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Failed inclusions: transnational employment and educational attempts among Bosnian Croats in Sweden

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This paper discusses empirical examples of Bosnian Croats and their children who settled in Sweden due to the 1990s war in their country. Their local economic and social incorporations have been relatively successful and not hindered by their transnational practices, which involve three countries (Sweden, Bosnia and Croatia). The paper focuses on the attempts to create employment and to gain education that make use of transnational spaces. My research participants did not use transnational options out of necessity, but out of perceived unproblematic possibilities of personal choice. Still, transnational options did not necessarily bring about satisfactory results: efforts were not necessarily rewarded in the expected ways. This invokes theoretical considerations of why this might be the case. The main theoretical point made in the paper pertains to the concept of community. It is deconstructed in line with the research participants' expectations and disappointments that make clear the imagined character of 'ethnic communities' as well as the dynamics of local inclusions, which prove to be equally complex in any location within a transnational space.

Transnational social spaces

Discussing issues of identification, belonging and social establishment among contemporary migrants would hardly make sense if their practices and identification processes were seen as only being embedded in events, encounters, places and institutions in the country of immigration. A transnational perspective is needed, as it implies the recognition, description and an understanding of the reasons for, and the effects of, the existence of *transnational social fields* (Basch et al. 1994; Glick Schiller

et al. 1992, 1995) or *transnational social spaces* as defined by Thomas Faist (2000: 200).¹

Transnational social spaces involve the accumulation, use and effects of various sorts of capital. They consist of combinations of sustained social and symbolic ties and the positions in networks and organizations that can be found in multiple states.

Importantly, transnational spaces denote dynamic processes, not static notions of ties and positions: social space and social action are inseparable. In this paper, transnationalism thus refers to *sets of practices* of connection ‘elsewhere’ that make a difference ‘here’. These practices affect migrants’ feelings and understandings of their own belonging but also the lived experiences of inclusion and exclusion among people they perceive as “their own”. While the accumulation of various sorts of capital is very often accompanied by shared migration-related discourses (including homeland-originated diaspora discourses), their effects are tested through individual practice, in every situation anew, with uncertain outcomes.

This paper takes up some experiences of migrants who used their social and symbolic ties, but faced obstacles when trying to convert different kinds of capital in a transnational context. After presenting the examples, I will suggest a theoretical explanation of why transnational options did not bring about satisfactory results – why these people’s expectations ended in disappointment.

Refugees from Bosnia-Herzegovina in Sweden

The examples come from my long-term research into diasporic identifications, political attitudes and cultural priorities of labour- and refugee-migrants from Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina who live in Sweden. While labour migrants came to Sweden three

¹ “Transnational social spaces consist of combinations of sustained social and symbolic ties, their contents, positions in networks and organizations, and networks and organizations that can be found in multiple states. These spaces denote dynamic processes, not static notions of ties and position. Cultural, political, and economic processes in transnational social spaces involve the accumulation, use, and effects of various sorts of capital, their volume and convertibility: economic capital, human capital, such as educational credentials, skills and know-how, and social capital, mainly resources inherent in or transmitted through social and symbolic ties” (Faist 2000: 200).

or four decades earlier (see Povrzanović Frykman 2001), these examples pertain to people who got residence permit as refugees in the early 1990s.²

More than 70,000 people originating from Bosnia-Herzegovina lived in Sweden in 2008. By 2008, some 20,000 had permanent residence permits, and more than 50,000 acquired Swedish citizenship while retaining the Bosnian one (*Pregled stanja* 2008: 58). In the report on status of their citizens living abroad (*Pregled stanja* 2008), Bosnian Ministry for human rights and refugees highlights the fact that, due to the policy of dual citizenship, Bosnians in Sweden are in far more favourable position than those in other European countries. It is especially stressed that, even for those with permanent residence, moving to another EU country does not affect the right to residence in Sweden. Bosnians with Swedish citizenship are free to move and live in any country of their choice (including Bosnia-Herzegovina that is not in EU), without losing Swedish citizenship. Taking that into consideration, and knowing about the intensity of migrants' transnational connections, it is no surprise that only 149 Bosnians officially returned to Bosnia from Sweden in 2001-2005 (*Pregled stanja* 2008: 59), notwithstanding the fact that Sweden implements 30 million euro into different development programmes in that country, including the programmes facilitating the repatriation of Bosnian citizens.

