# From national inclusion to economic exclusion: ethnic Hungarian labour migration to Hungary

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ABSTRACT. Over the past fifteen years, Hungarian nationalists have been redefining membership in the Hungarian nation to include all Hungarians in the region, irrespective of citizenship. This deterritorialised notion of the nation has been given increased discursive and institutional legitimacy. But ethnic Hungarians from Romania who have gone to Hungary in search of work have not discovered national unity. Rather, the vision of national inclusion preferred by elites has been met by the reality of economic and national exclusion engendered through labour migration. The migrants' national self-understandings have taken shape not in accordance with the wishes of nationalist elites, but rather in response to the economic imperatives of labour migration. Rather than deducing the salience of national unity from its political privileging, the purpose of this paper is to explain how national disunity is experienced, constituted and reproduced in the context of ethnic Hungarian labour migration.

## Introduction

In spite of the predictions of some, nationalism has shown few signs of fading from the post-communist landscape of east Europe. It has responded to the

challenges of supra-national forms of governance, the ascendancy of free market principles of global capitalism, and expanding flows of transnational migration by reinventing itself with renewed vigour (Verdery 1994; Caplan and Feffer 1996; Schöpflin 2000; see more generally Smith 1995; Guibernau 1999). Nations that were violently decoupled from their states through war and conflict in the twentieth century are being symbolically re-coupled, through European integration and the elaboration of kin-state politics, on the cusp of the twenty-first century. Nationalist elites throughout the region have been conceiving, defining and propagating new and innovative variants of political and cultural membership in the nation. At the same time, EU enlargement is providing many of the same nationalists with a backdoor for realising long-term ambitions of national unification. Past strategies of territorial revision are being supplanted by new visions of territorial obsolescence. In the process, the boundaries between cultural belonging to the nation and political membership in the state are being blurred.

Nowhere is this more evident than in Hungary. With two and a half million Hungarians in its neighbouring countries (the largest transborder co-ethnic population in east central Europe), Hungary's role in redefining membership in the nation is unsurpassed. For Hungarian nationalists, transborder Hungarians constitute an integral part of a greater cultural nation of Hungarians. Over the past fifteen years, this deterritorialised version of national membership has enjoyed increased discursive and institutional legitimacy.

But is this political vision of national unity becoming an everyday reality? Are people's quotidian understandings of national belonging congealing within the contours imagined by nationalist elites? To what extent do political manipulations of national belonging shape the ways in which ordinary people perceive and represent themselves in national terms? The scholarship on nationalism has devoted significant attention to the central role elites play in the production and reproduction of national sensitivities (Rothschild 1981; Hroch 2000 [1985]; Snyder 2000; Suny and Kennedy 2001). Meanwhile, comparatively little has been said about the ordinary people who are the presumed targets of this identity engineering. Rather than deducing the meaning and salience of collective belonging from its political privileging, the purpose of this paper to specify and explain the actual ways in which national belonging is experienced, constituted and reproduced by ordinary people in their everyday lives.

Migration provides one of the most salient contexts for these reworkings of the nation (Brubaker 1992; Soysal 1994; Cesarani and Fulbrook 1996; Joppke 1999; Spohn and Triandafyllidou 2003). Membership in the nation is defined, codified and legitimated through official policy and rhetoric on immigration, naturalisation and citizenship; it is simultaneously experienced, negotiated and sometimes challenged by the ordinary people it categorises. Since the early 1990s, Hungary has struggled to reconcile a borderless vision of national unity with migration policies that recognise – and reify – state borders. The

greatest challenge has come from the one and a half million ethnic Hungarians from the Transylvanian region of Romania. Their roles as both members of a culturally defined Hungarian nation and as potential migrant labourers do not always coexist harmoniously.

At the same time that nationalists in Hungary, and Eurocrats in Brussels, have been fighting over different forms of political and cultural membership, Hungarians from Transylvania and their co-ethnics in Hungary have been fighting over access to scarce resources in Hungary's post-communist labour market. In the process, national difference has been lived, experienced and expressed in the migrants' everyday lives much differently than national sameness has been imagined, wished for and engineered in elite circles. Through migration, ethnic Hungarians from Romania have gradually re-defined themselves as nationally distinct from their hosts in Hungary of the same name. The migrants' understandings of the nation have taken shape not in response to political imperatives, but rather, according to the economic contingencies of migration.

It is this mismatch between the elite vision of national unity and the migrants' everyday construction of national disunity that is the focus of my paper. In the first part of the paper, I sketch out the view from above: the discursive and institutional elaboration of Hungarian national unity by nationalist elites in Hungary. In the second and longer portion of the paper, I turn to the view from below: the ways in which national difference is experienced, articulated and reproduced by Transylvanian Hungarian mi-grant workers. The nation, I argue, *is* being redefined in east Europe. But the versions of it traded in stylised elite discourse bear little resemblance to those given expression through the practices of labour migration.

