YOUNG RETURNING MIGRANTS AS ACTORS OF
SOCIAL CHANGES IN SLOVAKIA

Mladi migranti povratnici kao akteri društvenih
promena u Slovačkoj

ABSTRACT: Migration is a cyclical process which also involves a decision as to whether to return. The situation in Slovakia is characterised by a high number of young people studying abroad. Up to now, the process of their migration and return has been studied frequently from an economic perspective. However, the return migration also contributes to social changes in the home country of the migrants. Therefore, the return migration opens new research, areas and themes some of which we include in our paper. In contemporary migration studies, the transfer of new ideas, practices and codes of behaviour between the place of origin and destination covers the concept of social remittances. The idea of social remittances focused sociological attention on the tendencies of returning young migrants to become bearers of change and development in their home country. In this paper, we are presenting findings about practical aspects how young Slovak migrants become agents of social change in their immediate circle, community and even society.

KEY WORDS: migration, return migration, young migrants, social changes

APSTRAKT Migracija je ciklični proces koji uključuje i odluku o tome da li se vratiti. Veliki broj mladih iz Slovačke studira u inostranstvu. Procesi njihovih migracija i povratka su do sada proučavani najčešće iz ekonomske perspektive. Povratna migracija, međutim, utiče i na društvene promene u njihovoj domovini i otvara nove istraživačke oblasti i teme, od kojih su neke uključene u ovaj rad. U savremenim studijama migracija, transfer novih ideja, praksi i kodova između mesta porekla i mesta destinacije je obuhvaćen pojmom društvenih doznaka. Ideja društvenih doznaka je usmerila sociološku pažnju na tendenciju da mladi povratnici postaju nosioci promena i razvoja u svojoj domovini. U ovom radu predstavljamo nalaže o praktičnim aspektima toga kako slovački migranti postaju akteri društvenih promena u njihovom neposrednom okruženju, zajednici, čak i u društvu.

KLJUČNE REČI: migracija, povratna migracija, mladi migranti, društvene promene

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Why Return Migration? Research question and approach

Entering the European Union in 2004 and the Schengen area in 2007, youth migration has become a highly debated topic in the EU’s new member states. This new situation is reflected in academic debates as well as political circles, media and general public discourse. However, the expansion of the EU brought about a new phenomenon besides emigration which has to be faced by new EU countries; return migration. The main paradigms within the migration research field focus on the economic relations of this process. The neoclassical theory of migration and the Push Pull model assumed that the movement of people has chiefly economic connotations. Therefore, the causes of returning to the country of origin, as well as income bonuses based on foreign experience are repeatedly examined. Research also shows that instead of the brain drain concept suggesting the irreclaimable loss of minds, new EU states are experiencing brain circulation (Martin and Radu, 2012; Zaiceva and Zimmerman, 2012). Migrants returning to their country of origin bring with them new experiences that influence their new life. Young returning migrants may contribute to changes and could be sources of new economical innovations. However, we still do not have sufficient information of how this process takes place. Research focusing on economic contexts of migration mainly targets the decision making or the primary causes for migration and returning migration. It does not, however, pay any attention to how returning migrants influence life in their immediate space (family circle, network of friends) or how they contribute to the changes across the social spectrum.

While a role of reverse flows of information and ideas was already acknowledged in classical sociological studies (Thomas and Znaniecky, 1996), the theory of transnational migration has revolutionised the understanding of migration in the last three decades. Contrary to economic approaches, it has a more complex understanding of the process, where the migrant does not leave the borders of his/her home country indefinitely (Portes and Böröcz, 1989; Szaló, 2007). In this case, Vertovec talks about the existence of a transnational conscience, meaning being home “here as well as there” (Vertovec, 1999: 450). According to Levitt, this theoretical turn in migration studies has been caused by several factors that heighten the intensity and durability of transnational ties among contemporary migrants: 1) ease of travel and communication, 2) the increasingly important role migrants play in the economies of sending countries, 3) attempts by sending states to legitimise themselves by providing services to migrants and their children, 4) the increased importance of the receiving country states in the economic and political futures of sending societies, and 5) the social and political marginalisation of migrants in their host countries (Levitt, 1998: 928).

