Social Responsibility of the Ukrainian Nation State and Labour Migration: Contemporary Challenges

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Abstract

This paper examines the role of social responsibility of the Ukrainian nation state towards a phenomenon which has arisen as a major source as well as consequence of socio-economic tensions prevailing since the dissolution of the Soviet Union: mass-scale labor emigration in Ukraine. It analyzes the case-study of Ukrainian labour migration to Italy and Poland shedding light on the personal motivations of labour migrants and the way they manifest themselves in relation to the Ukrainian state. Furthermore, the paper presents a concept of national social responsibility with a link to evaluation of the Ukrainian case. The paper suggests the combination of a lack of social responsibility of the Ukrainian nation state and the transitional economy formed by the collapse of a socialist polity has encouraged the dramatic movement of Ukrainians to work in European Union countries, specifically Italy and Poland. While there is a tendency to view the migrants as those who cause the problems, this study puts forward the argument that it is the nation state’s socially irresponsible policies, and not migrants, that need amendment and improvement.

Key words: National social responsibility, nation state, Ukraine, labour migration, Italy, Poland

Introduction

“I doubt someone will be able to survive this way. It is practically impossible to earn enough money for living taking on one job. Yes, life has led to such condition that I was forced to leave, to keep just a little steam of life.”

(W., 31 y.o., worked in Poland)

“Ukraine has never been a state where every citizen could somehow push or somehow reveal his initiative, and those initiatives that were in Ukraine, I did not like [...]. The nation state is irresponsible.”

(N., 42 y.o., worked in Italy)

The above extracts from interviews conducted during 2009-2011 capture the uncertainty, ambiguity and precarious circumstance in which many Ukrainians found themselves during the early 1990’s, when significant numbers left post-Soviet Ukraine. In this paper, I discuss how current Ukrainian policies directed at managing a transition economy perceived by Ukrainians as socially irresponsible configure personal motivation of potential labour migrants to migrate. More specifically, through interview materials, I contribute localized and grounded evidence of the combination of social irresponsibility of the Ukrainian nation state and the transitional economy formed by the collapse of a socialist polity has encouraged the dramatic movement of Ukrainians to work in European Union countries, particularly Italy and Poland.
The Ukrainian situation: migration to Italy and Poland

International labour migration of Ukrainians today is the most socially significant and widespread form of migration flow in Ukraine, aggravating demography, labour markets, economic and social development, individual welfare, poverty and social stratification. Psychological and cultural risks also come to bear (Levchenko, 2010: 16).

Ukrainian labour migration plays a pivotal role in the population decline. According to the Ukrainian National Academy of Science in 2050, the population of Ukraine will decline from the current 46 million to 36 million (Institute of Demography and Social Studies of NAS of Ukraine, 2010); while the United Nations presents an even more pessimistic figure: 26 million (Department of Economic and Social Affairs, United Nations, 2010). National survey results reveal the number of citizens who have traveled abroad for employment at least once from January 2005 to June 2008 reached 1.5 million or 5.1% of the working age population (State Statistic Committee of Ukraine, 2009: 25). Various estimations further show between 4 to 7 million Ukrainians are migrant workers (Golovaha, 2008: 63), respectively 19.5% to 34.1% of the economically active population (Malynovska, 2011: 6). In such great proportions this outflow of Ukrainian workers has created an unprecedented set of economic, demographical and social burdens neglected but not unforeseeable by the state.

During 2009-2011, I conducted 27 semi structured in-depth interviews with Ukrainian migrant workers (12 who worked in Poland and 15 who worked in Italy) examining the phenomenon of Ukrainian labour migration and the migrants’ life strategies. The group of respondents emphasized the following as the main stimulus for migration from Ukraine: 1) the low level of income; 2) retrenchment due to social and economic shocks; 3) absence of social protection (lack of state support); and 4) shifts in social values and social prestige.

As the content analysis of the transcribed interviews showed the major reason for working abroad is not due to a lack of jobs but rather low wages, my research contradicts the idea of a direct link between migration and unemployment. Other quantitative studies by the State Statistics Committee of Ukraine in 2008 supports this idea: the lack of suitable work or unemployment forced 38.7% of migrants to seek earnings overseas; while for the majority (59.8%) the crucial reason for emigration were low wages. This is consistent with the results of another study where 67% of employees said that low wages were the main push factor for their voluntary departure for work (GFK Ukraine1), while the lack of jobs was noted by 46%2 of workers (Levchenko, 2010: 28). Consequently, low income creates more of a reasonable social response than unemployment in contemporary Ukrainian society.

