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## CLR News

# The Lives and Work of migrant Workers

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## Labour mobility in construction: migrant workers' strategies between integration and turn-over

The construction industry historically is characterised by high levels of labour mobility favouring the recruitment of migrant labour. In Europe migrant workers made up around 25% of overall employment in the EU sector<sup>1</sup> and similar if not higher figures existed for the sector in Russia<sup>2</sup>. The geo-political changes of the 1990s have had a substantial impact on migration flows, expanding the pool of labour recruitment within and from the Post-socialist East but also changing the nature of migration. The rise of temporary employment has raised concerns about the weakness and isolation of migrant workers and the concomitant risk of abuses<sup>3</sup>. Migrant workers though cannot be reduced to helpless victims of state policies and employers' recruitment strategies. Findings of the research presented here unveil how they meet the challenges of the international labour market, the harshness of debilitating working conditions and the difficult implications for their family life choices.

The research consists of ethnographic fieldwork and in-depth interviews with Moldovan and Ukrainian construction workers and key experts based in Italy, Russia and Moldova<sup>4</sup>. Fieldwork has been carried out to investigate informal networks, recruitment mechanisms and

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<sup>1</sup> Stawinska, A. (2010). The EU-27 construction sector: from boom to gloom. *Eurostat: Statistics in Focus*, 7, 1-7: [http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/cache/ITY\\_OFFPUB/KS-SF-10-007/EN/KS-SF-10-007-EN.PDF](http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/cache/ITY_OFFPUB/KS-SF-10-007/EN/KS-SF-10-007-EN.PDF)

<sup>2</sup> Zayonchkovskaya, Zh. A., Mkrtchyan, N. & Tyuryukanova, E. (2009). Rossiya pered vyzovami immigracii [Russia facing the challenges of immigration]. In Zayonchkovskaya, Zh. A., Vitkovskaya G. S. (Eds.), *Postsovetskie Transformacii: otrazhenie v migraciyakh [Post-Soviet Transformations: Effects on Migrations]* (pp. 9-62). Moscow, Russia: Adamant. (p. 34)

<sup>3</sup> EFBWW study - Temporary migrant workers in the construction industry in the EU. *CLR-News* 4/2013.

<sup>4</sup> In-text citations for interview data will be provided in this order: expert interviews are fully anonymised and will provide information about institution/place/year of interview; materials from interviews with worker respondents will be cited in this fashion first name/place/year.

employment conditions to establish their impact on migration processes. Migrant trajectories reveal the rationale behind short-haul and temporary migration strategies as well as the present limitations of integration in host countries. Migrant workers' individual forms of resistance prove unable to overcome the constraints imposed by states, employers and intermediaries, yet their accounts show how policies aimed at their protection require greater alignment with their practices and expectations.

### **Migration, mobility and turn over in Europe**

In the last twenty years, two distinctive migration systems have developed in Europe, one in the enlarged EU the other in the former Soviet Union<sup>5</sup>. In both areas, the construction sector has been the primary beneficiary of migrant labour inflows. The institutional processes affecting these geo-political areas have long appeared diverging, with integration and promotion of free movement in the West contrasted with fragmentation and instability in the FSU. Yet, socio-economic dynamics have been remarkably similar, inspired by neo-liberal notions of the centrality of the 'market'. Post-socialist countries in 'transition' to capitalism have been subjected to 'shock therapies' prescribing large scale liberalisation and privatisation at the expense of workers' rights and representation<sup>6</sup>. EU enlargement, despite its apparent economic successes, has pursued the marketization of employment relations with equal determination, leading to a decoupling of labour rights from salaried work which has represented the cornerstone of citizenship in modern Europe<sup>7</sup>. Income inequality, as a result, has grown dramatically between and within countries. Employers have taken advantage of the cheapening of labour through outsourcing and delocalisation. In industries such as construction, agriculture and personal services, characterised by immobility and seasonality, the precarious employment of migrant labour has prevailed. This notwithstanding, labour mobility has not proved solely the outcome of structural changes introduced by capital and states. Workers in post-socialist countries, among others, have responded to decline in wages, employment security and welfare provisions with 'exit' strategies, generating high levels of labour turnover. Employers have responded by expanding the areas of recruitment and modifying recruitment strategies, further sustaining migration flows. This process is evident in the formation of an international labour market supplying the European construction

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<sup>5</sup> Molodikova, I. (2008). Patterns of East to West migration in the context of European migration systems. Possibilities and limits of migration control. *Demográfia* 51 (5): 5–35.