The aforementioned factors along with theoretical modifications point to migration driven forms of cultural and social development. In contemporary migration studies, social remittances describe the flow of new ideas, practices and codes of behaviour between the place of origin and destination of the migrants (Levitt, 1998; Levitt and Lamba – Nieves, 2010; Grabowska and Garapich, 2016).
Confrontation with other norms and practices, as well as increasing awareness of opportunities and lifestyles elsewhere, can have a profound influence on identity formation, norms and behaviour in the sending communities of migrants (Grabowska and Garapich, 2016:). Levitt, the coiner of the concept of social remittances, categorised them into three spheres: (1) normative structures (ideas, values and beliefs); (2) systems of practices (actions shaped by normative structures such as organisational practices; (3) social capital based on values and norms which form the resource for collective actions and facilitates the circulations of norms and values (Levitt, 1998: 934 – 936).

To fully understand the innovativeness of the idea of social remittance, it is inevitable that we accentuate its relation to the agency of people (Grabowska and Garapich, 2016: 2156). The process of social remittances should not be confused with a simple diffusion of external ideas, practices or institutions within a public space. The act of social remittance means the active participation of actors on changes and the activity of migrants as social actors in their home community. This activity is based on a realisation of novelty during migration, when migrants use different practices and have regular contact with new ideas. Therefore, encountering and observing the “new ways of doing things” initiate social remittances. The second stage is a comparison of this novelty with a situation at home. Here, a migrant is considering whether the community of origin will benefit from inspiration taken from abroad (good practices) or if the novelty is not applicable in a different context. This evaluation results in a migrant’s personal categorisation of new ideas and practices and this categorisation also serves as an interpretation frame when a migrant publicly presents a situation abroad.

Generally, returning home after some time living abroad is not always an easy process. As we have mentioned earlier, living abroad contributes to a certain advance in value and normative standards. Return migration is thus best understood as a new phase in which belonging to a place, community and society has to be newly established and negotiated. We can distinguish three directions of repeated bargaining for a place in society. The first presents a negative dimension and causes a subsequent feeling of alienation (person feels dislodged), leading to the person leaving the country again. The second form of bargaining leads to adaptation without a visible social change. Thirdly, negotiations have a productive side that leads to a social change. Following this, the third stage of social remittance occurs when returning migrants realise their ability to bring a change into their home society. Based on the research of Grabowska and Garapich, however, only migrants with specific features can be identified as an agent of change. Firstly, to use social remittances and bring a change into a home community depends on the socio-psychological traits of the individual. Secondly, an individual needs to have a mandate for diffusion, which means some form of social recognition in the local community. Thirdly, a successful bearer of change needs to establish and maintain a space for regular contact with a potential audience where they can embed or mediate social remittances (Grabowska, Garapich 2016: 2157).
The concept of social remittances is not applied systematically in inquiries mapping the situation after the enlargement of the EU and the situation is analogous in the case of the return of young people. Therefore, our main aim in this article is to provide the findings about this relatively overlooked topic. We have divided the entire cycle of migration into the following phases. The first is the decision to leave. The second phase concerns the migration itself, where the individual has to face the situation of novelty. The next phase in the cycle is the return that represents this part of migration where an effect of social remittances can be efficiently visible. Thus, we mainly focus on the third phase of the migration cycle. Instead of paying attention to all the possible consequences of social remittance, presented analysis maps a process how young returning migrants become agents of social change who diffuse new ideas and practices in their home society. This process is not linear but fragmented and multi-layered. As we already know, a necessary condition is the realisation of novelty which occurs during a long stay abroad. The return intensifies a tension between ideas and practices acquired abroad and those that are valid locally. Such tension contains an element of active communication with the social environment, an element of a certain negotiation and modification which does not have a special goal. Therefore, to become an agent of change can be an unintended consequence of negotiation in the process of return.

This article is structured as follows. In the next part, we describe briefly a migration of Slovaks after the EU enlargement and we accentuate the migration of students which is significantly higher than in the other new EU member state. After that, we characterise a methodological approach of research. The central part of this article deals with the main aspects of the process of return migration, in which the young returnee realises its ability to bring a change into their home community or society in general.

