

The Vietnamese Communities in Central and Eastern Europe as Part of the Global Vietnamese Diaspora

The Vietnamese are one of the most numerous migrant communities in the majority of the countries of former Soviet Bloc. In such countries as Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia they form the largest communities of migrants originating from Asia. In Poland, the Vietnamese are probably the second most numerous group of foreigners. According to Piłat and Wysieńska (2012: 65) their number equaled around 30,000 people in 2012. However, although their presence has been noticed by scholars and policy-makers dealing with the issue of immigration to particular countries of Central and Eastern Europe, so far this category has very rarely been analysed as a distinctive part of the global Vietnamese diaspora, worth attention as an example of a particular and weakly investigated kind of transnational mobility, shaped by Cold War era politics.

During the communist period, the inflow of foreigners into such countries as East Germany, Czechoslovakia and Poland was limited and carefully controlled by the state (Kicinger 2011; Nenicka 2012; Alamgir 2014). As a result, when communism collapsed, the Soviet Bloc countries were inhabited by relatively small immigrant populations compared to the countries of Western Europe. In the literature dedicated to the issue of migration, therefore, the fall of communism is often associated with a point when international mobility on a noticeable scale had just begun. For example, describing the case of Poland, numerous authors indicate that in the post-war history of Poland the collapse of communism was the moment when the significant immigration to this country started. It is stressed that after the political transformation symbolised by the year 1989 immigrants came to Poland attracted by the opportunities provided by a developing free-market economy. While the bustling economy was undoubtedly an important pull-factor encouraging the immigrants, it must also be remembered that an important factor – if not a crucial one – determining which particular migrant groups settled in the former Soviet Bloc countries was the ethnic networks already established during the communist era.

The case of the Vietnamese diaspora inhabiting such countries as Poland, the Czech Republic and Germany indicates that the picture of socialist societies as lacking transnational mobility is to a large extent simplified, as transnational movements of people existed during the Soviet Bloc era on a quite significant scale. From the 1950s until the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe, symbolised by the year 1989, tens of thousands of Vietnamese people arrived in such countries as the Soviet Union, Poland, Czechoslovakia and the former GDR in order to study and gain occupational training. Hundreds of thousands worked in factories as ‘guest workers’ in the 1980s – especially in East Germany, Czechoslovakia and the USSR (Alamgir 2014; Schwenkel 2014). Their work was profitable for the Eastern European countries, in need of a cheap labour force, but also played the role of developmental aid to Vietnam, as the workers commonly helped their families living in impoverished Vietnam by sending remittances (mainly consumer goods) (Schwenkel 2014).

Susan Bayly (2007) introduced the notion of ‘global socialist ecumene’ to describe the transnational flow of ideas, knowledge and cultural artefacts transmitted by students and specialists circulating among particular communist countries. Particular categories of Vietnamese – assessed as loyal to the communist authorities and promising in terms of educational outcome – participating in governmental exchange programmes were enabled to participate in the transnational mobility taking place within the area of ‘ecumene.’

Considering the importance of this communist era transnational movement for further establishment of migrant groups, it must be remembered that, according to the principles of government programmes, ‘socialist mobility’ was intended to be only of a temporary nature. After completing education or work, the Vietnamese were supposed to return to Vietnam. Students were subjected to the strict control of the Vietnamese authorities and were not allowed to maintain closer relations with representatives of the receiving society. The control was especially strict until the mid-1970s – the end of the Vietnam War. Settling in Eastern European countries was very difficult for them – although not completely impossible, as isolated cases of people staying in Europe have happened since the beginning of the emigration. In the case of students from Poland, changing temporary immigration into a permanent state gradually became more available as early as the 1980s due to the relaxation of the policies of both states – Vietnam and Poland. However, the ‘guest workers’ in such countries as East Germany and Czechoslovakia were subjected to strict control until the end of communism.

This pattern of ‘socialist mobility’ did not come to an end at the same time as the period of socialism, as in the first years of capitalism in Central and Eastern Europe immigration from Vietnam continued on a large scale. The vast majority of the people came to such countries as Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia to engage in trade of consumer goods imported from Asia – mainly clothes and shoes – becoming part of a complex transnational trade chain (Halik, Nowicka 2002; Williams, Balaz 2005). Post-socialist immigration was of a different nature to that of the socialist movements, which were organised and arranged due to the demands of the policy of communist Vietnam and particular countries of the Soviet Bloc. However, the continuity of migration patterns indicates the important role played by migration networks, established by former students and workers from the communist era.