## Methodology

This paper draws on fieldwork conducted with Transylvanian Hungarian migrant workers, in urban and rural settings in Transylvania and Hungary, at multiple intervals between 1995 and 2004. In the summer of 1995, I undertook participant observation research with day labourers in Budapest's Moscow Square. I talked to migrants about their experiences as they waited each morning for casual employment. The following summer, I conducted 31 interviews with migrants and would-be migrants in two sites in Romania. Oradea, a medium-sized city on the border with Hungary, was selected for its proximity to Hungary (and concomitant importance to migration). There I interviewed 21 Hungarian teachers from the city's three main Hungarian secondary schools. The teachers discussed their own migration experiences along with the migration trajectories of their students. My second site was a central Transylvanian Hungarian majority village (population 1,000) chosen for its typical migration links with Hungary. I used snowball sampling to conduct ten interviews, covering practical and impressionistic aspects of the

migration experience. I surveyed fifty randomly selected households to gauge the scope of migration.

Between 1999 and 2004, I was part of a larger collaborative research project on nationalism and ethnicity in Cluj, Transylvania. Fieldwork for this research included over twenty focus groups, one hundred interviews, and countless hours of participant observation. Migration was one of three themes explored in-depth in eight two-hour focus groups with working-class Hungarians of different ages (assembled using snowball techniques from different starting points). Migration was also a frequent topic in semi-structured interviews and participant observation. The methods we employed were designed to facilitate ordinary talk among participants about everyday topics of conversation. We were not only interested in what they said, but how and when they framed their talk in national terms. Interviews and focus groups were recorded and transcribed. All research was conducted in Hungarian and Romanian. Translations are my own; names have been changed.

Since 1990, labour migration has been a central preoccupation of Transylvanians struggling to make ends meet under difficult economic conditions. Migration has touched the lives, directly or indirectly, of the vast majority of them. In the process, the migrants' experiences – and their representations of those experiences – have formed a part of the commonsense stock of local knowledge. This is evidenced by my findings from multiple urban and rural settings collected over ten years. I have also drawn extensively on available quantitative data to corroborate my findings. It is this commonsense knowledge that my research attempts to reconstruct.

## 1. The view from above

Hungarians in the neighbouring countries never left Hungary; rather, Hungary left them when the peace treaties ending World War I compelled it to cede two-thirds of its territory to its victorious neighbours. Since then, the question of the Hungarians in the dismembered territories has dominated the Hungarian nationalist agenda. Different means have been pursued to realise the unification of the transborder Hungarians with the truncated homeland. In the interwar period, a policy of territorial revisionism was pursued through an alliance with Nazi Germany. When war broke out, Hungary reclaimed half of Transylvania and half of Slovakia, only to relinquish them at the war's conclusion. In the post-war environment of communist internationalism, questions of territorial revision, minority protection, and nationalism more generally were muted. Officially, the international working class knew no national boundaries; unofficially, national questions found other outlets. In the 1980s, a widening circle of intellectuals in Hungary began showing an interest in the fate of the Hungarian minorities in neighbouring countries. With the tacit support of the Hungarian state, these intellectuals began

forging cultural ties with their beleaguered brethren in Transylvania (Kürti 2001).

The Hungarian state's cautious handling of the Hungarian question ended in 1989, when the constraints of Cold War politics were lifted. In this new political climate, the transborder Hungarians were publicly and officially embraced as an integral part of the Hungarian nation. To conform to changing geopolitical realities, a kinder, gentler strategy for national unification was elaborated to replace the earlier discredited variants of war, population transfer and ethnic cleansing. Kin-state politics – the institutionalisation of transborder political, cultural and economic links between national homeland and external minorities – emerged throughout the region as the strategy of choice for (symbolically) uniting nations across state frontiers (Fowler 2004; see also Brubaker 1996; Schöpflin 2000). Hungary has led the way in extending a widening array of quasi-citizenship rights to transborder Hungarians, on the basis of their putatively shared ethnicity.[1] National unity is achieved not by changing political boundaries but by bypassing them.

This vision of national unity has been given increasingly elaborate discursive and institutional expression over the past fifteen years. Already in 1990, József Antall, Hungary's first post-communist prime minister, announced that 'in spirit' he was the prime minister of fifteen million Hungarians – five million more than live in Hungary. Not to be outdone, successive governments from both the left and right have asserted and reasserted their obligation to the transborder Hungarians. Competing visions of the Hungarian nation – and the place of transborder Hungarians in it – have been the focus of sustained political debate, endless newspaper commentary and ongoing discussion among Hungarian elites in both Hungary and its neighbouring countries. This is the nation as discursive construct: it is a language of political claim-making, an object of symbolic struggle and a means of popular legitimation (see Verdery 1991).

Different versions of this discourse on national unity have also been institutionalised over the last fifteen years (Bárdi 2003; Mák 2000). Hungary's self-proclaimed obligation to the transborder Hungarians is enshrined in Article 6 of the Constitution; it has been embraced by successive governments as a pillar of foreign policy; it has been formulated into policy by the Office of the Hungarian Beyond the Borders (established in 1992); it was legislated into the 'Status Law' (passed in 2001), a package of entitlements for Hungarians in neighbouring countries, including allowances for parents educating their children in Hungarian minority schools, benefits for healthcare and travel and, most significantly, a guestworker programme; and it was put to a popular vote in a (failed) 2004 national referendum on the question of extending dual citizenship to all transborder Hungarians. These various initiatives have given increasingly elaborate institutional form to the notion of Hungarian national unity (Fowler 2004; Stewart 2003).