The commonality and intensity of these people's transnational connections mentioned above is, however, not only a result of the war in the 1990s. In different periods of Yugoslav history, people living abroad have been described in terms of *workers temporarily working abroad*, *Gastarbeiter*, *emigration* and – in post-Yugoslav countries – *diaspora*; the terms reflect changes in policies and political attitudes towards them (see Povrzanović Frykman 2001). Visits by the people who lived in Western Europe but regularly came back because of family relations and social obligations have been a common, everyday phenomenon in Yugoslavia since the 1960s; they are incorporated into local experiences in manifold ways.

² According to the Bosnian Ministry for human rights and refugees, 73,380 people from Bosnia-Herzegovina applied for residence permit in Sweden between 1992 and 2005 (*Pregled stanja* 2008).

Examples

To my question about the reasons for her and her husband's decision to return to Croatia after some years as refugees in Sweden, a woman who left Bosnia in her twenties, claimed that they believe that "it is the most natural and the most normal to live with one's own people, if possible".³

Fleeing Bosnia with her baby-son, she first came to her relatives who lived in Sweden, to embark on the refugee path only after she was joined by her husband who managed to escape drafting in Sarajevo. After two and a half years in a refugee collection centre, and the starting difficulties, they eventually got jobs in a vibrant Swedish firm, and made quick advancements due to the recognition of their professional backgrounds and personal qualities. Together with their children, they are regular visitors of the events organised by the local (labour migrant-based) Croatian association. They are also regular and visible members of the local Croat Catholic community.

Unlike the majority of 1990s refugees from Bosnia and Herzegovina, despite having full employment and residence permit, they decided to return. However, 'return' meant resettling in a country they never lived in before, in a small town in Zagreb region.⁴ They were offered jobs and were in the process of buying a house, but eventually got discouraged by the administrative obstacles and perceived personal animosities, so that they returned to Sweden. "Only the teachers in the local elementary school were really nice and helpful, all the rest simply worked against us. It was, like, what are you doing here, you from Bosnia? You are not normal, what are you doing here? We were not welcome. People live with a plenty of prejudices. Down there, people 'know everything'; they don't need anyone (who could know better; MPF)." After half a year in Croatia, they could return to their jobs in Sweden. Actually, this woman's husband was often called by his Swedish boss who wanted him to return.

³ This example was first presented in Povrzanović Frykman 2011.

⁴ Due to Croatia's diaspora politics and the legal option of dual citizenship available in Sweden since 2001, the Croats from Bosnia-Herzegovina who came to Sweden in search of peace in the early 1990s are entitled to citizenship in all those countries.

Having two high incomes, they were able to buy a nice flat in Dalmatia – found via internet, to which they travel by car once a year, for summer holidays. From there they also travel within the region and meet all the people they want to meet, including extended family. When they were younger, the parents were ‘taking turns’ in Croatia, and the grandparents who stayed behind in Bosnia Herzegovina would also take care of them in order to prolong their stays by the sea. “The children were made to feel at home there, they got friends; it was also important to us because of the language. It is nice both for the children and for us”, the mother said.

The choice of location was led by the fact that they had some friends in the vicinity. Eventually they gained very good neighbours there, also -visitors who own flats in the same set of summer flat blocks. One of the neighbouring couples became close friends. My interviewee explained: “That company we have there – they are all from Zagreb. We are more or less the same generation, and we socialise very nicely.” They know some people, but are not socialising with them.

Their 19-year old daughter started to study in the Croatian capital of Zagreb, as she strongly wishes to live in Croatia. That, however, turned out to be an unpleasant episode, and her mother’s anger and disappointment was clear as she was telling me about it. The daughter was there as a foreign student from Sweden, but (since the programme was in Croatian) she had to do the regular entry exam. She passed it with a very good score, but she was still asked to attend a Croatian course before starting the programme. “They do everything to *not* help you, and they say, your child comes from abroad, she would like to give exams without working for them? Well, it’s Balkan tricks... prejudices...”⁵

⁵ Croatia's diaspora politics included some policy-incentives regarding that were supposed to facilitate the return of labour migrants from Western Europe or people of Croatian descent living overseas. They were seen as potential beneficial economic actors that could help Croatia's post-war recovery and development. However, the fact that several Ministers in the independent Croatia's government were recruited from diaspora, and that the images of 'deserving diaspora' that helped the Croatian war-effort saturated the political and media space for a decade after the war, also had a back side. A negative stereotype was produced, of Croats from diaspora who take it for granted that they should 'float' on privileged status.

