Gender Dynamics in the Process of Transnational Labour Migration: Case Studies of Serbian Migrant Couples in Slovakia

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This paper explores the realm of gender dynamics through the lens of transnational labour migration from Serbia to Slovakia from an anthropological perspective and through ethnographic material gathered from fieldwork. I address the question of how transnational migration influences gender dynamics, primarily in couples who migrate to Slovakia together. Further, my objective is to examine migratory processes as an arena where ostensibly a larger battle for reproduction takes place, but where a more subtle (re)negotiation of gender dynamics also unfolds. I assess this contested field principally through the narratives of the migrants themselves, which are analysed in a broader socio-political context of Southeast and Central Europe. Analyses of these cases are in line with ethnographic fieldwork based on a qualitative methodology, principally in-depth interviews and participant observation with male and female migrant workers from Serbia, conducted predominantly in Slovakia over the course of a year. I examine gender dynamics through the lens of transnational migration (Glick Schiller, Basch, Szanton-Blanc, 1992) – which emphasises the multilocal social networks of migrants connecting "guest" and "home" society – and from the perspectives of *doing gender* (West, Zimmerman, 1987) and gender performativity (Butler, 2006).
This article assembles an ethnographically-driven account of how gender is done, performed, and renegotiated among couples seeking better lives within the EU. Specifically, I document, through my respondents' own words, how gender regimes are transformed in the process of migration. As such, this paper speaks to a theme that has remained mostly unexplored in the context of south-central European anthropology.

Keywords: gender dynamics, migration, transnationalism, family, narratives

Introduction

According to estimates provided by the Slovak Office of the Border and Foreign Police (2023), more than 19,000 people from Serbia are currently living and working in Slovakia. This number includes only legal residents, but as my fieldwork in this community shows, many Serbians come to Slovakia illegally every year in the pursuit of economic stability, but also to escape political turmoil in their home country, an unrest that is preventing them from finding a stable livelihood. It is safe to assume, then, that the numbers of Serbian migrants in Slovakia are much higher in reality. Even though the numbers of Serbian migrants in Slovakia are on the rise every year,[1] this transnational migration and its various aspects are very rarely, if ever, reflected in anthropological research, which is currently limited to studies about migrations of the ethnically Slovak population from Vojvodina, northern Serbia (e.g., Zlatanović, Marušiak, 2017; Marušiak, Zlatanović, 2020; Ira, Uher, 2021). Additionally, Slovakia has historically been a country of emigrants, not immigrants. To a large degree, it still is (Bahna, 2011, 2013), and so, understandably, the anthropological literature has been predominantly focused on those leaving rather than on the incoming migration.

Of course, as with any migration pattern, this one also operates within a certain gendered matrix. Although gender as a category of analysis plays a crucial role throughout the entire process of migration, from the decision to migrate and settle in a new country, to continuing to shape migrant couples' long-term migrant experience, it is nevertheless often overlooked in migration studies (Boyd, Grieco, 2003). Labour migration from Serbia to Slovakia is also to some extent gender-based (for instance, Slovakia tends to offer men more opportunities, notably in the automotive industry there) in a way that seems not to follow other observable migration patterns in Eastern Europe. According to the statistical overview of legal and illegal migration in Slovakia (Office of the Border and Foreign Police, 2023) and some quantitative research (e.g. Filadelfiová, Gyárfášová, Sekulová, Hlinčíková, 2011: 29), up to 65 per cent of migrants from Serbia are men. But women also migrate to Slovakia in large numbers, as well as entire families in various configurations. The aim of this work, however, is not to focus exclusively on women or men who migrate; it is, rather, to answer broader questions related to how gender dynamics are affected in the process of transnational migration and, conversely, what consequences this process has on gender relations, representations, family patterns, and identities within families, but also how the existing gender patterns *form* the dynamics of migration.

To better explore possible answers to these questions, then, this article focuses on the experiences of Serbian migrant couples who migrated together to Slovakia. I first interpret these migrant experiences through the theoretical prisms of transnational migration, gender geographies of power and gender performativity – conceptual

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[1] From around 5,500 in 2015, when the migration pattern from Serbia to Slovakia first intensified, to 19,000 in 2023 (Office of the Border and Foreign Police, 2015, 2023).

frameworks I lay out in the next section. Then, I will address the qualitative methodology and ethnographic fieldwork that I have relied on for data collection. The final chapter will be dedicated to empirical findings.

