

Book Review

EU-in-BRIEF | Ausgabe 01-2016

Von Sophie Falsini

Bastian A. Vollmer (2016) *Ukrainian Migration and the European Union: Dynamics, Subjectivity, and Politics*, Palgrave Macmillan UK.

Migration can be described with facts and numbers, but migration may also be described as a life story, as a trip towards the potential improvement of one's livelihood, social status and societal context. This book allows each of us to get our own and private perception of what migration means, since there is always something different one can read out of the diverse stories and the author's deep thoughts. I personally came to the conclusion that there is almost no objectivity in migration, since each person with his experience perceives the process in his own, private way. It is therefore important to know what subjectivity is in order to understand the impact that migration has on the psychology of the subject. And exactly this is also the aim of this book, which approaches the topic of migration from Ukraine to the European Union through short narratives which provide insights into Ukrainians' life and subjectivity.

The goal of this interesting book is to examine how migration in Ukraine developed, so to understand the reasons behind massive emigration flows during the last centuries. The author wants to demonstrate the relevance of migration for both EU-Ukrainian relations and for Ukraine itself, since it equally affects the structure and the development of its society. A special attention has been also given to aspirations and imaginations, because these provide a better answer to the question of why people

leave than the sole examination of 'push' and 'pull' factors.

The imaginations and perceptions that Ukrainians have of the EU are crucial in the decision-making process (i.e. to leave or to stay), where rationality and emotions interweave. Imaginations get even stronger through the discourses of returnees and the media coverage, whose integrity and credibility people sometimes have little faith in. The images that Ukrainians get from the EU are positive, but in some sense still realistic: notion of beauty, morality, and the possibility of living a secure and calm life are the main drivers. "EU is just better", do some Ukrainians say. People who flow do not have luxury in mind, but they want to avoid a predatory state and search for stability and socio-economic security. For many these characteristics are embodied by Germany.

Besides an aesthetic attraction for the EU and socio-economic drivers, the book is also able to highlight some more political and psychological structural determinants for migration. Corruption is certainly one of them. "Corruption is everywhere; it is [...] all over Ukraine", and has become internalized and naturalized as a social norm, as well as an integral part of Ukrainians' life. Also the lack of perspectives and of the rule of law, together with high dissatisfaction and a politics of helplessness, drive Ukrainians in search of fortune abroad.

However, leaving behind family and children is never an easy choice, and the risk of shameful return and disintegration is a problem which many returnees may have to face once they come back. It is not just work (*rabota*) that people search in the EU, but the social status that for Ukrainians only work can give.

But what is Ukraine and what does this book analyze? Ukraine is not only a country which has always been “couched between two big global players”, i.e. Russia and Europe, but it is also a state with a specific historical, political and social background, which is neither Russian nor European, but solely Ukrainian. Such background has been attentively analyzed by the author: insights in Ukrainian religion, culture, demographic characteristics, educational system, political developments, and relations with its neighbors serve as a ground to analyze how migration patterns developed and changed since its independence in 1918. Nevertheless, what pops up besides the changes, is the fact that Ukraine has been always characterized by discontinuity and domination of foreign rulers. These contributed to transform migration into a complex construct, whose turning point was the abolition of the iron curtain. Back then, migration shifted from being solely internal into international overnight. This socio-historical and political context becomes the background for understanding a Ukraine on the move, where old and new patterns of migration interlace on one hand and split on the other. Today's Ukraine is threefold: it is a transit country, a country of immigration and emigration.

Even though we are interested in Ukraine today, the fact that the author goes backward to the historic idea of migration during the Soviet Union is of great help for the reader, especially because it allows to draw many subtle parallels with our current situation. During the Soviet Union migration was depicted as a ‘positive’ process, which fall

under the regime's framework of creating Soviet people, and was meant to reallocate labor forces and technical progress within the soviet territories. During Soviet times migration had a certain systematic, since it served the Soviet society and was part of a broader population policy, or “managed mixing” of ethnic groups. The strategy used was pretty similar to the one we happen to see today (my emphasis): administrative policies and ethnic propaganda were used to regulate migration flows in order to prevent irregular migration. The media inhibited a realistic coverage of the flows and it broadcasted the image of an “invasions of migrants”. Only the negative aspects of migration were brought to light and xenophobia raised quickly. However, as it may also be true for the EU, that is not an overall racist attitude, but rather a subtle narrative of supremacy. The goal was homogeneity, elimination of regional differences, development of the social structure and reduction of discrepancies.

All these elements and perspectives find their place within the pages of this book, which both informs and surprises the reader with unexpected point of views, statements and deep thoughts. Should you be the person who is looking for some inspiration or unanswered questions, this book is definitely worth reading.

About the author

Bastian Vollmer is a Leverhulme Fellow at the Centre on Migration, Policy, and Society (COMPAS), University of Oxford. He was educated at Cambridge University and the University of Amsterdam. He regularly publishes articles in internationally renowned journals such as *Geopolitics*, *Population*, *Place and Space* or *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*. His previous book *Policy Discourses on Irregular Migration in Germany and the United Kingdom* (Palgrave Macmillan) was published in 2014.

Über die Autorin

Sophie Falsini ist Master-Studentin der Europa Studien an der Europa Universität Viadrina. Ihre Schwerpunkte liegen im Bereich Migration und Grenzkontrollen, Politik und Geschichte in der Sowjetunion, sowie die EU und ihre östlichen Nachbarn. Studienaufenthalte führten sie nach Sankt Petersburg und ins estnische Tartu. Von Februar bis April 2016 absolvierte Sophie Falsini ein Praktikum im Generalsekretariat der EBD.



Kontakt: sophie.falsini@outlook.com

Impressum

EU-in-BRIEF | Analysen – Positionen – Vorausschau ist ein kostenloses Informationsangebot im PDF-Format der Europäischen Bewegung Deutschland e.V.

ISSN-Nummer: 2191-8252

Zitier-Hinweise: Bisher wurden keine verbindlichen Regeln zur Zitierweise digitaler Publikationen geschaffen. Daher bitten wir, folgende Angaben zu übernehmen, wenn Sie einen unserer Texte zitieren möchten: Autoren des Textes, Titel des Textes, Internetadresse wie angegeben. Für Rückfragen stehen wir Ihnen gerne zur Verfügung.

© **Europäische Bewegung Deutschland e.V.**

Sophienstr. 28/29 | D-10178 Berlin

T +49 30 3036201-10 | F -19

info@netzwerk-ebd.de

Herausgeber: Bernd Hüttemann (V.i.S.d.P.)

Mehr Wissen!

Auf der Website der EBD erfahren Sie alles Wesentliche über unsere Organisation und können kostenfrei auf eine Vielzahl von Informationen zu Europa zugreifen: <http://www.netzwerk-ebd.de>

Die Europäische Bewegung Deutschland e.V., gegründet 1949, ist das größte zivilgesellschaftliche Netzwerk für Europa in Deutschland und institutioneller Partner des Auswärtigen Amtes.