This deterritorialised national unity is also abetted by the eastward expansion of the European Union. Hungary and seven other east European states (together with Cyprus and Malta) joined the EU in May 2004; Romania and Bulgaria joined in 2007. Officially, the EU views Hungary's kin-state politics as potentially clashing with its strictures against ethnic discrimination and favouritism. At the same time, however, the EU vision of a borderless Europe has provided nationalists in the region with a backdoor for realising their ambitions of national unification (Kis 2001: 238–9; Csergő and Goldgeier 2004: 26–9; Keating 2004: 370; Weaver 2006: 177–8, 191–2; see more generally McGarry and Keating 2006). In his speech at the EU accession signing ceremony in Prague in 2003, Hungary's then prime minister, Péter Medgyessy, declared that 'the Hungarians, divided into so many parts, can now grasp an opportunity to reunite across national borders' (quoted in Weaver 2006: 191). The Hungarian Democratic Forum, a consistent voice of mainstream Hungarian nationalism, campaigned for Hungary's accession to the EU with a placard depicting a topographical map of the Carpathian Basin. In place of Hungary's current borders, it arranged the yellow stars of the European Union around the pre-World War I borders of Greater Hungary (Weaver 2006: 191). The EU's dismantling of state boundaries has paved the way for the symbolic reunification of Hungarians in Hungary with their ethnic kin in the neighbouring countries. With Romania's accession to the European Union in 2007, Hungarians of all countries now live in a new, common (European) home.

In the past, territorial revision was the preferred means for accomplishing national reunification. Now, national homelands make house calls by bringing the nation to their external co-ethnics across increasingly porous political boundaries. In this arrangement, transborder co-ethnics need not return home; through the elaboration of kin-state policies, they can enjoy quasi-citizenship rights in their countries of origin on the basis of shared ethnicity with the national homeland (Schöpflin 2000; Fowler 2004). Such policies are not precursors for territorial revision (as certain alarmist elements in the neighbouring states sometimes claim); rather, they are their substitutes. Far from succumbing to the threat of obsolescence, the nation has been reinventing itself in east Europe to adapt to changing political realities (Verdery 1994; Guibernau 1999; see also Kymlicka and Opalski 2001; McGarry and Keating 2006). Through kin-state policies and European unification, Hungarians in the neighbouring countries are being discursively, symbolically and institutionally incorporated into a new twenty-first century version of Greater Hungary. A unified cultural nation of Hungarians is becoming a political reality.

## 2. The view from below

A very different understanding of national difference, however, is being constituted in and through the processes of Transylvanian Hungarian labour

migration. The stylised representations of national unity preferred and proffered by Hungarian nationalist elites bear little resemblance to the experiential realities of national disunity accumulated and accomplished through the routine practices of labour migration. 'Struggles over ethnic or regional identity', writes Pierre Bourdieu,

are a particular case of the different struggles over classifications, struggles over the monopoly of power to make people see and believe, to get them to know and recognize, to impose the legitimate definition of the divisions of the social world and, thereby, to *make and unmake groups* (1991: 221; emphasis in original).

Since 1990, Hungarian nationalist elites have been defining and redefining the contours and content of Hungarian national belonging. But while their institutional position invests them with the authority to articulate and disseminate their preferred national visions, it does not in itself explain how – if, indeed, at all – those visions are received by the ordinary people in whose name they claim to speak. Nationalism, writ large, is the project to make the nation. But the nation is not constituted *ex nihilo*; rather, its efficacy rests upon its quotidian appropriation and unselfconscious ratification by the ordinary people, thus defined as the nation (see, e.g. Bourdieu 1991: 223–4; 1985: 727–31).

These ordinary people, however, have largely been absent from much of the scholarship on nationalism. While elite approaches have focused on institutional and discursive dimensions of the political project to make the nation, they have not systematically attended to the actual ways in which the nation is engaged and endorsed – or ignored and deflected – by the targeted audiences of those projects. To properly understand the popular salience of nationalism requires a shift in focus to the supposed bearers of the nation: ordinary people in their everyday lives (Billig 1995; Brubaker *et al.* 2006). Most of these people do not think or talk *about* the nation as the abstract idea of shared culture and values preferred by elites. Rather, they think and talk *with* the nation as a practical category for understanding and arranging social difference, an unselfconscious disposition about the order of things, and an interpretive schema for making sense of diverse phenomena (Brubaker *et al.* 2004).

And the phenomena that Hungarians on both sides of the border have been coming to grips with over the past fifteen years are the changing economic relations in which they live. These transformative relations have become particularly transparent in the context of international migration. Since 1989, hundreds of thousands of ethnic Hungarians from Romania have gone to Hungary to work for higher Hungarian wages. In so doing, they have laid bare many of the fissures in Hungary's emergent market economy. In the second part of this paper, I examine the ways in which the economic pains and uncertainties of Transylvanian Hungarian labour migration have provided the context for the everyday elaboration of new modalities of Hungarian national difference.