Theoretical framework

The labour migration of Serbian citizens to Slovakia is a recognisable form of transnational migration that emphasises the multilocal social networks of migrants connecting "guest" and "home" societies, in ways that transcend geographical, cultural and political boundaries between two or more countries (Glick Schiller et al., 1992; Basch, Schiller, Szanton-Blanc, 1994). This means, among other things, that migrants do not, in fact, completely give up their original identities in this process. Instead, they operate in two or more social fields at the same time, which deepens their identity by reinforcing certain aspects of it, while creating more complex cultural patterns for such identity expression in new contexts, moving freely across cultural and social systems (Grimes, 1998; Vertovec, 2009). Vertovec (2009) sees the process of transnational migration as the creation of a multi-local world and life by migrants, where different presentations of identity often provide individuals with a more fluid and strategic sense of their own position within, and an equally adroit belonging to, different aspects of everyday society at various times in their migration journey. In one way, then, migrants can be capable of a more protean performance, adapting to life in a country, while at the same time, their identities in their homes can feel more entrenched in attitudes and behaviours that they may have brought with them. Reconciling such tensions is extra emotional and ideological work that reshapes the regimes of belonging, regimes that couples negotiate in ways that can at first seem baffling to the casual observer.

In order to explain the effects of transnational migration on gender dynamics, I use two similar concepts: doing gender (West, Zimmermann, 1987) and gender performativity (Butler, 2006). Doing gender involves the everyday performance of "a complex of socially-guided perceptual, interactional, and micropolitical activities that cast particular pursuits as expressions of masculine and feminine 'natures'" (West, Zimmerman, 1987: 126). According to them, gender cannot be considered a stable construct based on any biological elements, but it is, rather, something that is created and performed in constant everyday interactions. However, West and Zimmerman (1987) do not focus only on the concept of gender as such, but rather seek to understand how people create gender differences in everyday interactions and in narratives too.

Feminist theorist Judith Butler deals with similar questions. In this context, we deploy her concept of gender performativity, which in some respects resembles what Zimmerman and West call "doing gender", at least insofar as Butler also understands gender as an identity that is not a stable construct, instead, it is something that is

"constructed in time and established in space through the stylized repetition of acts" (1999: 179). Thus, according to Butler, gender is not something that one is, but rather what one does, a kind of act, deed, action, or, better said, a sequence of certain actions. It is not "just" a process, but a certain type of process, "a set of repeated actions within a very strict regulatory framework" (2006: 45). She points out, however, that, even though gender is performative, this does not mean that the subject can freely or flippantly choose what gender they are to "perform" without some negotiation – in society there is a kind of "scenario" that is determined by regulatory frameworks, regimes that limit the subject in their choices. Drawing on the concept of Butler's gender performativity, Paul (2015) emphasises that women (but also men) who migrate often engage in a process of negotiation regarding their gender identities. During this process they sometimes adopt certain roles to navigate the complexities of their new environments while still retaining elements of their original identities. This negotiation is a form of agency, where migrants actively shape their identities in response to external pressures (Paul, 2015). Similarly, Levitt (2001) discusses how gender identities are continually performed and reformed in transnational contexts, highlighting the fluidity of these performances across borders. By applying Butler's concept of gender performativity, they both show that gender identities can be disrupted, but also reconstructed in the process of migration; these observations by Paul and Levitt aid us in analysing how gender is not static but constantly renegotiated across borders.

In the light of these theories, we should ask ourselves what happens when, as a result of transnational migration, there is a "violation" of these standards regarding gender ideologies (when for instance women make more money than men, a topic to which I return later)? At the same time, we could pose a question about the stability of gender as a construct. What happens when some aspects of gender dynamics change in unwelcome ways due to migration?

Thinking about migration through the lens of gender, several lines of inquiry already suggest themselves: what might it mean to violate such negotiations; how stable can gender be when challenged by the daily pressures of migration and; what role do narratives play in helping migrants navigate gender roles and practices?