Despite the economic benefits of labor migration, 11 of my interviewees migrated for non-economic factors. They were personal, cultural or educational reasons: 1) the intention to change their personal life, to see the world, to gain life experience; 2) studying and improving professional qualifications. The main motivator in most cases was the wish for self-realization in a safe environment with economic, social and political stability; which is perceived to be unrealizable in Ukraine. Thus, economic motivation is not the sole reason for migration, but rather labour migration appears to be an instrument for achieving a dream of stability and economic freedom.

25 from 27 respondents noted the economic uncertainty in Ukraine with minimal state participation in investigating more employment. According to governmental estimations, the unemployment rate in Ukraine would be 1.5 times higher if labour migration is restricted. The
average migrant worker in 2007 earned 817 US dollars per month, almost three times higher than the median monthly salary in Ukraine (State Statistic Committee of Ukraine, 2009: 79). Migrants’ earnings are of great, sometimes crucial importance to the welfare of their households. Consequently, the Ukrainian government seems to find it less beneficial to create workplaces and more beneficial to fill the public purse with money from Ukrainian migrant workers in the form of remittances.

During interviews, many Ukrainians talked of their life in the recipient country as of a “precarious life”. Two Ukrainian migrants stated that they were refused support from the Ukrainian consulates and embassies in Italy and Poland. Many of them felt depressed, unprotected and insecure in the sense of place and future. But in spite of these considerable challenges in recipient societies, return migration is extremely low.

The example of Ukrainian workers in Italy and Poland brings to the forefront the issues of sources, principles, subjects responsible for development and implementation socially accountable policies. Moreover, it underpins the urgency of establishing an adequate and appropriate national model of migration policy in the Ukrainian nation state, which is one of the largest donors and transit countries for migration flows from East to West (Markiv, 2009:12).

**Concept of National Social Responsibility**

What constitutes the “social responsibility” of the nation state is difficult to define. In the last 50 years, scholars have set the foundations of the “abstract” concept of social responsibility as a useful basis for its implementation in current circumstances (Carroll, 1999). This has happened despite different views on the concept through the decades and despite the lack of consensus on its general definition (Henderson, 2001; Frankental, 2001). All definitions of the concept include basic phrases like focus of corporations on societal needs and goals, care for diverse interests of numerous stakeholders and not only for the interests of capital owners, focus on societal benefits, welfare, better quality of life and the protection of the environment.

More frequently, the concept of social responsibility began to appear in the literature in the early 1950s (Carroll, 1999), irrespective of the predominant practice of big corporations whose tentacles got longer with globalisation and which quickly followed the trend of capitalism, facilitating the accumulation of wealth. To date, much of the discussion about social responsibility has been about the social responsibilities of corporations, lacking the attention to national social responsibility as a separate concept. Theories of corporate social responsibility acknowledge that corporations operate within a network of various stakeholders that can influence them either directly or indirectly (Habisch and Jonker, 2005: 7). Bowie (1991) is setting the issue of so-called moral relations between a corporation and its stakeholders (they have to be reciprocal, which means active cooperation by stakeholders) and setting up moral plurality. Such an approach is important when applied to the concept of national social responsibility where stakeholders of a nation come to the place of stakeholders of corporation. Definitions of national social responsibilities that can rarely be found in academic literature emphasize the interrelationship between economic, environmental and social aspects and their impacts on the state’s activities, and that social responsibility “is taken to mean a balanced approach for the nation state to address economic, social and environmental issues in a way that aims to benefit people, communities and society” (International Institute for Sustainable Development, 2004). Conceptions of social responsibility differ according to national, social and economic priorities, which are themselves influenced by historical and cultural factors.
At the national level, the key influences on social responsibility include the level of modernization or economic development of a nation and the particular institutional arrangements it exhibits. Rawls (1993) uses the term "basic structure" to refer to a given country's institutional arrangements in politics, law, economics, and the family. These arrangements provide “the background conditions against which the actions of individuals and associations take place” (Kaynak and Iyer, 1999: 35). Particular national institutional arrangements can either actively promote social responsibility, latently sustain it, or actively discourage it. There is ample evidence to suggest that Ukrainian national institutions are revealing the last two settings on social responsibility, supporting the idea that the less developed a society is the less prominent the social responsibility discourse will be (Cannon, 1994). This is clearly illustrated by contemporary Ukrainian social policies that are economically focused, and unfortunately these economic priorities supersede social development. For example bribery, corruption, anti-competitive practices are more firmly established in the Ukrainian social responsibility discourse than worker conditions, human rights, social development and community issues. According to Alas and Tafel (2007: 371), in transition economies we should not overlook the fact that, “at least in the early years of social and economic transition, the focus is on a rapid economic development where the social side will inevitably be left in the background and economic development will take place at the expense of social and environmental development”. The place of Ukraine in the National Social Responsibility Index (NSRI) scale, conceptually built on freedom, well-being and transparency indexes, gives evidence that such a vector of development influences social spheres in a deep level. In 2007 Ukraine with the NSRI of 0.53 occupied 85th place among 180 countries, the worst result in Europe (MHCi, 2007).

