future research should go further in order to understand the precise way in which these migrants define themselves, and to take into consideration the complexity of factors’ interactions in forging these new ways of self-identification.
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