To draw these issues into focus I employ the notion of gendered geographies of power (Mahler, Pessar, 2001, 2006; Pessar, Mahler, 2003) which interconnects three important ideas: (1) *geographical scales* that capture the fact that gender operates at different spatial, temporal and cultural levels (family, state, or gender hegemony or anti-hegemony). Geographical scales force us to question whether the process of transnational migration offers opportunities to strengthen already-existing gender ideologies and norms or, on the contrary, whether this process provides a place for migrants to challenge hegemonic questions about gender; (2) *social location* explains how individuals and groups are situated in multiple, intersecting and mutually-forming power hierarchies related to class, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, nationality and gender, and which are created through distinct historical, political, economic, geographical, kinship and other socio-stratifying factors, and; (3) *agency*

and imagination help us understand how images, meanings and values associated with gender and family are actually gendered and interpreted by migrants (Mahler, Pessar, 2006: 42–44). Gendered geographies of power thus show us how temporal, spatial, scalar, biographical and other intersections are interconnected on different levels: individual, family, or structural. By framing migration within the context of gendered geographies of power, these authors provide interesting insights into the complexities of migration experiences and the importance of considering gender in migration studies. Their approach emphasises the need for a nuanced understanding of how gender shapes individuals' lives within various geographical and social contexts.

People, setting, methods used

Findings in this article are a product of ethnographic fieldwork based on qualitative methodology – mainly in-depth interviews and participant observations with migrant workers from Serbia. This fieldwork was conducted during my Ph.D. studies, where I conducted forty-three in-depth interviews in total, with both men and women, some of them single, and some married or in long-term relationships. However, in this article my focus will be on heterosexual couples who migrated from Serbia to Slovakia together and at the same time, focusing on four couples and case studies in total.

All the participants had been living and working in Slovakia for at least one year, though the average time my participants had spent in Slovakia was closer to a three-to-five-year period. They made a relatively homogeneous sample with respect to several factors: all the participants, for instance, had a high school education except for one participant, Tamara, who holds a university degree. In addition to education, most of the participants were also connected by the work they did in Slovakia – mainly some form of manual work in various multinational companies in the automotive industry, in logistics or in other technical sectors. However, participants also showed certain heterogeneous elements, especially with regard to the place of origin; the research was a mixture of participants from urban and rural environments, drawn from southern, central and northern Serbia.

While in-depth, semi-structured interviews were my principal method, I also relied on participant-observation and go-along methods. However, my fieldwork was not typically anthropological, mainly because I did not conduct fieldwork in a single location or community where I had the opportunity to immerse myself in the local social relations, but that is often the reality of studying scattered migrant communities such as this one. In this context I relied on "patchwork ethnography" (Günel, Varma, Watanabe, 2020), a methodological approach that uses short-term field visits and uses fragmentary data that is nevertheless rigorous and accurate.

One reason why a coherent community of migrants grouped in certain enclaves has not formed in Slovakia (yet) may be the nature of today's migration, which is focused on individual workers and not on the community of Serbs as such. Even

though family networks can generally play an important role in so-called chain migration, this phenomenon is not present to a great extent in this context. The community of migrants is thus united by a shared experience that gains importance only after arriving in Slovakia.

I carried out most of my participant-observations in the migrants' homes in Slovakia. Visits were repeated and usually lasted for the entire day, where I spent time with the participants, I observed their daily activities, and sometimes I participated in their daily tasks. These visits occurred not only on regular weekdays but also on weekends, during holidays, and at family celebrations. This variety in timing allowed me to capture a more comprehensive understanding of the participants' lives, accounting for both their routine and exceptional experiences. By engaging with them during different temporal contexts, I was able to enrich the depth of my data and better represent the nuances of their daily lives and cultural practices.

An important dimension to the observations I made was that I often conducted the research on the move, travelling between Serbia and Slovakia with participants. This experience allowed me to explore migration as an aspect of the transnational paradigm shaping their lives. Such journeys often took place in minibuses that specialise in transporting migrant workers from Serbia to Slovakia and vice versa. Such journeys usually lasted six to ten hours, which allowed me to get well-acquainted with the participants, but also to observe their behaviour, interactions and the different ways they built narratives about migration and their transnational experience. Observations of this type also contributed to creating a more accurate picture of who our participants were, not only based on what narratives emerge between them during long road conversations, but also, for example, based on how they behaved during the trip, what they carried with them from Serbia to Slovakia and vice versa, or what consumption patterns appeared among them. All these things suggest different transnational ties and forms of transnational lives of migrants with regard to gender as a unit of analysis.