Policies concerning 'diaspora youth' allowed them access to educational institutions in Croatia in the frames of extra quotas. The girl in question was actually using another channel of institutional inclusion (as a foreigner), but as that channel is highly unusual for a Croatian-speaking person, she seems to have fallen in-between categories, and was framed as 'diaspora Croat' counting on (undeserved) privileges.

When she attended a preparatory course for the entry exam in Zagreb – I quote – “Everyone told her: what are you doing here? What do you think – you came here from Europe... How do you think you’ll study here?” The teacher at the course was pointing to the flaws in her Croatian in front of the entire class, so she provoked him by asking if she could explain a mathematical solution in Swedish. Afterwards, the same problem occurred with a university professor who would not let her pass an exam because of the flaws in her written Croatian, even if her mathematical solution was correct.

The daughter was not only framed as a 'diaspora Croat' who claims (undeserved) privileges. This framing was intertwined with another perception widely spread (in Yugoslav times as well as today) among people in Croatia who have not been living abroad themselves, namely that ‘is better abroad’ – a perception that seems to be linked to a sort of diffused envy. It is therefore suspiciously strange that a 19-year old with an EU-passport would want to come to study economy in Zagreb.

This girl’s perception of normality of transnational presence was challenged when that presence bore claims to full incorporation. Her attempt to inclusion, along the parents’ former attempt to settlement and employment, has to be analytically juxtaposed to the unproblematic, easily achieved informal personal forms of transnationalism based on regular visits and holidays spent in own premises. Even if the girl was positioned as a Swede/European and the parents as Bosnian Croats/Bosnians, their experiences of rejection were similar. So, while my interviewee’s statement on ‘naturalness’ and ‘normality’ of living among co-ethnics can be deemed as ideological, her personal experience made her add “if possible” as a correction of that statement, pointing at the realities of (im)possible inclusions being based on a number of factors other than ethnicity.

A male interviewee whom I met in the course of fieldwork and kept a long-term acquaintance with, never told me about any animosities he would have experienced in Croatia, but neither he could fulfil his wish to settle there. He came to Sweden from Zagreb, where he attended his second year at a technical faculty, in order to avoid being drafted as the resident of Bosnia-Herzegovina and sent to fight in his newly independent country. His brother did the same.

Having known some countrymen in Sweden, he first worked without a permit in a restaurant, and only afterwards registered as asylum seeker in Sweden. In retrospect, he seems to be sorry for not taking up university education, but – perhaps because of the idea of the possibility of ‘quick success in the West’ (connected to the perception of ‘better life abroad’ mentioned above) – he then saw it as too long and tiresome a path, so he went for a one-year artisan education instead. Unfortunately, for health reasons, he had to quit that profession soon. Being a resourceful and energetic person, has been changing jobs ever since, but radiates frustration for not being able to “make money with a pen”, as he put it, but being forced to “do it with the hands”.

He cherishes the holiday weeks he can afford; he spends them in Bosnia and in Croatia, travelling there by car. In 2009, the timing of his holidays was defined by the date of the “U2” concert in Croatia – a highlight of his year, where he also met some old friends and evoked his student-days experience of his first rock concert.

This man was able to take a “free year” – a year of partially paid leave from his former job as a genitor in a Swedish town. That opportunity was given to people in many professions, to be used for further education or for testing another kind of employment.⁶ He used it in order to find out the possibilities of getting an employment in Croatia. However, the many efforts to find employment were in vain; the contacts he had were not of much use. In the process, he lived with a young Croatian woman he

⁶ Introduced in 2005 at the initiative of the Green Party, “free year” was also opening the possibility for the unemployed to get some work experience. They were stepping in for those who were employed for at least two years, and could be on the leave between 3 and 12 months while receiving 85% of their salary. The new government canceled it after the elections in 2006.

met in one of his attempts to sell Croatian products in Sweden. The relationship broke a while after he returned to work in Sweden, being over-stretched between two countries.

He also tried to be a salesman for an established Croatian firm producing expensive accessories. That effort failed since he had no access to the market for such products in Sweden (“Swedes are dressing too informally”; “they didn’t even want to have a look”). While being employed as genitor, he also tried to run an ‘ethnic’ firm oriented towards Croats and Bosnians in Sweden and their need for travelling to their original homelands. But his Croatian business-partner (acting as the main investor) “did not understand how business is done in Sweden”. According to this interviewee, both formal and informal aspects of such business differ very much in Sweden and Croatia. As he insisted on keeping the books according to Swedish laws, he eventually had to pull out.