Consequently, at the national level one would think that a government would like to treat its people responsibly, morally and fairly, promoting social security, unemployment insurance, environmental policy, pensions, healthcare, social housing, social care, child protection, social exclusion, education policy, crime and criminal justice. But, for so many, this has not been the case. In fact, the Ukrainian example is not an exception - it shows that a lack of socially responsible governance in the country has led to mass outflows of migrants (frequently known as labour migrants) and is the main focus of the remainder of this article.

**Lack of National Social Responsibility in Ukraine and Labour Migration**

The collapse of the socialist system in the early 1990’s and the subsequent transition of post-Soviet states to the market economy provided the population with greater freedom of movement along with higher expectations of social responsibility from the nation state. However, gaining the right to free movement coincided with a time of structural transformation accompanied by a decrease in living standards and rising unemployment rate. As a result of degradation of free education and healthcare systems, the expenses were also borne by the individual. A revealing illustration on the poor state of health care is the story of a Ukrainian labour migrant, who went to Italy in 1998 due to the fact that Ukrainian health system would not treat her illness which caused her to remain infertile, so she was forced to go abroad and seek specialists in the Italian health care sector while earning money to support the treatment.

Unwilling to tolerate the widespread shadow relations in the Ukrainian social systems: unregulated labor relations, wages in envelopes, irregular working hours; the future migrant worker begins to look for ways out. This process takes place on the basis of individuals’ observations of others life strategies and the acquired benefits - the expansion of social
opportunities mentioned by almost every respondent. Such situation stimulated labor migration abroad, which at the end turned into a mass phenomenon and major source of income of many Ukrainian families.

As a matter of fact, in the process of institutional reforms and societal transformations caused by departure from the socialist model of the state, the Ukrainian society has lost its basic social guarantees the state has been providing for several decades, such as: guarantees of full employment; subsidized prices for consumer goods and services; free or low cost health care and education; developed social infrastructure and social welfare system in state enterprises. Respondents aged over 40, who have lived during Soviet times, used to compare the current situation in Ukraine with the one in USSR. All of them mentioned that people in that time used to rely on the Soviet state, capable in many cases to help to cope with everyday social risk. Actually, they blame the collapse of socialists system as the main reason for their current situation as a labour migrant worker. Therefore, interview materials reveal that the dramatic social changes in the model of state responsibility could not but provoke widespread social trauma in society, as well as such changes were not able to quickly eradicate values of etatism and paternalistic culture (Popova, 1998: 146).

Moreover, from the conducted interviews it can be concluded that there is a large gap in dialogue between Ukrainian citizens and the Ukrainian state, due to responses to social enquiries from the government that are often superficial and reactionary rather than strategic. Likewise, the empirical data of "European Social Survey (ESS), conducted in 2008-2009 in 31 European countries, namely the module “Welfare attitude in a changing Europe”, indicate that “there is a catastrophic lack of social responsibility of the nation state in the Ukrainian society” (Kutsenko and Gorbachyk, 2011: 122). The analyses of the three-dimensional space of citizen’s perception of social responsibility – a) expectations of social security provided by the state; b) evaluation of benefits; c) evaluation of risks of welfare state implementation – brought to the forefront the paradox that exists in the social conscious of the Ukrainian citizens: “very high level of social expectations from the state is combined with the lowest (comparing to other countries) estimations of the use from the state social support programs, extremely low level of trust to the state and its institutions. Such people’s attitudes toward perceptions and evaluations of welfare policies suggest that during the 20 years of post-Soviet development the lack of social responsibility of the state wasn’t compensated. Therefore, in the current condition of deep socio-economic and moral crisis as well as transformation of social structure and values, such situation only increased the social alienation and deep institutional rupture between state and society, furthermore, in many cases becoming a reasonable motive for emigration.

