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Transit in the East: Shifting Borders

6.1 Mobility patterns in the East in the 1990s

At the turn of the century and in the years 2000–4 there was a proliferation of studies on migration in Central and Eastern Europe. Scholars tended to argue that these countries were a new or ‘emerging’ migration space (see, for example, Wallace and Stola, 2001; Gorny and Ruspini, 2004). In fact, as this chapter will show, migration, and transit migration in particular, was not as new as presented. Instead, there was a tradition of transit migration in the region. Evidently, the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the communist regime and the turmoil that followed increased migration flows substantially. Nevertheless, it was not the transit migration that increased, compared to previous years; it was the creation of external borders and the introduction of visas that turned internal movements international, making them subject to controls and, to a large extent, irregular.

This tradition of transit migration can be explained, amongst others, by usual practices of movement in the region in search of better opportunities, often on a seasonal or temporary basis. There was also a tradition of migrating for study purposes. People were moving between the Soviet Republics and between Eastern European countries for a number of reasons and this was never a migration issue, and never had any such policy implications. In addition, suitcase traders and vendors crossing borders were a very standard practice in the region. The street-market tradition is also relevant to this transit migration and trade pattern, going back to Soviet times. Markets have been providing informal and day jobs for migrants for a number of years. Recently it was estimated that up to 20,000 non-Russians were working in the Moscow markets alone (even if many were doing so illegally). All this makes
transit migrants an integral part of the social fabric. The whole region was a large transit space for all kinds of activities, many of which, however, were not necessarily related to Europe (or had no further destination prospect in Europe).

Furthermore, the transit movements were not subject to visas. Crossing borders was easy and borders were internal, separating families and friends only on the map. There were loopholes and possibilities allowing movement and temporary residence. At the same time emigration to and immigration from abroad was not allowed and the republics remained isolated from the international community. In addition, transit migrants were not necessarily vulnerable in the same way as is witnessed today. There were no deaths at the frontiers and frontiers were open, which also meant that migrants did not resort to the services of smugglers to cross the border. Transit migrants were also not getting stuck in the region; the sense of being ‘stuck’ appeared in the mid- to late 1990s, as it became difficult to cross the borders. It is only after irregular migration gained policy relevance in Europe that transit migration also gained policy relevance in Eastern Europe.

There is also a long history of smuggling goods and people and trafficking drugs in the whole region from Central Asia up to the European border. There are established routes and large populations that depend on this for their daily living; so the transit or other types of movements have also followed the track of these routes. In addition, all this is coupled to a large tradition of ethnic minorities moving to countries of their ethnic origin. This was particularly strong as soon as the Soviet Union collapsed, for fear of discrimination or political pressure. Ethnic Ukrainians moved (back) to Ukraine, ethnic Latvians to Latvia, ethnic Russians to Russia and so on.

Eastern Europe and the CIS have also been source and host countries to large numbers of forced migrants. The political events in Eastern Europe in 1989 also led to the displacement of refugees, culminating in the war in former Yugoslavia. Almost 700,000 refugees fled to Western Europe in 1992, the biggest refugee crisis in Europe since World War II. Germany received almost half of them. Being in the immediate vicinity, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Poland and Slovenia also received a large share of the asylum seekers throughout the 1990s and for the next years up to EU accession. In Hungary, for example, it is estimated that almost 40,000 arrived in the 1990s (Juhasz, 1999). The number of Balkan refugees increased further in the late 1990s. Around 350,000 people became internally displaced in Kosovo and another 450,000 ethnic Albanians left for Albania, 250,000 to the Former Yugoslav Republic of