In the subcategory of the participant observation method, I would also add another qualitative method: the go-along interview. The go-along method can tell us much about how the normal, everyday life of the participants can look. The goal of go-along as a method is to capture the daily interactions of participants with the outside world and the environment in which they live and work, through joint walks, rides, or shadowing. Through this method, the researcher can capture details that relate to various aspects of migration and how it is experienced in the context of everyday life (Kusenbach, 2003). The author of this method, Margarethe Kusenbach (2003: 458), argues that this method can help us as social scientists to reveal the dynamics taking place between society and its surroundings, in order to capture a range of social, cultural, economic, political and other meanings.

I completed sporadic go-alongs during walks with participants that were both focused on a certain activity, and of a more general nature. As for these activities, they often carried gendered undertones, like shopping for groceries or clothes.

During the go-along, I always engaged in informal conversations with the participants, while at the same time I was actively noting their behaviour, choices they were making, reactions, body language and interactions with the environment. The go-along was always followed by a short "recapitulation" of the given activity or the whole day spent with the participant(s), during which we talked about what they experienced, what they bought, why, what they would use the item for, etc.

Migrating family – migrating structures?

It was early in the morning when I got to my participants, Žarko (m, 1975) and Marijana (f, 1975), who live in a larger town in western Slovakia. I was there to conduct an interview with the couple about their experiences of migration to Slovakia. Marijana and Žarko come from a town in southern Serbia, where both had worked their entire adult lives, Marijana as a clerk in a bank, and Žarko as a manual worker in a local factory. However, due to the political and economic turmoil, both had lost their jobs around 2014. Marijana had been subsequently unable to find a stable job with a liveable wage since, and Žarko had been working as a security guard in a local firm that eventually stopped paying him. Around this time, in 2018, they decided to migrate together to Slovakia, since that seemed the only feasible option at the time.

I entered their apartment, where everything looked as if every single thing was in its place, and there was not a single speck of dust in the apartment. There were snacks waiting for me on the table, and Marijana was already in the kitchen making me coffee. Žarko was sitting on the couch, and as we greeted each other, he waved his empty coffee cup in his wife's direction, apparently indicating that he also wanted coffee. A similar scene repeated several times during my visit: Marijana stood up from the couch a couple of times to get him water or chips, or hand him the remote control. Marijana seemed to feel quite uncomfortable in front of me during these interactions, which was also noticed by her husband, who subsequently felt the need to explain his behaviour and views:

> You've probably noticed that I'm a bit of a patriarchal Balkan man, if you want to call it that. But I don't think that there is something wrong with that, as it's often times presented today, that men like me are bad because they don't 'respect' women, which is not true by the way, I just think that women and men still have certain roles in our society, and it's known what belongs under the feminine sphere, and what belongs under the masculine sphere. But here [in Slovakia], as I see it, that boundary is disappearing, here is where those Western ideologies are now fashionable.

This situation and Žarko's views were not at all unique during my time doing fieldwork, especially in the context of married couples that had migrated to Slovakia together. The patterns were almost always repeated during my many visits to their

homes, but also in the narratives of the participants. These narratives often reflect patriarchal ideologies that had seen a surge in public discourse around the turn of the millennium. Marijana and Žarko, as well as most of the other participants in this research, belong to a generation that entered adulthood during the most turbulent time in the recent history of Serbia, when the collapse and disintegration of Yugoslavia and subsequent civil war had a profound effect not only on the political and economic situation, but also heavily affected everyday practices, and, among them, gender dynamics and family relations. The 1990s and early 2000s in Serbia were marked by outbursts of ethno-nationalism, religious populism, and patriarchy. This reappearing patriarchal matrix was reinforced by the return of women into the realm of household and unpaid work, which in turn reaffirmed traditional and patriarchal gender dynamics (Milić, 2004; Drezgić, 2015).

However, sociological and anthropological research conducted in the last decade records some signs of gender dynamics in the realm of Serbian family turning towards a model that is more egalitarian. Gender relations are, however, still under the heavy influence of a patriarchal ideology that remains noticeable among Serbian men (Blagojević Hjuson, 2013). This subtle movement, of a tectonically slow transformation of gender dynamics, is very much also present in the population of Serbian migrants with whom I conducted field research. I suspect that migration as a process is pushing and accentuating this transformation of gender dynamics even further.