Until recently, the Vietnamese residents of the countries of Central and Eastern Europe have gained relatively little attention in the literature concerning the global Vietnamese diaspora. Emigrants from Vietnam dispersed around the world number – according to official estimates of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam – around 4 million people.¹ The overall sum of remittances sent by the diaspora members to the country of origin in 2014 reached 12 billion USD, accounting for around 8 per cent of the GDP of Vietnam.² Various problems connected with the presence of a large diaspora, such as social integration in the recipient countries, economic activity of migrants or political involvement of diaspora members, are phenomena that are important from the point of view both of the Vietnamese state and of receiving countries. However, so far the academic discussion over the *Việt kiều* (‘overseas Vietnamese’) has mainly been focused on the case of the Vietnamese residing in the United States. This is not surprising taking into account the fact that the American Vietnamese community is the largest overseas population, accounting for around 1.7 million people,³ and being the source of the majority of remittances sent to Vietnam.

However, the case of the American Vietnamese community does not represent the experiences of the whole Vietnamese diaspora dispersed around the world. Vietnamese immigrants residing in various countries differ in many aspects, most of which result from the diversity of historical contexts of emigration from Vietnam to these countries. Following the distinction introduced by Sheffer (2003), Vietnamese people residing in various places can be described either as members of a ‘stateless’ or ‘state-linked’ diaspora (this useful distinction was applied to the Vietnamese diaspora by Long Le; see Le 2014). The Vietnamese American population that has so far become a model for discussing the issue of emigration from Vietnam is predomi-

nantly a group of refugee origin, consisting of the people who left the areas of South Vietnam after the end of the Vietnam War. Although the characteristics of this group has evolved throughout this time, including newer waves of immigrants arriving in the USA for economic or educational purposes, it can still be described as an archetypal example of stateless diaspora (see Le 2014).

Contrary to the American–Vietnamese community, the migrant communities from Central and Eastern European countries have a visibly distinct history, connected with the cooperation among the Soviet Bloc (Comecon) countries. Although later waves of migration to such countries as Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia can be described as spontaneous migration, motivated largely by economic factors, the genesis of formation of the migrant communities was a result of state policy. To this day, the communities in the former Soviet Bloc countries tend to maintain strong connections with the authorities of Vietnam. This is exemplified by the activity of migrant associations, the majority of which cooperate closely with Vietnamese embassies in particular countries and relevant institutions in Vietnam (such as societies of friendship) and impose a noticeable level of control over the migrant community.

While the literature dedicated to the issue of Vietnamese Americans can be described as abundant, involving numerous books and articles dedicated to such issues as social integration, political involvement of the diaspora and its transnational connections, there is a significant gap concerning the literature dedicated to the communities residing in the former Soviet Bloc countries. Although in each country of Central and Eastern Europe inhabited by Vietnamese migrants some works – academic books and papers or social policy reports – have been published, the vast majority of them are available only in the national languages (see more on this issue in Schwenkel’s paper in this volume).

The thematic issue of the CEEMR journal aims to fill the significant gap in the literature dedicated to the issue of the Vietnamese global diaspora.⁴ We intended to compile a collection of papers authored by specialists dealing with issues connected with the presence of Vietnamese migrant communities in Central and Eastern Europe, in order to enable a comparison between the migrant communities residing in various countries, with different backgrounds and various patterns of engagement in transnational politics. In order to place the problematic of the former Soviet Bloc communities in the broader context, we also present one paper dedicated to the issue of a model Vietnamese diaspora group – Vietnamese Americans.

The issue consists of six articles, including case studies of Vietnamese groups residing in such countries as Germany, Slovakia, Poland and the United States. A very special place in the issue is occupied by the paper of Ewa Nowicka – an obituary to Dr Teresa Halik, a prominent Polish specialist on Vietnamese culture and language who regrettably passed away in January 2015. Her death is a great loss both for scholars researching the Vietnamese migrant community and for the community members itself, as for many years she was a great friend to the Polish–Vietnamese diaspora, also acting as a bridge between the migrant community and the Polish authorities.

Three of the six articles presented in this volume discuss the issue of the Vietnamese diaspora in Poland. The Vietnamese migrant community, the second-largest in Poland, has been described in some depth in Polish sociological and anthropological literature (with the most general descriptions being books by Halik and Nowicka 2002; Halik 2006; Górný, Grzymała-Kazłowska, Kępińska, Fihel, Piekut 2007; Szymańska-Matusiewicz 2013). However, the literature in English has so far been very scarce. Contrary to such countries as Czechoslovakia, the Soviet Union and East Germany, the Vietnamese arriving in Poland during the communist era were almost exclusively students. However, the political transition, due to economic opportunities in the sector of trade, made Poland the most attractive country for Vietnamese migrants, attracting newcomers not only from Vietnam, but also from other former Soviet Bloc countries, such as former contract workers from East Germany and Czechoslovakia. Currently, the community inhabiting Poland is an interesting case worthy of attention among the Soviet Bloc countries due to its internal differentiation. The Vietnamese population in

Poland includes such categories as former students from the communist era, economic migrants who arrived in Poland after the political transformation, former contract workers from East Germany and Czechoslovakia, and – last but not least – representatives of the 1.5 and second generation. Therefore, analyses dedicated to the case of Vietnamese from Poland provide an insight into various categories of migrants present in the former Soviet Bloc countries.