The literature on transnationalism has drawn attention to the important role that sending countries play in establishing and nurturing transnational ties with their migrant populations abroad (see, e.g. Basch *et al.* 1994). These growing relations between sending and receiving contexts have contributed to the emergence of new transnational forms of allegiance, which challenge the continued hegemony of the nation-state paradigm. In the Hungarian case, however, it is the receiving country – not the sending country – that sponsors the establishment and maintenance of ties with co-ethnics abroad. As in other instances of ethnic return migration, migrants are travelling *to* – not from – their putative national homelands (Brubaker 1998; Joppke 2005; Skrentny *et al.* 2005).

But the sorts of ties Hungary favours with its co-ethnics are those enjoyed and maintained *in* the co-ethnics' countries of origin. Unlike other countries with the 'right of return', Hungary does not actively encourage or facilitate the return migration of its diasporic communities.[2] The official vision of Hungarian national unity is undergirded by the principle that *all* Hungarians, irrespective of citizenship, are members of a greater cultural nation of Hungarians. But this vision only works insofar as Hungarians from the neighbouring countries symbolically claim such unity from the comfort of their own homes. Since 1990, Hungary's kin-state policies have been aimed at improving the cultural, economic and political conditions of Hungarians *in* their countries of origin, so that they can continue to thrive there as Hungarians. 'The primary objective' of legislative initiatives for the co-ethnics, according to the Hungarian Standing Conference (an advisory body periodically convened between the government of Hungary and political representatives of transborder Hungarians), 'is to reinforce the prospects and opportunities for [the co-ethnics to remain] in the ancestral homeland' (reproduced in Kántor *et al.* 2004: 529). Transborder Hungarians are invited – indeed, encouraged – to enjoy shared belonging in the Hungarian nation, but with the caveat that they do so from their countries of origin. Hungary's policies in this sense are symbolically inclusive but practically exclusive.

Hungary thus encourages transborder Hungarians to stay put and wait for the ethnic homeland to come to them (Kántor 2001: 260–4). The problem, however, is that transborder Hungarians have not stayed put. Ignoring their national homeland's paternal advice, these Hungarians packed their bags and left for Hungary in droves in search of work. Hungary's relative proximity and prosperity vis-à-vis Romania made it an attractive destination for Transylvanians emerging from the detritus of Ceaușescu's harsh austerity policies. But Hungary, concerned with its own precarious economic standing, provided neither the legal nor institutional framework to integrate these migrants into its labour force. Many of the migrants accordingly worked undocumented. As 'tourists', lacking either visas or work permits, these migrants were permitted to stay (but not legally work) in Hungary for thirty days. Many gave up jobs in Romania to work fulltime in Hungary, leaving once a month just long enough to get their passports stamped before returning

again. Over the past fifteen years, established networks of circular labour migration have taken shape to facilitate the continued flow of migrant workers in and out of Hungary.[3]

My focus here is on this large number of mostly undocumented Transylvanian Hungarian migrant workers.[4] Hungary is their most favoured destination. These Hungarians did not go to Hungary in search of their ethnic homeland; they went there in search of work (Csata and Kiss 2003: 10–11). To be sure, linguistic and cultural affinities facilitated their entry in the local labour market (see Brubaker 1998: 1057–8). But these national affinities were not the migrants' objective; rather, they were a means for realising economic ends.

The limits of these affinities soon became apparent. Hungary was not the benevolent mother country greeting its long-lost ethnic brethren with open national arms. Almost immediately, the symbolic myth of national inclusion was confronted with the harsh reality of economic exclusion (Fox 2003: 456–9; Pulay 2005: 148–9). This was not the ethnic homeland tacitly expected by some, but a foreign country with different and at times alienating customs, habits and institutions (see, e.g. Szakáts 1996: 115–17, 121–2). Nominally shared ethnicity between migrant and host therefore did little to secure the migrants' privileged access to the Hungarian labour market. Instead, the co-ethnics were greeted with the same combination of suspicion and scorn that greets labour migrants the world over.[5] Working undesirable, low status jobs (in the construction, agricultural and domestic sectors) for meagre wages and no benefits, these undocumented migrants were socially and economically marginalised in Hungary (Szakáts 1996).[6] 'You work like crazy', one worker explained, 'don't spend anything, come home, and change your money – that's the only way you can make it work.'