**Migration in Slovakia after the EU enlargement**

Officially, in the year 2013, 150,000 people worked abroad, which represents 7.5% of the economically active population in Slovakia, averaging 45 years of age (Labour Force Survey – LFS). Yet, the Slovak rates of migration is not especially unique among post-communist member states of the EU. What is distinct in the case of Slovakia, is a specifically high number of university students leaving the country. According to the Brain Drain research 2014, 15% (36 200) of students in 2012 studied at universities abroad, not including those in the student mobility programme, which is the third highest number in the EU. This is ten times as many as in 1998. It is also true, that many choose to study in the Czech Republic (65%). While in 2002 there were 4,900 students studying in the Czech Republic, it was 24,800 in 2012. However, the number of students studying further abroad (in countries which are not bordering SK) has been increasing since 2004. In 2012, this was 25% (9,400) of all those studying abroad, with the greatest number in Great Britain. Since 1998 the number of students studying in the UK rose from 74 to 3,000 in 2012. Overall, whilst in 2002 the number of Slovaks studying
abroad was 11,281, in 2012 it was 36,450 (Bahna, 2018: 2). Compared to Slovaks studying at domestic universities, internationally mobile students more often come from families with a higher level of cultural capital. Moreover, students from families with high cultural capital have a higher probability of studying in more prestigious study destinations (further abroad than Czech Republic). Surprisingly, the decision to study abroad is not influenced by the economic capital of the family (Bahna, 2018: 4).

Other evidence of the high international mobility of young Slovaks can be found in research on the political participation of youth in the Visegrad countries. Data collected from the survey show that young people from Slovakia have the most experience with long-term life abroad in comparison with young people from the other countries. Almost 40% of young Slovaks, followed by young people from Hungary (34%), Poland (28%) and the Czech Republic (24%) spent more than 3 months abroad. (Political Participation of Youth in V4 countries: 2018)

In the case of young people studying abroad, many return, or try to return, to Slovakia. The Brain Drain research shows that 42% of all graduates return home within two years (Bahna, 2018: 5). The migration experience influences the integrity of the individual as well as his/her family and social relations and ties. It interferes with the consciousness and functionality of society on both local and national dimensions. Diversification in cultural and social spheres not only accompanies migrants in the new environment, but also influences their way of life after they return home.

Methodology

The presented paper summarises the findings of 26 interviews, where we focused on individual migration histories. The interviews were conducted by means of a semi-structured interview. The substantial part of interview was oriented to understand a situation of young participants after their return from abroad. Participants were chosen by personal contacts, via the snowballing procedure, as well as with the help of several institutions. For a deeper understanding of the problem, we also mapped out internet conversations and interviews focused on young people and migration.

At least one year abroad was considered as migration experience during which the person studied or worked. Another important criterion was the country of study destination. Even though most young people chose to study in the Czech Republic, these were not the primary subjects of our research. The Czech Republic is culturally, historically and economically close to Slovakia; thus, problems with adaptation would not be paramount. Furthermore, living in the Czech Republic, visiting home can be easily arranged on a weekly basis.

3 The survey was conducted in Hungary, Slovakia, Czech Republic and Poland on a population of the age group of 15 – 24 years.
4 NGO: Sokratovinštitút, Leaf; Universities: MatejBel University in BanskáBystrica, University of Ss Cyril and Methodius in Trnava, Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra.
5 The list of countries of destination and numbers of respondents: United Kingdom 12, Belgium 3, Denmark 2, Germany 2, Spain 3, France 2, Italy 1, and USA 1.
also considered an even territorial coverage (people interviewed coming from all around Slovakia). The average age of those interviewed is 27.3 years and the maximum accepted age of respondents was 32. Furthermore, because 65% of all Slovak university students are women this is reflected in the fact that a greater number of the respondents were women, (17 female and 9 men).

The topic of migration and particularly return migration is not sufficiently anchored in Slovakia. For these reasons, we decided to carry out a series of ethnographic observations at a cultural centre in a small town in north Slovakia, which was founded by young people upon returning home. Two of the founders studied and worked in the Czech Republic, the third studied in Spain and worked long-term in South America. The nature of the observation consisted of two stages. In the first, the researcher attended events organised by the cultural centre. These were mostly concerts, exhibitions or theatre. The second phase of the research consisted of constant collaboration with the centre. The researcher became a part of the group and took part in meetings, drama sessions and the preparation of the annual multi-genre festival. The cultural centre is in a long-term conflict with the representatives of the local self-government, the core of the conflict being the public involvement of the representatives. Last year, the centre became the main hub for protests in the town (public protests after the murder of a journalist and his fiancée). Overall, the researcher spent 30 days of observation during the year 2017 and assisted in the organisation of the main festival in the cultural centre and moderated monthly discussions named “central point”.