<sup>6</sup> Upchurch, M., Croucher, R., Morrison, C. & Danilovich H. (2014) The Transformation of Work and Industrial Relations in the post Soviet bloc: 25 years on from 1989. *Work, Employment and Society*, e-special issue, forthcoming.

<sup>7</sup> Meardi, G. (2012). *Social Failures of EU Enlargement: A case of Workers Voting with their Feet*. London, UK: Routledge.

industry. Here employers have designed tighter forms of control such as ‘subcontracting and worker “posting”. . . to protect themselves from legal liability, while isolating migrants from the economic and social norms of the host society’<sup>8</sup>. These strategies prevail in northern European countries due to greater regulation. In the south, a large shadow economy has allowed informal methods of migration, recruitment and work to prevail<sup>9</sup>. There, the costs and difficulties of entry combined with expectations of legalisation and formal employment have so far favoured long term migration strategies. Workers can follow a path of integration but also taste its downside as migrant’s discrimination and class relations call into question the myths about the West. In the former Soviet Union, a large grey area of economic activity also facilitates the informal employment and open discrimination of migrants.

Here labour migrants are prevalently FSU citizens entitled to a three months visa-free stay dependent on obtaining registration and work permit. Specific regulations for individual nationalities and fluctuations in the harshness of implementations have varied over the years<sup>10</sup>. Such arrangements have engendered a system of circular migration. The *propiska* regime, the compulsory residence to which access to welfare and legal jobs are tied, guarantees the exclusion of most migrants, including internal migrants, from contractual employments rights. Family ties, the large presence of Diasporas and a common language, among others, make sure Russia remains a primary destination for CIS migrants. In Russia too, research indicates that agency recruitment of teams from central Asia is replacing Moldovan and Ukrainian migration based on informal networks<sup>11</sup>. Experts suggest that informal networks, which are held primarily responsible for abuses<sup>12</sup>, offer greater bargaining chances vis-à-vis agencies<sup>13</sup>. Another emerging feature is represented by the use of bogus self-employment, set to avoid employers’ contractual obligations. This is widely reported in the EU.

In both areas, segmentation by nationality, migratory status and skills allows for the continuation of dividing tactics and enforcements of informal, often illicit, forms of employment. It is generally held that informal networks and regulations concur to heavily constrain workers’ agency, leaving them exposed to fluctuating market conditions. The crisis

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<sup>8</sup> Lillie, N. & Greer, I. (2007). Industrial Relations, Migration, and Neoliberal Politics: The Case of European Construction Sector. *Politics & Society*, 35(4), 551-581. (p. 552)

<sup>9</sup> Cremers, J. (2007). Self-employed and the Free Provision of Services. *European Institute for Construction Labour Research News*, 2, 34-47.

<sup>10</sup> Rios, R. R. (Ed.) (2006). Migration Perspectives: Eastern Europe and Central Asia. Vienna, Italy: International Organization for Migration: <http://www.iom.it/documents/Migr.Perspectives-eng.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> Expert interview, Centre for Social and employment Rights, Moscow 2012

<sup>12</sup> Human Rights Watch (2009). “Are You Happy to Cheat Us?” – Exploitation of migrant construction workers in Russia. New York: [http://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/russia0209web\\_0.pdf](http://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/russia0209web_0.pdf)

<sup>13</sup> Expert interview, Russian Academy of Sciences, Moscow 2010

has apparently further restricted options available to migrants, reducing them to survival tactics<sup>14</sup>. While appreciating structural constraints imposed by capitalist accumulation, this research has found some evidence of migrant workers' agency and resistance. Following the migrants' own trajectories across spaces, labour markets and workplaces the research explores their individual and collective forms of agency. The study unveils their **aspirations and expectations** and show how they translate into a wide variety of strategic options. Migrants' accounts also reveal how they perceive the structural differences between these two geo-political spaces.