Migrant women did protest their husbands' attitudes and opinions. However, such protests almost always took place outside the family sphere, sometimes even secretly. For example, just a few days after my visit to Žarko's and Marijana's flat, I received a phone call from Marijana, who started to apologise profusely for her husband, his behaviour and his words during my visit.

> *You know, he wants to have it all in our home, the way it should be – it needs to be cooked, it needs to be tidy all the time. ... And of course, I do all of it, even though we're both employed, he probably hasn't washed a plate in his life. But I say to myself, well, let it be, if that's the way it's supposed to be. At least now both of us have a stable job, a nice apartment, we both make money, my son is also employed here, we have peace of mind, and that's important to me. Plus, I also do things that my husband doesn't need to know about, like investing money every month through a bank* [phone app]*, not a lot, but it gives me a sense of independence.*

In addition to Marijana, a reflection on gender dynamics in her marriage was also provided by Tamara (f, 1993), who, during an interview when her husband was not present, confided in me the difficulties she had experienced a few years ago when she gave birth to a son in Slovakia:

> *It was the most difficult time for me. I was on maternity leave only for a few months because my husband was unemployed at the time, so I had to go back to work as*

soon as possible because of the financial situation of our family. At the same time, I was suffering from depression, which nobody noticed, I had to take care of the household, as I always had, and I also had a baby who was almost exclusively my responsibility. It just came naturally to me, after all, I'm a woman, right? And yet my husband was unemployed. Can you imagine? Well, recently I've started thinking more about this ... and I started to read. I am reading psychological and feminist books, and it's only now that I've started to "learn" so to speak that what I've experienced is not normal. I think that if I had stayed at home [in Serbia], I would never have learned it, because my mother, my sister would have helped me ... it would have been easier, and I wouldn't have been so angry.

These quotes show the changes that have occurred in the lives of both male and female participants, i.e., in their perception of family and gender dynamics. Both cases highlight how the process of transnational migration, and in this process, the interplay of elements of *gender geographies of power*, can influence the conception of gender roles and dynamics in family life (Mahler, Pessar, 2006). Marijana's example shows us how the geographical space in which she found herself has provided her with a partial financial independence that to some extent, although indirectly at first glance, also influences her social location, which is fluid and situational. She still faces certain challenges in her married life and in the gender dynamics of her relationship that she is not comfortable with, but at the same time she lives a kind of parallel life in which she consciously resists these dynamics. In Tamara's case, too, we can see demonstrated the role that imagination and agency play in processes of migration.

While in research such as this, that relies heavily on how respondents "make sense of" their lives in some way, attention and criticism may be drawn to the fact that the things that participants say may not, in fact, tell the whole truth. Many things my participants talked about remained difficult to corroborate during my research. One may counter though with the observation that the respondents recognise the conflicting norms they are exposed to and feel the need to adapt to them narratively. Conflicts between expectations can lead, in fact, to a range of different ways of adjusting to new realities and changes – or lack thereof – in the context of family gender dynamics. I would also argue that whether aspects of their narratives are true or not is not entirely germane to the discussion here; I have recorded their narrative *explorations* of these regimes and their effects. Narratives are never finished accounts, being constantly reconstructed in order to adapt, even to dissent. Many married women who migrated with their husbands, for example, by building on certain dissents, construct these narratives of migration in terms of emancipation. Such narratives show us that the migration experience has had an impact on their agency and perception of reality, and thus can be interpreted as something that has the potential to have a powerful impact on social reality as well.

So, the question remains: do gender structures (roles, patterns, ideologies etc.) migrate with the family, or are they transformed by the transnational migration? One

could argue that the answer to this question is more complex than a simple yes or no. Certain ideologies linked to the patriarchal gender matrixes are very much alive and well, as shown by Žarko and many other male participants, which comes as no surprise as all families that migrate do not do so in a social vacuum, but in a particular political, economic, cultural and social context. It is important to state that, along with the families, their social networks also migrate quite often, so the already-established relationships they had before they left (extended family members, friends, acquaintances) frequently follow. Thus, entire societal structures also migrate, bringing with them the gender norms and dynamics of one society that are much more easily transmitted in this process. However, as demonstrated by Tamara and Marijana, certain ideologies and structures are also challenged, although these challenges regularly take the form of "hidden transcripts" (Scott, 1990).