Increasingly, these differences in working and living conditions between migrant and host came to be interpreted and represented as quasi-ethnic differences (see, e.g. Bonacich 1972; Miles 1982). Migrant workers in Hungary, irrespective of their ethnicity or citizenship, were frequently referred to as 'Romanians'. In theory, this 'Romanian' label could function as an unmarked category referring to the migrants' country of origin. In practice, however, the label was heard by the Transylvanian Hungarian migrants as a symbolic denial of their Hungarianness. It functioned as a quasi-ethnic shorthand for migrants from the poor, backward, 'Balkans', whose willingness to work long hours for low wages was viewed with resentment and suspicion (Feischmidt 2004: 50–5). Migration provided the context not for national reunification but rather for the experience and construction of national difference (Biró 2002: 137–9).[7]

Research on attitudes toward foreigners shows that Hungarians in Hungary consistently regard Transylvanian Hungarians favourably and Romanians unfavourably (Fábián 1998: 158–60; Tóth and Turai 2003: 112, 115–16). Such findings, however, do not account for the way in which category membership shifts in sending and receiving contexts. It is not enough to say that Hungarians in Hungary like Transylvanian Hungarians and dislike

Romanians. Hungarians in Hungary like Transylvanian Hungarians as long as they stay in Transylvania. The moment Transylvanian Hungarians cross the border as migrant workers they become 'Romanian' in the eyes of their hosts (Tóth and Turai 2003: 108–10, 125). 'Here [in Romania] we're Hungarians,' one migrant observed; 'there, we're Romanians.'

For the migrants, this 'Romanian' label was heard unambiguously as an ethnic slur (Feischmidt 2004: 51–7; Pulay 2005: 149–50). Consider, for instance, the following exchange between two twenty-something Hungarians from Cluj:

Zoli: . . . Everybody thinks you're Romanian –
Éva: – Romanian?, *Wallachian*, excuse me, *Wallachian*[8] . . .
Zoli: . . . and where did this 'stinking Romanian'[9] come from, . . . that's the way they treat you a lot of the time, like you live on the street, and I don't know, you steal, and they come up with all this stuff about you . . . it was like you were Afghan or something, . . . it didn't matter that you were Hungarian, in terms of your nationality, I'm not talking about citizenship now. . . . They don't understand what it means that . . . you're a Romanian citizen, but your nationality is Hungarian, they just don't get it.

Seemingly everyone who had been to Hungary – and many who had not – had stories to tell about being called 'Romanian' (Biró 1996; Mungiu-Pippidi 1999; Fox 2003; Pulay 2005). A young Hungarian woman from Romania who had visited (but not worked) in Hungary described her experiences: 'You get on the metro', she explained,

and they come and check your tickets and there's some sort of problem, you didn't validate it or something, . . . and then they check your ID and 'Phooey! – It's the Romanians again!', and so you try to prove to them that you have a completely Hungarian name, that you're Hungarian, not Romanian.

An older Hungarian, from a village near Târgu-Mureş in central Transylvania, said he overheard someone in Hungary referring to him and his compatriots as 'Romanian thieves'. Another worker from the same village was cursed by his boss as a 'filthy Romanian Wallachian' for helping himself to a handful of cherries from a tree. And a teacher from Oradea near the border with Hungary said that her friends were greeted with 'here come the Romanians!' by their new neighbours in Hungary.

This semantic denial of Hungarian national belonging did not sit well with migrants, who at least tacitly expected shared national affinities to secure them a warmer welcome. As one worker complained,

If I go over there [to Hungary], they look at me like I'm Romanian . . . . Morally speaking, . . . I should be able to consider myself Hungarian the way I really am, they shouldn't look at me like I'm Romanian, or Senegalese, or Mongolian.

Hungarians in Romania, as minorities elsewhere, have a heightened aware-ness of themselves in ethnonational terms. Their Hungarian self-understand-ings, moreover, were explicitly constituted vis-à-vis lower status Romanians (Csepeli *et al.* 2002: 89–90). To be labelled 'Romanian' was therefore not just

a challenge to the migrants' Hungarianness, it entailed a status reversal as well.

Not surprisingly, Transylvanian Hungarian migrant workers have consistently and stridently rejected the 'Romanian' label.[10] Hearing the label as an ethnic slur has necessitated – and justified – an emotionally charged defensive embrace of the migrants' 'true' Hungarianness in return. In the process, migrant and host have engaged in symbolic struggles over who is really Hungarian (Csepeli *et al.* 2002: 83–6; see more generally Triandafyllidou 2001).[11] Transylvanian Hungarians depict themselves as carriers of the virtues of tradition, while they portray Hungarians in Hungary as exemplars of the ills of modernity. The Transylvanians symbolically deny their co-ethnics' Hungarianness by labelling them 'Jews', 'Schwabians', 'Gypsies' and 'Slovaks'. According to Tamás, a craftsman from central Transylvania, Hungarians in Hungary are 'nothing-people'. The Transylvanians depict themselves, in contrast, as leading a more traditional Hungarian life, speaking better Hungarian and displaying greater pride in being Hungarian (Pulay 2005: 155–8).

And, as has become clear in the context of labour migration, they work harder (Pulay 2005: 149). 'They're always saying we take their work from them', Csaba complained to his friends (all of whom had worked in Hungary) during a focus group discussion. But for him the reasons were clear: 'The best carpenters and joiners', he argued, 'always come from Transylvania.' His friends nodded in agreement. He added,

It's true that [Transylvanian Hungarians] work for less than Hungarians [in Hungary] – that's why they get pissed off. But they don't even like to work. . . . I worked there a year . . . as a manual labourer, I mixed the mortar, hammered the boards, laid the bricks, whatever they needed. . . . Okay, so they worked ten hours. But the amount of time they were just screwing around was unbelievable. . . . Now the Transylvanians, *they* really work. Take my father-in-law, he works sixteen hours a day every day. Hungarians [in Hungary] are already heading home at 4:00. They make just as much as my father-in-law but they go home at 4:00. Maybe they don't need the money so badly . . . and so they don't work so hard. . . .