### **Moldovan and Ukrainian workers between East and West**

The recently constituted republics of Ukraine and Moldova are neighbouring countries with a population of respectively 47 and 4.3 million inhabitants. Constituent parts of the Russian empire and later the Soviet Union, their independence has emerged from the geopolitical earthquake following the collapse of the Union. They now stand as a contested borderland between new Europe and a smaller Russian Federation, marred by weak economies, fragile institutions and crippling foreign interferences. Their peculiar position makes for substantial and continuous migratory flows in both directions.

Migration from the region begins in the mid-1990s and has now reached considerable proportions: by prudent estimates there are now six to eight hundred thousand Moldovans and about two-three million Ukrainians working abroad. The experience of migration is popular in many households. In Moldova, about one third of families receive some kind of support from remittances<sup>15</sup>. Ukrainian migration affects directly up to 20% of the working age population but at household level the experience of migration involves about one third of the population. At home, migrants worked with very low monthly wages, respectively 50–200€ in Moldova and 150–300€ in Ukraine, often without an employment contract.

### **Migrant construction workers in Russia**

Reports on international migration indicate that only a small proportion of Moldovan and Ukrainian migrants who work in Russia express a preference for permanent resettlement. Those who move to Russia are *na zarabotki*, which is understood as leaving temporarily one's place of residence in order to earn a living. In this "temporary" situation workers could live for years.

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<sup>14</sup> Krings, T., Bobek, A., Moriarty, E, Salamońska, J. & Wickham, J. (2011). From Boom to Bust: Migrant labour and employers in the Irish construction sector. *Economic and Industrial Democracy*, 32(3), 459-476.

<sup>15</sup> Mosneaga, V. (2008). Circular migration of the population of the Republic of Moldova. Carim-East Explanatory Note 12/68. EUI and RSCAS.

*My family now is in Moldova. Well, temporarily – but you know what they say: ‘there is nothing more stable than what is temporary’. . . I say it again – I left for a year or two and it is already six years. (Arkady Moscow 2012)*

Mobility to Russia is perceived as a “work trip” during which work performance is temporally concentrated, so that workloads and intensity are unusually high. Migrant workers indicate that family or friends either offered jobs or facilitated the search initiated by the respondent:

*My father and brother were on zarabotki on construction sites. In Russia, I went by myself: my friends work there. (Stas, Cainari Station 2010)*

Some respondents originally left for different jobs (“I first worked as a plumber in a company, then back home, then again in St. Petersburg I fitted fire alarms, then I worked as security guard,” Roman, Pervomajsk 2010). Construction proved attractive, at least until the crisis, since it is better paid and more rewarding than some of the menial jobs mentioned above (“Every job has its wage: I went where they pay more”, Roman, Pervomajsk 2010).

If family and friends act as facilitators, actual recruitment is carried out by intermediaries who work on site and are in direct contact with site managers or subcontractors. Once the migrant has been familiarised with the work and is acquainted with the bosses, he will await a call or seek an offer from them. On occasion, he can be required to recruit others and, over time, become a recruiter or brigade leader. This way, long chains of recruitment are constantly developed.

Most respondents are returning migrants, observing the three-month threshold set by the state and enforced by employers (Roman: “I work for 3 months then home for 2-3 weeks, bosses know”). This pattern allows the migrants to recuperate from an arduous job and the often dismal conditions afforded by life in barracks on isolated construction sites (“/.../morally and physically I could not tolerate it,” Ivan, Pervomajsk 2010). It also proves highly advantageous for both business and the state. It allows the extraction of high productivity and maximum flexibility (“I would not have left if they kept paying; now it seems all right – they ask me back,” Dyma, Pervomajsk 2010). Workers’ accounts indicate the unsuitability of these forms of employment for long-term settlement and a stable family life. Issues most commonly raised concern the insecurity of job tenure, pay and career prospects due to the informal nature of the employment relationship as well as the hazardousness of the work.