Narratives of mythological order at home and migration as a site of contestation

One of the more important thematic units present in the research concerned the role that gender played both in long-term relationships and in the construction of narratives about place-of-residence preferences in the host country. This was particularly pertinent to discussions between spouses about whether it would be a better decision for the family to stay in Slovakia for a longer period of time, or whether the goal was to return to Serbia as soon as possible. This topic, like many others I discussed with the couples, was sharply gendered.

Gavrilo (1970) and Marica (1975) discussed this problem with me when I asked them what plans, if any, they had for their length of stay in Slovakia. The topic was taken up by Marica, who had been living in Slovakia with her husband for seven years. By devoting herself to learning Slovak and mastering it to a higher level, compared to her husband, Marica had managed to find a job in which she earned more money than him.

M: *If I could choose, I would like to stay in Slovakia for many more years. I simply have no reason to return to Serbia, except for some sentimentality. Yes, I miss my family, my sister, my friends I left behind. But nowadays I can call them via socials whenever I want, and eventually I'm there by car within five to six hours. Well, it's just that relationships and sentimentality don't pay my rent, groceries, life. ... And here in Slovakia, wherever I've worked, all I had were good experiences compared to Serbia. I'm not saying it's honey and milk, but at least in my current job my work and efforts are appreciated. I also make more money now in comparison to my husband, which I never thought possible.*
G: *But wait, you never told me you wanted to stay here.*
M: *Well, probably not for the rest of my life, but the longer the better. ...*
G: *Probably?? What's that supposed to mean? I don't understand how you can think*

like that. ... Now you make more money and suddenly you think you know what is the best for us. [To me] *I'll tell you this, I definitely don't want to stay here. Yes, there's work here, yes, there's a good salary here, and everything we need for a comfortable life, but even so I don't feel comfortable here, I feel restricted, I'm not allowed to say anything in case I offend somebody. I've noticed that Slovaks are thinking more and more like Europeans nowadays. And Serbia is Serbia, nothing can ever replace it. And let's be real, it is far from perfect, but at least in Serbia we still know our ways, men and women know their place.*

Similar sentiments were shown by Dejan, a middle-aged man from Southern Serbia that currently works as a manual worker in a car factory in Bratislava. At the time of our interview, Dejan did not have a partner, but he often emphasised that what he called the "traditional" family life was very important for him.

Where do I see myself in the future? I see myself somewhere in Serbia, somewhere on a mountain, in my own home, having a small piece of land, being self-sufficient. I dream about it every day. ... I dream of family life, of real *values. Just so that my family is as far away from the system as possible. And here I can't imagine that kind of life, because here I feel like I'm always being watched, I have to live by some rules that don't make sense to me.*

In the men's narratives, the country of origin figured thematically as a place where they felt somehow freer, and which stood in stark contrast to the country to which they had migrated. This "freedom" related primarily to a normative level in which their role and position in the broader context of gender politics was being increasingly undermined. This can be seen, for example, in the case of Gavrilo, who explicitly showed his annoyance at his wife earning more money than him. This new role of "joint breadwinner" in this context comes with a cost for men like him, which is strongly felt by these men. In this context, nostalgic narratives of return and certain lifestyles become strategies and coping mechanisms aimed at the struggle to maintain not only a certain gender identity, but also a certain matrix of gender ideologies.

However, these patterns of behaviour, or their contextualisation, in the narratives of migrants such as Žarko's and Gavrilo's, are linked to a broader geopolitical space in which Slovakia, as a country of the semi-periphery (Gál, Malová, 2018; Vieira, 2018), seeks to move closer to "Western values". This may be observed for example in how Slovakia is implementing gender equality practices, where certain patriarchal patterns of behaviour are no longer the default setting, at least in theory, and which many male participants have, in their narratives, interpreted as a threat. Thus, labour migration to Slovakia becomes, in one sense, a kind of (temporary) "necessary evil" to meet the economic needs of the family, while Serbia in male narratives undergoes a kind of mythologising process in which the family becomes the last bastion of a traditional social order. Strongly present in this context is what Zaharijević et al.

