



Introduction to the Special Issue: Migration and East Central Europe – a Perennial but Unhappy Relationship

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In March 1929, the ambassador of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes sent a query to the Kingdom's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. His message concerned the repatriation of immigrants who were citizens of the country but were of Magyar or German ethnic background:

Since these people had left our Kingdom dissatisfied with the new conditions, and because they represent an alien ethnic element which is of no use to our national state – on the contrary, according to the embassy's opinion it should be in our interest that there are as few of these people as possible, especially in the border areas –, the embassy kindly requests instructions from the Ministry as to whether the return of these people is opportune.¹

Five months later, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs replied:

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs has the honor of informing the Royal Embassy that requests for repatriation to the Kingdom by our citizens of Magyar and German nationality should be dismissed under whichever pretext. The return of these a-national elements to our country must be obstructed to the furthest extent possible.

Obviously, the government of the Kingdom wanted to impede the return of citizens who were not considered part of the South Slavic nation, while “Yugoslav” emigrants were encouraged to return. The same reasoning based on a notion of ethnic selection also applied to applications for permission to leave the country. In 1924, the Ministry for Social Policy, which was responsible for emigration affairs, informed its departments that the emigration of so-called

1 This and the following quotes are from Ulf Brunnbauer, *Globalizing Southeastern Europe. Emigrants, America and the State since the 19th Century*, (Landham, Md.: Lexington, 2016), 236–38. See also: Ulf Brunnbauer: “Emigration Policies and Nation-building in Interwar Yugoslavia,” *European History Quarterly* 42, no. 4 (2012): 602–27; Aleksandar R. Miletić, *Journey under surveillance: The overseas emigration policy of the kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes in global context, 1918–1928* (Berlin–London: Lit, 2012).

“a-national” families should be encouraged, while “national” families should be denied permission to emigrate. In 1925, the same ministry sent a circular to the Department for State Security with the following declaration:

Regarding the emigration of national minorities the Ministry shares the view that their emigration must be favored. The relevant authorities have agreed and maintain their interest in this issue; from that it follows that this is the official line for implementing emigration policies.

In 1926, the director of the Kingdom’s Emigration Commissariat in Zagreb, Fedor Aranicki, joyfully reported to the Minister for Social Policy that almost half of the emigrants who had left the country over the course of the few years that had passed had been “a-national” elements, and he recommended setting higher goals for the future: “One of the tasks of our emigration policy is to exert influence over the emigration of the a-national minorities in the future as well, in order to return the affected regions to their original national character.”

Fast forward some ninety years and the region appears still to be obsessed with the connection between migration and ethnicity. Control of migration continues to be seen as a tool of nation-building, and officially spread fears of immigrants underpin the legitimacy of increasingly authoritarian governments. Today, though, attention is paid primarily to immigration. The Visegrád governments in particular excel in promoting xenophobic stances in their concerted efforts to prevent the immigration of people seen as innately alien and unassimilable. Hungary’s Prime Minister Viktor Orbán uses his hardline policies against refugees from the Middle East to portray himself as the defender of Europe against imagined Islamization. Polish strongman Jaroslav Kaczynski claims that refugees and immigrants would spread unknown diseases, and in doing so he ironically employs stereotypes similar to those prevalent (and used) in Germany in the first years of the twentieth century, when the public began to grow increasingly concerned about the millions of Eastern Europeans (among them many Poles) traveling through Germany on their way to North America.

Similar to interwar Yugoslavia, East Central and Southeast European governments pursue a highly selective policy of entry: while they present non-European immigrants as mortal dangers, they invite co-ethnic citizens of neighboring countries to immigrate and generously extend citizenship to them. Hundreds of thousands of citizens of Moldova and Macedonia have enjoyed the privilege of receiving, respectively, Romanian and Bulgarian passports, only

to use them to settle in one of the prosperous countries in Europe. Two things seem obvious: conceptualizations of international migration are highly ethnicized or even racialized. People's alleged cultural or biological properties determine whether they are welcome or not, not for instance economic or humanitarian considerations. Second, public and political attitudes towards migration are closely tied to deep-seated anxieties, including fears of loss, alienation, domination, and marginalization, and these fears can be easily exploited by populist politicians.