### **Employment, wages and working conditions in Russian construction**

Migrants universally report irregularities in their migrant status or employment position. As FCU citizens, since 2001 they are required to register for immigration, obtain a work permit

and ideally an employment contract too. Most of them failed one or more of these stages. The risk of hefty penalties has put pressure on bosses and employees alike, yet resistance on the part of employers is still strong and sometimes sustained by the workers' interest in higher pay ("In Russia, I work without a contract. Even if I had a work permit, they employ without contract" Stas, Cainari station 2010). Even Russian nationals struggle to find genuine employment, with actual pay and benefits matching the official paperwork. Viktor, a Russian from the Volga provinces who works for one of the 'safest' employers in Moscow (a protégée of the former mayor with a steady procurement portfolio) voices equally sceptical remarks:

*I am officially employed, yes, but it's a fraud! We never get holidays and as for sick leave they only allow it in serious cases, which are normally their fault anyway. (Viktor, Navoloki 2010)*

Informality means that the workplace is governed by custom rather than law and collective bargaining, resembling in many aspects the paternalistic and authoritarian management of the soviet shop floor but with less bargaining power for the workforce. Pay and working conditions can vary significantly depending on type of site, size of firm and skills of the individual employee. Nationality is the primary factor deciding occupation and its conditions. Piec-erate is the prevailing pay system ("The employer prefers hourly pay, but in general everybody goes for piece-rate", Slavic, Moscow 2010). Working time can stretch from a minimum of nine up to eleven hours per day. Late hours and weekend work do not generally garner extra pay, and workers often bargain over timetabling. Virtually all respondents report payment in cash by the manager, the brigade leader or even from fellow colleagues. Payments are made in stages with only small sums anticipated for expenses; therefore, disputes over wage arrears are common. Work organisation is based on small teams or brigades, often ethnically homogeneous, performing specific tasks under the supervision of a brigade leader. Workers' interviews portray him as the target of resentment – "Brigade leaders, who get paid for work but sit and smoke" (Slavik, Zalotiefka 2010) – but also as a leader of whom workers have high expectations: "We do not get paid holidays: it's the fault of the brigade leader – he could do much more for his brigade" (Andrei, Zalotiefka 2010).

The whole employment and work relationship hinges on intermediaries, but workers do not appear to be at the mercy of brigade leaders. They try to turn this volatile system to their advantage by differentiating and selecting recruitment networks and constantly bargaining over conditions. A 'good' intermediary has to prove himself by guaranteeing jobs and regular payments:

*This is the way it works: there is a brigadier [i.e. gangmaster] who has long worked in the field. And people know that if you turn to him there's a job awaiting you. It is up to his intelligence and his ability to bargain whether people go to work with him or not.*

*Wages are also his responsibility.* (Victorio Kishinev 2012)

Turnover, therefore, can be used by workers to their advantage. According to Professor Mukomel this has affected intermediaries, “Nowadays, they are interested in a stable market /.../this is decent form of employment relations, yet it exists as part of the shadow economy”<sup>16</sup>. The latter represent a stumbling block to reducing turnover. Issues of health and safety also continue to rate high among workers' concerns:

*Yes, it is heavy and dangerous work. [Safety equipment] gets in the way of working /.../ there were [fatal incidents], people fell off /.../ in 4 years 2 died: a guy just arrived, no induction, fell and crashed to the ground. Minor injuries are more frequent: often something falls down on someone's head, leg or hand and [the protective helmet] is uncomfortable, falls off all the time.* (Viktor, Navoloki 2010)

Finishing jobs are less heavy and dangerous than structural work; the construction site, though, is always described as being awash with risks, especially when working at heights.