Csaba, and others like him, rationalised the Transylvanian Hungarians' moral right to compete for jobs in Hungary by appealing to their supposedly stronger work ethic. 'If you consider yourself . . . part of the Hungarian nation and feel like you can't make ends meet' in Transylvania, argued Pista, another migrant worker, 'then you should have the right' to work in Hungary.

Transylvanian Hungarians went to Hungary in search of a living wage – not identity politics. But their economic woes were given an ethnic spin when their hosts called them 'Romanian'. Competition over access to scarce resources came to be expressed in terms of competition over legitimate claims to Hungarianness. Indeed, it is not uncommon for economic inequalities to be given ethnicised or racialised expression, particularly in contexts of labour migration (Bonacich 1972: 552–4; Miles 1982: 167–75). The Hungarian case is distinctive, however, in that migrant and host nominally shared the same

ethnicity. The national 'other' in contrast to whom the migrants understood themselves was part of the same national 'self' privileged in elite discourse.

These sorts of ethnicised accounts of economic hardship and indignation enjoyed widespread circulation not just among the migrants themselves, but, just as importantly, through the networks of labour migration, back to Hungarians in Romania who had never been to Hungary. The impact of labour migration needs to be measured not only quantitatively, but also qualitatively, in its capacity to shape the experiences, self-understandings and cultural repertoires of those whose lives it touches. The stories that circulated through networks of migration have come to form an integral part of the stock of commonsense knowledge of Transylvanian Hungarians (Biró 2002: 138; Fox 2003: 460–2). A Hungarian blacksmith in a small village in Transylvania complained one day about the difficulties of making ends meet as he pounded out a horseshoe on an anvil. When asked whether he considered looking for work in Hungary, he paused and said 'I could go to Hungary, but why? There I'm just a stinking Wallachian.' Another young man selling handicrafts in Cluj saw things similarly: 'Half my family lives there . . . my brother, grandparents, they told me to come, and I could go, fine, they pay well enough. But I'm not going there as a "Romanian".' A mother of another migrant worker gave similar reasons for why she would not be following her son to Hungary: 'I'd rather be a "*bozgoroică*"[12] here [in Romania] than a "Romanian" there [in Hungary].'

Neither labour market tensions, nor the experiences of quasi-ethnic differences they engendered, were ameliorated by Hungary's rhetoric of national unity. This vision of national unity did not conform to the reality of economic exclusion experienced in the day-to-day practices of labour migration (see Stewart 2003: 88). Many Transylvanians had become too jaded by years of marginalisation to take Hungary's rhetoric or policy initiatives seriously. Pali, a computer salesman from Transylvania (who had never worked in Hungary), cynically regarded the package of entitlements contained in the Status Law as a cheap attempt by Hungary to curry favour with the transborder Hungarians. He, for one, was not taken in:

It's all just stupid. . . . It's ridiculous. . . . You know what it's like? They give you a little piece of shit and you complain so you get some more – 'Gimme some shit!' – But no one cares. . . . No one's even talking about . . . whether it's shit or not, or what it is they're actually getting.

His mother, a pensioner, saw things differently. Unlike Pali, Erzsi had no intention of cashing in on the law's entitlements. She was content to reap the symbolic rewards of 'being Hungarian' in the comfort of her own home. As she explained to her son, 'It's about the *principle* of it, it's the *principle* that Hungary finally wants to help Hungarians in the neighbouring countries in some way.' Indeed, transborder Hungarians (including a disproportionate number of pensioners) did sign up for the special Hungarian identification papers that entitled them to the Status Law's benefits (Császár 2004: 321;

Stewart 2003: 87). Many did so, however, not to cash in on the Status Law's material rewards, but, like Erzsi, to symbolically mark their belonging in the Hungarian nation. This was an endorsement of Hungary's vision of symbolic national unity.

But others who had experienced the hardships of economic exclusion were less impressed by such arguments (Császár 2004: 322; Stewart 2003: 87–8). Pali rejected his mother's principled rationale: 'You worked thirty-nine years straight,' he continued, growing more agitated:

> You should get *something*, it doesn't matter *what*, but *something* at least. The Hungarians aren't giving you a *thing*, the Romanians work hard to keep you from getting anything. So many principles. Every damn thing is a principle. I'm gonna fight for something when that something is tangible, when it'll be mine, and I'm gonna know it's mine, then I'll fight. But as long as some *Hungarian* tells me 'you just keep fighting, because eventually I'll get around to giving you something,' then the Hungarians can go to hell, you understand?

