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Extended abstract for Section 607: International Migration

“Exploratory Study of the New Migration Stream from the Former Soviet Union to Ireland”

This paper will present results from an exploratory qualitative study conducted in the summer of 2006 in Ireland on Russian-speaking migrants from the former Soviet Union. Massive migration to Ireland from these countries is a novel phenomenon and researchers are only beginning to explore its causes and implications. To date, most efforts to describe this new flow of migrants have revolved around inaccurate or incomplete statistics gathered by various Irish agencies. In depth interviews can provide access to populations not tapped by statistics—or inaccurately tapped by statistics—and point to emerging patterns that help focus further research. This paper will delineate a typology of migrants, discuss emerging themes, and contextualize the migration process in the unique situations in both Ireland and sending countries.

Background

Ireland has experienced a dramatic economic upswing and tremendous growth in the foreign-born population in the past decade. After centuries of being a country of emigration, it has become a prime destination for migrants from all over the world. By 2002, an unprecedented 10% of the population was born outside of the country, including 3% who were born outside of the EU-15. In 2005, Ireland opened its borders to the new EU states, allowing citizens of these countries to work in Ireland without restrictions or permits. The 2006 national census is predicted to reveal one of the highest rates of foreign born population in Europe. This paper focuses on a segment of immigrant flow that comes from the former Soviet Union. The ease of work and travel has attracted mass migration from the former Soviet republics of Estonia, Lithuania, and Latvia which are now EU members. At the same time, Ireland is home to many professionals, refugees, and undocumented migrants from non-EU countries of the former Soviet Union. Ireland is a unique setting for studying migration because of dramatically short transformation into a major migration magnet and because it has no history of immigration and lacks colonial or most other ties to the sending countries.

Data and Methods

Over 50 respondents were interviewed using a semi-structured instrument. Interviews were conducted in Russian in person by the author, who is bilingual, and lasted from 30 minutes to 3 hours. Respondents were solicited through (1) a large recurring ad in the Russian-language weekly, (2) ads posted in ethnic stores, internet cafes, and church, and (3) referrals by previous respondents. Despite concerns about the selectivity of this approach, the author received calls from a wide range of migrants, including undocumented migrants and migrants working illegally. Migrants were asked

to relate the story of how they came to be in Ireland, to describe what their experiences have been like there, and to talk about their plans for the future.

Nationals of eight countries that were part of the former Soviet Union were represented, along with two ethnically Russian Argentine and Israeli nationals. Tables 1 and 2 show the breakdown by nationality and ethnicity.

Table 1. Nationality of respondents

Nationality (citizenship)	Number of respondents
Latvia	15
Estonia	14
Russia	13
Moldova	5
Lithuania	5
Ukraine	1
Belarus	1
Azerbaijan	1
Israel	1
Argentina	1
Total	57

Table 2. Ethnicity of respondents

Ethnicity	Number of respondents
Russian	35
Mixed	5
Latvian	5
Ukrainian	4
Moldovan	3
Lithuanian	1
Estonian	1
Tatar	1
Azeri	1
Unknown	1
Total	57

In 2007, the author will have access to the 2006 Census of Ireland, which, for the first time, has information that will allow researchers to distinguish between various ethnic groups from the same sending country. This data will supplement the qualitative data.

Preliminary Results

At this point in time, data collection has just been completed, so there are only very tentative results. The paper will first frame the immigration to Ireland from the Soviet Union through the theories of migration described in the work of Douglas Massey. While there is scant evidence in support of the world systems theory, there is ample support of neoclassical economic theory, new economic theory, and segmented labor markets as underlying causes of migration from the Soviet Union. Respondents attributed their migration decisions to higher wages and lower unemployment in Ireland, set earnings targets to meet family goals, and filled unstable low-paid jobs that the native Irish reject. Social networks play a crucial role in maintaining the flow, with practically all respondents describing a connection with someone who had previously migrated to Ireland despite lack of established communities due to the recent nature of the migration stream. Irish immigration policies allow basically unlimited access to the labor market for EU nationals and effectively bar non-EU nationals from entry.

What makes this segment of the Irish immigration stream interesting is the significance of ethno-political factors. Russian-speaking minorities in many former Soviet republics live under discriminatory majority regimes. Many of my Russian-speaking respondents did not see a future for themselves in their home countries and cited

their marginalized status as the main motivation to migrate. The future of the large Russian-speaking minorities in the Baltic countries has been theorized by researchers such as Rogers Brubaker and David Laitin. Just prior to the opening of the Irish borders to workers from the new EU nations, James Hughes predicted that the Russian-speakers in Estonia and Latvia would opt to exit. This has, in fact, occurred, and the qualitative data on Russian-speakers and ethnic 'Balts' alike will allow the exploration of the role of ethnicity and nationality in migration from the vantage point of the receiving country.