Workers' agency: between informal bargaining and further mobility

Despite the many constraints to which they are subjected, workers display acute awareness of their condition and try to act upon it either individually or in small groups. Grievances range from wage issues to working time and poor working and living conditions. The informal character of the employment relationship and the lack of union support mean that such bargaining occurs in a direct, often personalised fashion, with line managers on site. Roman explains: “There are no trade unions over there; in Europe they defend [workers]. Here they do not exist, if only we saw them” (Roman, Pervomajsk 2010). Slavic's account summarises the options normally open to workers to further their grievances:

*One morning the brigade leader calls the managing director, workers refuse to work because of unpaid wages/.../. Once he failed to do so and people started to quit. I went to his office/.../ and said: 'I demand to be paid'. He gave me only half of it. /.../You just go and take the wage yourself.* (Slavic, Moscow 2010)

Individual mobility between firms, jobs and ultimately countries, remains the most common strategy for addressing those issues. This raises the question of resettlement and family arrangements.

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<sup>16</sup> Interview with expert, Sociology section of the Russian Academy of Sciences, RAS, Moscow 2010

## **Circular migration and dilemmas of resettlement in Russia**

Migrant strategic options revolve around the need satisfactorily to combine employment and social life. Respondents, depending on their circumstances, develop a variety of option to answer this dilemma. The older generation who acquired family, home and profession in Moldova and Ukraine during soviet rule expects to sustain their social capital at home. They can return to low paid local jobs hoping for support from children or wives abroad. Among the younger generation, those who reject distant resettlement also exist, especially when locally married. They show interest in developing their own business or move into new professions. Most respondents, however, continue to travel. For them there are two options: the long and difficult process of moving to Russia or a more complex compromise. Mobility to Russia is favoured by the apparent homogeneity of rules governing work and everyday life in former Soviet countries. Permanent resettlement, though, is perceived as a different enterprise linked to hard-to-obtain access to secure and well remunerated jobs, public welfare and full residence rights. As for the latter option, this may consist in minimising shuttle work including easier destinations to southern Russia and Ukraine. Finally when options in the region are exhausted, those with connections or knowledge of the West begin to contemplate the longer step to 'far flung' destinations.

*Saint Petersburg is a cultural centre; there are friends asking me to go/.../My wife's in Italy – Bologna. Vicenza would be fine. Russia is a progressive country, it does not stand still. In Italy I can do everything. I do not have to go to Russia necessarily. I am not even sure whether to remain here or not. (Tolik Cainari 2010)*

The wide variety of geographic destinations contemplated by workers in their plans is certainly significant in terms of agency. Mobility in the East, therefore, does not simply mean engaging in survival strategies but entails a wide variety of options. More importantly, mobility appears the opposite to acquiescence or acceptance of life and working conditions offered to manual workers. In this way the reluctance to resettle in Russia, for example, can be reconsidered ("a passport makes no difference: Russians too work informally – the firm has no interest in having many formally employed" Dyma Pervomaisc 2010); in other words, the realisation that they will have it no better as workers elsewhere, if they moved permanently. Workers' aspiration to remain in their place of origin too should not be disregarded – it expresses a claim to the right to stay, behind which stand their unanswered social demands. The difficulty at finding a feasible answer to these demands therefore does not limit strategic options rather multiplies them. Workers, through direct experience and word of mouth, build up 'mental maps', detailing the financial and social costs of various



destinations. In this way, they can regularly evaluate their position and compare between geographic options. The experience of migrant workers to Italy allows verifying to what extent the West, with its promises of integration, represents an altogether different experience rather than just another point on the migrant's map.

### **Migrant construction workers in Italy**

Moldovans and Ukrainians have increasingly turned toward Western Europe where Italy represents the preferred destination for both men and women. Important factors influencing the choice of migrating to Italy are the presence of social networks, EU passport and language, for Romanic speaking Moldovans, and, sometimes, strong anti-communist sentiments. Moldovan and Ukrainian women are seen as prime movers in Italy, but most of our (male) respondents emigrated first.