(2023) call "the narrative of return", which frames the family unit as something increasingly under various types of threats, threats such as "gender ideology" (Ćeriman, Vučković Juroš, 2023), and therefore needs to be protected and preserved at all costs. These narratives of return, then, paint the family and family life as the subject of a mythology on which all the traditional and natural order of society stands (Zaharijević et al., 2023), or falls.

In the context of my research, this return to a certain mythological matrix when everyone knew their place, not only appears on an ideological level, but also on a physical one. The narrative of return thus manifests in a narrower sense as well, through a proposed return to the country of origin, now reimagined as a kind of promised land that is immune to "Western and gender ideology", and where a reversion to "natural" and essentialised gender patterns will take place once they do arrive back.

This process in not entirely new. In her study *Family in Transition: A Study of 300 Yugoslav Villages,* which deals with the transformation of family relations in the context of Yugoslav families moving from rural to urban environments in the interwar period, Ehrlich (1966) demonstrates that when the rules governing gender relations change, where the previous system no longer applies and the new one is not yet firmly established, there is a tendency to romanticise the old patriarchal system. This happens because, despite its flaws, it represented a clear structure or order (Ehrlich, 1966).

However, the ideological and physical return in the context of transnational migration from Serbia to Slovakia is often complicated by gender dynamics within the family. For example, one of the ways in which women oppose this arrangement relates to their resistance to an early return to Serbia, despite the gender guilt many of them feel (Ezzeddine, Havelková, 2021), as many of them have left behind children or ageing parents at a time when they were expected to be the main providers of care and other unpaid work in the home. Transnational migration, nevertheless, often appears in the narratives of these women as a kind of empowering move; many women who have come to Slovakia with their partners have discovered a sense of freedom here, one that is easily overlooked, and which is made possible by the work opportunities in Slovakia. These opportunities, at least in part, give them a greater sense of individual self-esteem, even as they balance and negotiate their social and gendered senses of self more carefully. Migration affords them income to actualise new, negotiated roles more fully, which provides them with opportunities to participate more in decision-making, although often not fully. Tamara's realisation that her position in her marriage may no longer be what it had been, or Marijana's savings may suggest that, even though the migrant family presents itself as a united front to the world, there is a constant struggle within it with respect to the reproduction of (traditional) gender dynamics, as well as their transformation.

The question of whether a family unit should remain in the country of destination or return to the country of origin is thus strongly gendered, and can reveal the often-difficult social reality of gender ideologies and their effects on migrants' everyday lives. It also shows us how migrant men's and women's narratives are linked

not only to long-standing cultural and social conceptions of masculinity and femininity, but also to changing gender dynamics in the context of migration.

Conclusion

By focusing on the phenomenon of transnational migration of (mainly) middle-aged married couples from Serbia to Slovakia in the last five to eight years, this paper has explored how gender dynamics inside the family units of migrants have been negotiated and challenged by ideologies and opportunities, creating diverging prospects and meanings for my research participants. The ethnographic material collected during my year-long fieldwork primarily details the consequent ongoing transformation of gender dynamics in migrants' narratives, but also migrants' everyday practices in the context of transnational migration.

I have argued that migration to Slovakia has had a significant impact on how Serbian couples shape their talk about certain aspects of gender in their everyday lives, but also in what ways these new gender dynamics take place and how they are presented in the participants' narratives when speaking to others. The narrative passages of both men and women reprinted here show how this transformation of gender dynamics is not a linear process per se, but rather a *gendered process* marked by a continual contestation of strong patriarchal gender patterns and regimes on one side and a more muted protest against these aspects that often takes the form of a "hidden transcript" (Scott, 1990) on the other side.

Drawing on the concept of gender performativity by Judith Butler (2006) I have also argued that transnational migration can affect migrants' narratives and performances by accentuating certain patriarchal ideologies through the narratives of mythological order "at home". Furthermore, I have examined how gender shapes migrants' experiences, identities, and social relations by employing an analysis of gendered geographies of power (Mahler, Pessar, 2001). I conclude that understanding migration requires a deeper examination of the interplay between gender, culture, and economic factors to come to terms with how migrants are "at home" with the reality of living and working abroad.

In the final analysis, transnational migration can still play a crucial role in the emancipation of both men and women from certain constraining gender patterns. Therefore, the process of migration in and of itself can be interpreted as a site where the battle for reproduction, but also (re)negotiation of gender dynamics is actively taking place and merits much more attention.

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