The opening article, authored by Christina Schwenkel, offers an introduction to the subject of socialist mobility. Schwenkel discusses the various waves of migration of the Vietnamese to the fraternal countries of Soviet Bloc taking place from the mid-1950s until the collapse of the Soviet Union. The paper aims to provide a more detailed and nuanced perspective of the Vietnamese diaspora by abandoning the dominant discourse, based on the bipolar distinction between the West and the East.

The second paper, by Gertrud Hüwelmeier, discusses an important aspect of the situation of the Eastern European Vietnamese population – the peculiar institution of bazaars (markets) where they concentrate their economic activity. Analysing the case of the Wólka Kosowska ‘commodity centre’ situated near Warsaw, Poland, the author indicates the impact of socialist and post-socialist migrations on the creation of ethnic and cultural diversity in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. Hüwelmeier also points to the growing role of global interconnectness, describing the trade centres as both the places where the homeland culture of the migrants is practised and where global cultural phenomena – such as specific religion movements – are being developed.

The third paper, written by Miroslava Hlinčíková, describes the Slovakian Vietnamese community. Based on ethnographic research conducted in a neighbourhood in Bratislava inhabited by Vietnamese migrants, Hlinčíková analyses the process of migrant integration, describing the internal diversity of the community. She also examines the attitude of the majority Slovakian society, pointing to the fact that the Vietnamese are accepted by their majority neighbours as long as they remain ‘invisible’ – for example, speak the Slovakian language and do not articulate demands as a group.

In her paper, Grażyna Szymańska-Matusiewicz describes the internal division of the community, based on the case of two ethnic *Tết* (Lunar New Year) festivals – one organised by the representatives of official Vietnamese organisations and the other by members of the pro-democratic opposition. This case illustrates the complex nature of the transnational connections of diaspora members, focusing on the political dimension of their activity. While the official organisations, cooperating with the institutions of the Vietnamese state, try to depict the Vietnamese community living in Poland as unproblematic and easily adapting to Polish society, pro-democratic activists use ethnic festivals as a means of encouraging the Polish spectators to act for political change in Vietnam.

Ewa Nowicka’s paper is dedicated to the problematic of a specific group of Vietnamese people – young women brought up in Poland (1.5 and second-generation migrants). The author concentrates on the issue of the psychological problems and internal conflicts experienced by those researched, describing the difficulties resulting from the fact of growing up in two cultural surroundings: the Vietnamese one, represented by their own families, and the Polish one, represented by the school and peer group. Apart from describing the widely discussed problem of adaptation of the second generation of migrants, the article also provides a gendered perspective, describing the problems experienced by Vietnamese girls and young women.

The last article, authored by Hao Phan, provides readers with further context by looking at the issue of the Vietnamese diaspora residing in the United States. Using data from qualitative research, Phan examines the intricate issue of the political involvement of Vietnamese Americans. As the author argues, although as representatives of the ‘stateless’ diaspora, Vietnamese residing in the US in general present an anti-communist attitude, their level of hostility towards the current Vietnamese government varies significantly. Phan focuses

on the transnational connections shaping the political attitude of the diaspora community, stressing both the impact of the painful past experiences and the current situation in Vietnam.

The thematic issue of CEEMR aims to provide readers with a collection of articles discussing the most prominent problems connected with the presence of Vietnamese migrant communities in Central and Eastern Europe. Although not all Central and Eastern European countries hosting Vietnamese communities are covered in the issue – Russia and the Czech Republic, for example, where Vietnamese populations are relatively numerous – the volume is the first publication in English offering a comparative perspective on the Vietnamese communities in Central and Eastern Europe. By covering the topics such as social integration, migrant economy and diaspora politics, the issue enriches the discussion concerning Vietnamese migration, which has so far focused mainly on the refugee diaspora.

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Notes

¹ Consular Department, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Vietnam: http://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/vietnam/documents/eu_vietnam/vn_migration_abroad_en.pdf (accessed: 27 June 2015).

² World Bank data: <http://econ.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/EXTDEC/EXTDECPROSPECTS/0,,contentMDK:22759429~pagePK:64165401~piPK:64165026~theSitePK:476883,00.html> (accessed: 27.06.2015).

³ United States Census Bureau, *Race Reporting for the Asian Population by Selected Categories: 2010*, available at: http://factfinder.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?pid=DEC_10_SF1_QTP8&prodType=table (accessed: 27 June 2015).

⁴ The inspiration for the special issue came from the international conference ‘The Global Vietnamese Diaspora,’ which was organised in March 2014 by the Institute of Sociology, University of Warsaw and the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology, Polish Academy of Sciences.

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