Their accounts signal that migration to the West entails expectations for "stability", i.e. permanent resettlement to a place allowing them to "earn a living and live their lives". Stability contains the aspiration for development of both professional skills, and in this way of a "career", and of a life project. In general, stability at work implies continuity of employment and wage payments. Life projects are checked against opportunities in the labour market but also potentials for agency both in the workplace and the wider social environment. There is awareness though that such achievements, if any, come at the cost of sacrificing the web of family and communal relationships from back home and the rich cultural texture in which they are embedded.

Migration flows to Italy from the FSU are fairly recent and there is little evidence from interviews of recruitment structures but, as first migrants settled, chains facilitating mobility have grown. Earlier work experience in Russia is common, and reverse benchmarking, that is workers evaluating different work settings the same way businesses normally do, emerges from workers' accounts ("[In FSU] the discipline is harsher than in Italy or Spain /.../ let's say the boss is not only the chief, he feels like a king there" (Ivan, Padova, 2010). It also differs in that it is a financially and legally onerous enterprise, which generally implies a period of illegal stay. Family re-unification with spouses engaged in the much expanded private care sector is the only exception. Respondents refer invariably to the purchase of tourist visas, false residence permits or false passports as an entry device. Prices for such services vary considerably – from five hundred up to two thousands Euros. The debt burden forces migrant workers to accept irregular jobs to pay off their debts.

### **Employment and working conditions: from illegality to regularisation**

Until 2007-8 finding an illegal job on a building site was a matter of days: “All people work in construction, because they find work more easily” (Sasha, Milan 2010). Migrant workers can easily move to where jobs are available, and selection for recruitment is carried out on the spot. Wages are initially very low, ranging from three to five Euros per hour, including transport but not meals. Working time ranges from nine to twelve hours, usually for six days a week. Initially, migrants will find work on construction sites through word of mouth, generally from other migrants. At busy times, recruiters are said to visit public locations, such as bars or squares, normally populated by migrants looking for journeymen. These jobs are poorly paid and normally without contract. This results in significant labour turnover as workers seek better conditions elsewhere. Undocumented migrants working illegally can easily be subjected to harsh working conditions and abusive management. Increasingly, migrant workers can find employment in small businesses run by their own country’s nationals or other migrants. Recruitment is informal and relies heavily on language-related ties. In such cases, workers feel under particular pressure to perform because of personal trust bonds with intermediaries.

Regularisation of stay has an immediate effect on employment conditions and reduces turnover. Most commonly reported changes relate to formal employment, access to union services and reduced risk of abuse. Regularisation, they argue, may also lead to a reduction in working time. Outstanding issues remain, however, concerning the role of the trade union, work organisation and the extent of integration. The union is described by respondents as an organisation providing discrete services, rather than a tool to organise and defend their interests in the workplace.

*I am a union member from the very beginning /.../ When I need to fill up some forms I always go there; they are very kind all the time. If there is an issue with the employer though, I better deal with him directly, with the unions you never know how is going to come out. (Stefan, Padua 2010)*

As a result, workers are often left to fend for themselves in the workplace. Here, the contentious issue is represented by harsh discipline aimed at taxing production targets, augmented by ethnic segregation. In Italy, direct supervision prevails and strict discipline is imposed: “You can have a chat [with colleagues] but never stop moving; if you do, insults start flying at you” (Dyma, Padua 2010). Migrants with substantial work experience in both the East and Western countries exercise a sort of reverse benchmarking: “I got used to it in Portugal: ‘you have to work all the time’. Even if you smoke, you always work” (Emiliu, Padua 2010). Ukrainians and Moldovans are also perceived and treated differently, exposing

the extent of occupational segregation by country of origin. The division of labour among different nationals in the construction sector both in Italy and in Russia is succinctly captured in a worker's sarcastic reply to the interviewer's questioning:

*Vasile: To build a house [in Russia], as we put it: the Tajiks dig, we [Moldovans] do the walls and Ukrainians handle the roof.*