One of the factors contributing to these fears is the demographic crisis in which all of the countries of the region find themselves, though to different degrees. What the Hungarian demographer Attila Melegh has pointedly termed “demographic emptying” underpins much of the hysteria about defending the nation and ensuring its survival (right-wing populists would rather see their nation die out than to let migrants in). Similar fears about emigration as a loss to the nation sparked attempts to restrict it a century ago. As Tara Zahra has persuasively shown in her recent book, political debates about international migration in East Central Europe and the Balkans have been closely tied to perceptions of marginalization and peripherality and visions of state development since the late nineteenth century.²

East Central and Southeastern Europe past and present offer textbook examples of what Sebastian Conrad examines in his seminal global history of the (pre-1914) German Empire:³ the globalization of the flow of labor, goods, and ideas breeds its own contradiction in the form of nativist responses, which define belonging not in terms of shared citizenship, but in terms of narrow kinship solidarity, i.e. “blood” vs. cosmopolitan ideas. This contradiction is hardly new. Transnationalism and nationalism flourish not only in tandem but even in a synergetic or parasitic relationship. These ironies, however, are usually lost on nationalists. In the most extreme case, this connection is not ironic but fatal: extreme nationalisms regularly produce waves of refugees, which generate new transnational entanglements, both on the level of everyday social interactions and on the level of high diplomacy.

Here again, the Balkans and East Central Europe offer a great deal of material for comparative research, for example on refugee accommodation strategies after World War One and today, resettlement practices in empires and nation states, and international relief efforts in the interwar period and after

2 Sebastian Conrad, *Globalisierung und Nation im Deutschen Kaiserreich* (Munich: Beck, 2010).

3 Tara Zahra, *The Great Departure: Mass Migration from Eastern Europe and the Making of the Free World* (New York–London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2017).

1945. Large-scale refugee movements, such as the flight of almost 1.5 million Greeks from Turkey to Greece in 1923, were met with new patterns of state intervention. The Balkans and Central Europe in the interwar period and again after 1945 were essential laboratories for the development of international refugee protection mechanisms which still exist today and which we now see crumbling in Europe as, one by one, the countries of the region ignore their obligations according to the Geneva Convention. The politics of asylum is, unfortunately, terribly ignorant of its history.

The close link between nationalism, nation-building, and migration is not the only continuity in the rich migration history of the region. East Central European and Balkan societies have also faced an almost constant pressure to emigrate for economic reasons. With the exception of the period of communist rule, when voluntary emigration was banned or highly restricted in all of the states of Eastern Bloc (with the exception of Yugoslavia), significantly more people left the region than immigrated to it. Under communism, these streams were partially redirected to domestic destinations (for example, from rural settlements to larger cities or to areas from which German speakers had been expelled). This points to the structural position of the region in the international division of labor. It is a reservoir of relatively cheap labor from where, most of the time, workers go to places where capital can employ them, and not the opposite way round (though the inflow of foreign direct investment after 1989 has somewhat reversed this relationship). In many ways, the region can therefore be considered a laboratory for the study of the long-term (and also short-term) effects of migration and the ways in which the dynamics of economic migration interrelate with state-building and political change.

As a social process with manifold, complex and often contingent cultural, economic, and political consequences, migration has shaped the societies of East Central and Southeastern Europe in many, often unforeseen ways. It helped connect the region with global currents, but it also regularly was met with nationalistic backlashes which aim to reinforce borders and state control over movement. Yet despite the widely recognized significance of migration for the past and present of the region, the scholarship about it is still very unbalanced, with important lacunae, especially with regard to its history. This was motivation enough for the *Hungarian Historical Review* to solicit contributions for a special issue on the history of migration and refugee movement in East Central Europe and the Balkans. The editors hope that this initiative will be another step in firmly putting the region on the map of international historiography about migration.

The late Holm Sundhaussen's call to consider the history of Southeastern Europe as a history of migration (and to strengthen research efforts towards that goal) should not have been in vain.⁴

The articles in this issue explore a wide range of topics, and their geographic and chronological spread is also broad. Taken together, they not only highlight the importance of migration for the history of all the countries of the region, they also make clear that the current hysteria about migration is misplaced: first, because migration has been a fact of life for centuries and second, because societies prove remarkably successful in the integration of newcomers in the long term. Migration is one of the driving forces of cultural innovation, and more often than not, its economic benefits outweigh its costs. The articles also point to one of the many paradoxes of migration: while it is often a result of constraints, despair, or even violence, it also offers a chance for individual agency. Migration is linked not only to fears but also to hopes. Its consequences can never be predicted because each act of migration creates new social interactions, which in turn generate new dynamics which ultimately can change underlying social structures. But this is precisely the business of historians: to reveal the structural determinants of human life on the one hand and highlight the contingent practices enabled (and constrained) by these structures on the other. Hindsight teaches us at least one lesson: history never ends.

4 Holm Sundhaussen, "Geschichte Südosteuropas als Migrationsgeschichte: Eine Skizze," *Südost-Forschungen* 65/66 (2006/2007): 422–77.