In the meantime, he bought a small house in Bosnia, to be used as a summer house. He enjoys doing all the woodwork in the house on his own. He scouted for the possibilities of engaging in eco-tourism there, but “all the doors were closed” for him, since he is “not from there” – from that particular place in Bosnia.

My third example concerns a Bosnian woman who came to Sweden a child in a refugee family and returned to Bosnia at the age of thirty, after having completed her post-graduate education.

Her reason for return was marriage with a Bosnian man; she subsequently got the job in the field of her expertise. This did not happen because the local academic environment was welcoming her international experiences and connections, but because the final decision was made by the international body funding the position in question. The local colleagues have openly expressed doubts about her ability to fit in with “all those diplomas from top universities”, along what she perceived as jealousy for her getting a leading position.

Similar to the man mentioned above, who was not from that particular place in Bosnia in which he intended to start business, here the utmost negative attitude of the locals concerned the fact that this woman “was not in Sarajevo during the war”.

Anthropological research (see Stefansson 2007) offers a number of similar examples from the post-war Sarajevo, of the problem-ridden relations between those who became refugees but returned after the war, and those who stayed behind. Notwithstanding the private reasons for her return and the fact that she was only a child when leaving Bosnia, this woman's returnee status was held against her, together with the fact that she originally does not stem from Sarajevo. Multiple bases of rejection and othering were intersected with the local colleagues' negative opinion on her age and gender which are not in focus here, but add to the current troublesome first months of this woman's employment in a Bosnian environment. She was surprised, angry, and othering her local adversaries when narrating about her frustrating experiences. Such experiences appear as much more important than connections based on their shared ethnic and national affiliation.

Conclusion

How can we theorise – and explain – these examples?

The philosopher Edward Casey (1993) claimed that places direct, stabilise us, and identify us, tell us who and what we are in terms of where we are. Yet, there is neither a singular theoretical connection between place and (ascribed or self-ascribed) identity, nor between place and the subjective feeling of belonging. This is especially pertinent in transnational contexts. Ties to a place do not imply exclusive belongings; people can feel intimately related to, and have a well-developed sense of several places as 'their own'. However, as much as transnational ties do not necessarily signal failed incorporation in the country of immigration, they do not necessarily signal successful re-incorporation in the country of origin, or in the country of co-ethnic majority, either.

Even though of a limited scope, the ethnographic examples I presented point to the gaps between expectations and lived experiences that come out of the imagined character of 'ethnic communities' as well as out of the dynamics and premises of local inclusions. They corroborate Andreas Wimmer's (2007) claim that ethnic categories often play a subordinate role in people's agency in the categorical universe of community, belonging, networking, solidarity and cohesion. If ethnicity is understood as "the sense of difference and the image presented to the outsider that may be either

repressed or elaborated” (Okely 1996: 60), it is relevant to also ask questions that aimed at the grounds of othering and exclusion among people of the same ethnic affiliation.

As ethnicity paradigms concern boundary formation and the cultural contents of group identities, they bring about the danger of homogenising, i.e. presupposing certain kinds of sameness and solidarity between individuals constructed as ‘members’ of ethnic groups.

While not forgetting that politics and policies, indeed, may turn people’s ethnic affiliation into a crucial political and social issue, and not denying the reality of subjective perceptions of group belonging, my examples suggest that the role of ethnic affiliation in should be consistently turned into an empirical question. In research on transnationalism, ethnic group and ethnic community are relevant first and foremost as analytical concepts.⁷ The importance of ethnicity should not be taken for granted explanatory ground or prioritized over the influence of legal and moral frameworks; migrants’ educational, socio-economic but also local geographical background; their gender and age; as well as the modes of incorporation controlled by the locals.

Examples of failed or hindered attempts to transnational educational and professional inclusion urge a reflection on how migrants accumulate and use various sorts of capital in transnational contexts and if they succeed in getting incorporated into specific places.

Even if individual motivations and enactments of transnationalism and attempts to inclusion, facilitated by multiple national belongings, may overlap with ethnic affiliation and are they may not run smoothly. There is a pronounced need for looking at lived experiences and analytically detaching them from the discourses – employed by migrants as well as by researchers – concerning ‘own’ groups and communities.

⁷ In the study of specific processes of group- and community formation among the migrants, the concept of diasporic community is a useful analytical alternative to ethnic group and ethnic community as it allows for a clear distinction between the symbolic ethnic identity and a localised diasporic identity requiring involvement in the activities that create a community (see Povrzanović Frykman 2004).

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