*Interviewer: How would it be in Italy? Who is the digger here?*

*Vasile: Well, here, what about digging, I am the one doing the digging.*

(Vasile, Milan 2010)

Not surprisingly, working in Western construction sites does not feel any easier despite higher levels of mechanisation. Accidents followed by serious injuries, such as 'loss of limbs' or 'broken ribs', are relatively common among respondents. A worker who suffered from a fall comments, "I have worked here for a year; once I got injured /.../ if you suffer an injury it is not a good thing because after that they look bad at you, you understand? They need you to work; they do not need you to stay home sick, never" (Vasile, Milan 2010). Control by state inspectors and trade unions is largely absent: "For eleven years I have been working in Italy, but I have never seen any safety inspection on construction sites" (Emiliu, Padua 2010). Some workers report moving into self-employment. Employers' pressure is most commonly referred to as motivating factor, "I decided to start my own business because they forced me" (Bogdan, Milan 2010). These workers can then hire a relative or a friend or ask them to follow the same path. Some migrants resist the change, fearing discrimination over prices in sub-contracting work. They also note how self-employment offers flexibility for employers transferring the risk onto the migrant. Self-employment has a dual aspect. When initiated by the migrant, it represents an attempt, like in the Russian cases, to escape the pressures of wage labour. However, findings suggest that its popularity owes more to the employers' attempts at countering workers' demands.

Moving to Italy represents a complex and often life-changing experience which these workers clearly identify as migration. Migration trajectories are not homogeneous: those with experiences in the East retain network relations which allow for wider options and further mobility. In contrast, those immediately re-settling to Italy rely entirely on their family. For all, migration holds the prospects of improving substantially and permanently their social and economic position. However, integration is often perceived as an entrapment. These workers realise that access to limited social opportunities entail substantial losses in both emotional and status terms. In other words, western destinations are much less the expected land of opportunity than a last stop in a complex set of migration routes.

## Conclusions

Findings from this study contradict commonsensical assumptions about workers' acceptance of flexibility, their dependence on networks and, generally, their lack of strategic options. In comparative terms, labour turnover in the Russian and EU construction industry is structurally different. In Russia, job rotation built around the visa waiving regime and the overall temporary nature of employment allows for continuous and substantial turnover. This circular migration system is entirely functional to the production system and applies also to internal migrants. The system is policed by state control on immigration and by gang masters, but is also managed by the workers themselves. Positive changes in brigade leaders' behaviour can be seen as partly accommodating their' expectations. In Italy, migration is built on long-term expectations. Legalisation of stay and work are associated with a decline in individual mobility. The employment system allows for stabilisation, but both at the initial stages and later, employers' strategies – easy hire-and-fire and self-employment – mean that such opportunities can be easily reversed. In both areas, the increasing use of self-employment and agency work suggests the employers' preference for a more controlled management of migration flows.

Migration satisfies the workers' immediate need for higher cash earnings but falls short of their aspirations for stable employment, family plans and professional growth. Their attitude is not without consequences. In Italy, they seek regularisation and unionisation. In Russia, where this is not possible, they minimise trips or seek alternatives to *zarabotki*. Employers and states are reluctant to accommodate such pressures: in Italy, they force workers into self-employment; in Russia, they push recruiters to seek cheap labour further afield. In both countries, migration is willingly expanded in new forms: posted workers in the EU, Asian workers in Russia, shipped by agencies to replace 'free' migrants.

Migrant workers' life trajectories reveal a wider range of migratory paths and mobility options than normally acknowledged. Migrant workers have adapted to the breakup of national systems by inhabiting complex networks at transnational level. Few respondents engaging in geographical mobility are actually interested in either migration or long-term resettlement. What Moldovan and Ukrainian respondents, those who stay put no less than those who emigrate to different places and with different strategies, share is an appreciation for socio-economic stability. Their transnationality, therefore, calls for rethinking labour and citizenship rights beyond the confines of the nation-state.