Lack of national social responsibility can be also traced in deficient labour market and migration policy. Involvement in external labour migration representatives of all Ukrainian regions have become the fundamental social and economic problem necessary for urgent administrative governance and development of new socially responsible policies. Social security and protection of Ukrainian labour migrants, as mentioned in the interview materials, are the key issues that Ukrainians feel lack of and are in need of either in the country of labour or in Ukraine. It suggests that current Ukrainian migration and labour policies should in first turn address these matters being a socially responsible state. In official Ukrainian documents the formation of bilateral agreements on employment and social security are always declared as one of the areas of migration policy and the basic tool of protection of citizens employed abroad. In practice, the general agreements on employment do not play the regulatory role of migration and do not guarantee the rights of migrants. They have more political significance and appear to be rather declarations of intent by cooperation partners in the field of employment (Roska, 2009: 16).
However, for today the agreements providing mutual insurance record and transfer payments within pension, accidents, unemployment and temporary disability insurances are signed not with all states that employ Ukrainian citizens. It is important to note the gaps in Ukrainian legislation narrow the scope of their actions, for example, the lack of legislation on health insurance does not allow establishing appropriate standards in international agreements.

This research suggests that policymakers will do well in developing more socially responsible welfare and migration policies as crucial to the processes of creating favorable social, economic and political conditions within the country so central to concerns of bureaucrats, publics and politicians in migrant-sending states in contemporary de-regulated capitalism. The interview materials with Ukrainian labour migrants working in Italy and Poland suggest that for today, having formed the necessary political vision of problems of labor migration trends and their solutions, practical steps in this direction in Ukrainian policies are missing. The reasons lie in the lack of legislation, including the absence of mutual agreements on Ukrainian citizens’ employment in the range of countries, no law on legal status of migrant workers, lack of public assistance for Ukrainian labor workers abroad, dispersion management functions, and most importantly the absence in the government structure of the executive body specialized on labor migration, which would be able to shape policy, lobby for the adoption of necessary legislation and form a favorable public opinion for solution of migration problems.

Conclusion

This research paper proposes that the social responsibility of the nation state plays a pivotal role in the contemporary migration processes taking place in Ukraine. The analysis of life-stories of Ukrainian labour migrants in Italy and Poland actualizes the issues of the socially responsible governance of the sending country. Specifically, the lack of national social responsibility of the Ukrainian state as reflected in deficient social policies and general inability to treat its citizens fairly, look after their well-being, especially addressing Ukrainians employed abroad, appear to be one of the main causes of mass labour migration from Ukraine.

The interviews with Ukrainian migrants in Italy and Poland showed that state’s social irresponsibility is crucial in forming a decision to migrate. Being potential migrants, interviewed Ukrainians didn’t feel social support from the state when they were in need and thus the level of the trust in all Ukrainian state institutions was and remains rather low. There are several reasons for this current distrust in state institutions and perceived lack of social responsibility from the nation state by Ukrainian citizens: (1) the collapse of the socialists system, that brought along the loss of basic social guarantees the state has been providing for several decades, such as: guarantees of full employment; subsidized prices for consumer goods and services; free or low cost health care and education; developed social infrastructure and social welfare system in state enterprises; (2) the values of etatism and paternalistic culture, that due to social trauma in society caused by transition were not quickly eradicated; (3) the absence of dialogue between Ukrainian citizens and the Ukrainian state, revealed in superficial and reactionary rather than strategic responses from the government to social enquires. Consequently, people see the nation state as socially irresponsible for human and social development of the Ukrainian nation. During interviews, 25 from 27 migrants mentioned uncertainty and ambiguity of economic, social and political situation in contemporary Ukraine as one of the main causes of their leave for work abroad.
Unfortunately, it is not only Ukrainian migrants’ subjective perceptions of the Ukrainian state as being socially irresponsible, objectively in 2007 Ukraine occupied the last place among all European countries with the figure of 0.53 according to the National Social Responsibility Index (NSRI), conceptually built on freedom, well-being and transparency indexes. Following the conceptualization of national social responsibility given above socially responsible state can be defined as a state that treats its citizens fairly, looks after their well-being, and provides social support (including security and protection) of its citizens. Regrettably, Ukraine is recognized to be a state with a low level of social responsibility from the national institutions revealed in the policies they promote regarding Ukrainian citizens.

Some efforts that could help to endorse social responsibility of the Ukrainian nation state include capital market reform, the promotion of democratic structures in the public sphere to incorporate citizens in the policy process. Moreover, efforts could be made to increase space within the public sphere for currently marginalized groups, which often include potential labour migrants, to have a voice in the formulation of social policies, as well as labour and migration policies.

Footnotes

2. Percentage summary exceeds 100% as respondents could name a few reasons for migration.

References


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