This was hardly the image of Hungarian brotherly love promoted by Hungary and enshrined in the Status Law. Pali's view, however, while perhaps remarkable for its vitriol, was not untypical for its content.[13]

Ultimately, few migrant workers were interested in taking advantage of the Status Law's guestworker provisions (Hárs 2003: 68–9; Stewart 2003: 85–9). By the time the law was passed, established networks of undocumented labour migration were funnelling workers from Transylvania and elsewhere into different jobs in Hungary. The law's offer of three months of legal employment each calendar year was hardly enticing to migrants who had grown accustomed to working year round in Hungary (Hárs and Tóth 2003: 13; Stewart 2003: 87). According to Zoltán Kántor (2001: 263), these weak guestworker provisions were consistent with the 'central scope of the law ... to convince the Hungarians living in the neighboring countries to remain in their home country'.[14]

The Status Law was therefore of little practical consequence in legalising labour migration or in undoing the experiences of economic and national exclusion. Any remaining hopes the Transylvanian Hungarians may have held, for securing more than symbolic benefits from their ethnic homeland, were dashed by the ill-fated dual citizenship referendum held in December 2004. The controversial plans for dual citizenship went considerably beyond the Status Law, by proposing to extend citizenship rights to all transborder Hungarians on the basis of putatively shared ethnicity (Kovács 2005). But the referendum's defeat (due to insufficient voter turnout) sealed the transborder Hungarians' continued exclusion. 'Our Hungarian brothers screwed us over ... with the referendum', remarked one Transylvanian Hungarian sardonically, adding 'just as I expected'.

Politically privileged conceptions of the nation, promulgated through official institutional and discursive practices, were challenged by the everyday conceptions of national belonging grounded in the social and economic realities of labour migration (Biró 2002: 137–9). To be sure, the exclusion

experienced by undocumented migrant workers was often more pronounced than that experienced by Transylvanian Hungarians who enjoyed some form of legal status in Hungary (see Tóth 1997; Gödri 2004a). But particularly for the undocumented workers, Hungary's rhetoric of national unity did not ring true in the face of the sort of frustrations, anxieties and humiliations endured day in and day out while working in Hungary. These Transylvanians accepted neither the notion of Hungarian unity endorsed by the Hungarian state, nor the 'Romanian' label ascribed to them by their Hungarian hosts. Instead, the economic differences they experienced were interpreted and articulated as national differences. The official Hungarian vision of national unity was undone by their economically grounded experience of national disunity.


## Conclusion

In certain respects, there *has* been a resurgence of nationalism in Hungary and east Europe since 1989. But this resurgence has had different sources and divergent trajectories. While Hungarian nationalists have been hashing out new visions of national unity, Transylvanian Hungarian migrant workers have been encountering and constituting their own versions of national disunity. Officially sponsored visions of national belonging are not the best predictors of the ways in which ordinary people understand themselves nationally in their daily lives. The migrant workers' quotidian experiences of economic exclusion – not the lofty ideals of Hungarian nationalist discourse – provided them with a national language for interpreting and articulating social difference. Shifting the analytical focus from official discourse and policy, to the economic contexts of everyday life, reveals that labour migration has provided the impetus not for the *re*-unification of the Hungarian nation but rather for its bifurcation.

A number of observers have noted that transnational migration processes are gradually eroding the continued salience of the nation-state paradigm (Soysal 1994; Appadurai 1996; Hannerz 1996; Hedetoft and Hjort 2002). At the same time, others have suggested that the nation-state's retreat is being hastened by European expansion and the elaboration of kin-state politics in east Europe (Fowler 2004). But these transnational processes have not necessarily engendered concomitant transnational forms of collective belonging (Waldinger and Fitzgerald 2004). The experiences of national difference engendered through the processes of migration continue, in large part, to congeal within the political boundaries supplied by the state: Hungarians from one side of the border see themselves as distinct from those on the other side. The state thus remains a powerfully cogent container for the organisation and experience of social reality (Giddens 1987: 13; Mann 1993: 59–61; see also Torpey 2000: 11–13). This is the state not as an assemblage of powerful elites, but rather as an institutional form that prescribes the culture of a territorially delineated polity. 'The "power" of the modern state', explains

Michael Mann (1993: 61), 'principally concerns not ''state elites'' exercising power over society but a tightening state-society relation, caging social relations over the national rather than the local-regional or transnational terrain. . . . ' Elite discourse has not *trans*-nationalised the migrants as much as the organisational logic of the state has *re*-nationalised them.

## Notes

1 Poland, Romania and Slovakia have also implemented kin-state regimes for their transborder co-ethnics in neighbouring countries; Albania, Croatia, Macedonia, Serbia and Ukraine similarly acknowledge varying degrees of responsibility to their transborder co-ethnics (Fowler 2004).

2 Germany and Israel, the paradigmatic cases of states with the 'right of return', have historically granted preferential treatment to co-ethnics wishing to resettle (Levy and Weiss 2002). In other countries, such as Japan, Korea, Italy and Spain, ethnic affinity has been established as a principle (and rationale) for granting preferential access to local labour markets (Joppke 2005; Skrentny *et al.* 2005). In these come-and-get-it approaches to immigration, naturalisation and labour migration, citizenship and/or labour market access is designed to be enjoyed *in* the ethnic homeland by those who return. (In more recent years, however, Germany has shifted to a 'Hungarian' model whereby it encourages its co-ethnics to remain in their countries of origin.)

3 While the number of Transylvanian Hungarian migrant workers peaked in the mid-1990s, research conducted in 2002 showed that nearly half of employable age Hungarians from Romania still planned 'short-term' employment in Hungary (Sik and Simonovits 2003: 43–4; see also Simonovits 2003; Bädescu 2004). The number of work permits issued to Romanian citizens has fluctuated between 10,000 and 30,000 per year over the past fifteen years (Juhász 1999: 9–11, 14–15; Gödri 2004b: 9–10). The actual numbers of undocumented migrants are more difficult to gauge, but estimates place them at around 100,000 per year (Hárs 1999: 60; see also Juhász 1999: 21–2).

4 Transylvanian Hungarians have also gone to Hungary as emigrants, students, tourists, traders and refugees (see, e.g. Tóth 1997).

5 Survey research from Hungary shows that Hungarians in Hungary blame Transylvanian Hungarian migrant workers for economic ills and rising unemployment (Hárs 1999; see also Fábián 1998: 158–60; Fábián *et al.* 2001: 411; Tóth and Turai 2003: 113, 118–19).

6 The degree of marginalisation varied for differently situated migrants. Those better-placed in established networks, for instance, fared better than casual labourers seeking day employment at Budapest's infamous Moscow Square 'human market' (Sik 1999).

7 There are other contexts, however, in which this discourse of national unity is more resonant. Hungarian national belonging in Transylvania, for instance, is constituted vis-à-vis Romanians in a way that implicitly (and sometimes explicitly) recognises Hungarians in Hungary as part of the national self. The boundaries and content of the national self shift in different contexts.

8 '*Wallachian*' is a common slur used to refer to Romanians. While it technically refers to Romanians from Wallachia, or the Old Kingdom, south of Transylvania, in practice it has become a synonym for Roma.

9 'Stinking Romanian' is another common slur directed at Romanians. Other favourites included 'stinking Transylvanians', 'Wallachian Gypsies', 'Gypsies', 'dirty Romanians' and 'Romanian thieves'. I also heard an unemployed worker from Hungary refer to the migrant workers as '*bocskorosok*' and '*szőrős talpúak*'. '*Bocskor*' refers to a particular type of traditional footwear still worn in some rural parts of Romania. '*Szőrős talpú*' means 'hairy footed'.

10 Ethnic return migrants in other contexts have reacted differently. Japanese Brazilian migrant workers, derisively called 'foreigners' by their hosts in Japan, responded by rediscovering their Brazilianness with new intensity and resolve (Tsuda 2003). Russian émigrés to Israel, and

*Aussiedler* Germans in Germany, reclaimed their distinctiveness by self-segregating into enclave communities (Levy and Weiss 2002). But the cultural affinities between Russian Jews, *Aussiedler* Germans and Japanese Brazilians on the one hand, and their hosts of the same names on the other, have been more diluted by the effects of history and geography. Hungarians from Transylvania, in contrast, can – and do – claim more proximate historical and geographical ties with Hungary.

11 Nearly half of Transylvanian Hungarians concurred with the statement that Hungarians in Hungary are 'assimilated Hungarians' (Centrul de Cercetare de Relaţiilor Interetnice, undated); conversely, a quarter of Hungarians in Hungary agreed that Transylvanian Hungarians 'aren't really Hungarian' (Fábián *et al.* 2001: 411).

12 '*Bozgoroică*' is a common slur used by Romanians to refer to Transylvanian Hungarians. It means 'without a homeland'.

13 Other Transylvanian Hungarians cynically predicted that the only people who would claim the Status Law's benefits would be *non*-Hungarians. Jancsi, a stagehand at the Hungarian opera in Cluj, who had worked in Hungary on numerous occasions, expected the Status Law to make Hungarianness a hot commodity:

*In Romania out of twenty-three million Romanians, or rather twenty-three million* citizens, *it's going to turn out that twenty million are Hungarian* [chuckling] *and three million Bulgarians or whatever* [chuckling again]. *That's the problem with this whole thing . . . I mean it's human fallibility, right? If I have the teeniest possibility, an ounce of a chance to get something . . . .*

The law's entitlements encouraged the strategic manipulation of Hungarian identity to lay claim to those resources. But incorporating non-Hungarians into the fold of Hungary's 'unified cultural nation of Hungarians' through the Status Law's entitlements was seen by 'real' (Transylvanian) Hungarians as a further degradation of the ideal of Hungarian unity. While the law would not succeed in uniting transborder Hungarians with Hungarians in the mother country, it would succeed, according to Jancsi, in making Hungarians out of non-Hungarians.

14 To add insult to injury, a week before the Status Law was to go into effect, Hungary entered into a bilateral agreement with Romania (under pressure from the EU) to extend the law's guestworker provisions to all Romanian citizens, irrespective of ethnicity. While the amended law allayed EU concerns over ethnic discrimination, it did so at the cost of further offending the transborder Hungarians (see Deets and Stroschein 2005).

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