Return – problems and bargaining

Even though the return migration was voluntary and the respondents looked forward to coming home, the decision-making process and the subsequent re-adaptation were described as complex and demanding. In the words of Alfred Schutz: “The home-comer sees a face of home that he is not used to. He believes he is in a strange country, a stranger in a strange land” (Schutz, 2012: 407). The return home required a change in the social, psychological, cultural and economic world of the individual, with which he/she has become used to. The process of return brought about feelings of distance from social and work contacts the young people had built abroad. This was accompanied by states of alienation, frustration, and in some cases, depression. Returning migrants usually adopt dual identities. They are bound to the socio-cultural environment of both the host and the home country. Home society is often idealised when abroad and after the return, the individual has to face a harsh reality that does not correspond to the idealised picture or nostalgic memories. Here we can talk about the re-entry negotiations where it was necessary to newly define the current situation, understand the new-old world and build social capital. Feelings of distance were often connected to feelings of misunderstanding or grief and loneliness.

Young returning migrants have had to form their social networks twice. Not only upon their arrival in the host country but also upon their return home. It is worth noting that long-distance relationships were not kept at the same intensity
and quality. At family level, family ties and communication among different family members improved and became more intense. When the respondents were asked, they emphasised the support of family members and the importance of relationships and interpersonal communication. Ties with friends presented a greater problem and were not always fully resumed. On the one hand this is connected to the forming of life and family strategies when friends moved, started working elsewhere or started their own families. On the other hand, the structure of relationships was also disturbed by new life experiences acquired abroad. Apart from some positive reactions from family members, the respondents also experienced less positive reactions such as a lack of understanding or interest as well as envy. Therefore, respondents agree, that problems during a return are best understood by the people who have similar experience.

It was really weird that all the people back home had no idea about the reality there. I had no one to really talk to, only the very few who had had similar experience. I suddenly felt a distance from the others, such as other than others? (M. R.)

Consequently, a distance is caused by different attitudes and forms of inadequate behaviour of Slovaks: unwillingness, grumbling and an unprofessional approach in different spheres. Value differentiation of young migrants and parts of Slovak society also manifests itself in an open, critical attitude towards corruption, xenophobia, intolerance and protectionism: “In Slovakia, a young person first and foremost, needs contacts to get anywhere. You just need to push much harder to get anywhere, there is cronyism and corruption. There(in the receiving country), it doesn't even occur to them to break the law” (P. C.).

In pointing out the corrupt and non-transparent behaviour in society, young returning migrants are active and resolute. On the issue of the future development of society, young people critically perceive the ruling political leaders and feel frustrated that government policy is ineffective and that corruption cases are not properly investigated. Similar results are found in the study Political Participation of Youth in V4 Countries. This lack of trust of ruling elites could be recently seen in the current attitude of young people organising the protest “Za Slušné Slovensko”.

Change is undoubtedly the most dynamic category regarding migration. Based on research, we can assume that young returning migrants respond to specific institutional, political, and cultural conditions. On the one hand, they have a drive and the potential to mobilise their resources in order to help social change. On the other, value disillusion, discrepancies between expectations, ideas and reality are in some cases divergent, so that many also consider returning abroad in the future.

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6 Za slušné Slovensko [For decent Slovakia] initiative began as a result of the brutal murder of the investigative journalist Ján Kuciak and his fiancée (February 2018). He wrote of the political connections to organised crime and corruption. Subsequent protests were the biggest since the fall of communism in Czechoslovakia. People called for an independent investigation of the murders and a new and sincere government. As a result, the prime minister and the interior minister both resigned. One of the initiators of the protests was also one of our respondents.
Becoming active citizens in society

The Young Slovaks who successfully overcame some of the initial aspects of return migration showed an interest in social events. This interest can be characterised as the realisation of the importance of civic activity for the development of the community or country. In the interviews this motive appeared as responsibility. Yet, we have to admit that a greater need for engagement is also related to the higher educational level of our respondents. Responsibility, however, in the answers of returning migrants is in sharp contrast to the passivity and resignation represented, for example, by their classmates or friends without foreign experience. For young returnees, passivity and low levels of activity represent a symptomatic feature of Slovak society. Returning migrants distance themselves from this cultural pattern of passivity and this act of distancing represents a moment of civic conversion. It expresses the transition from an unwillingness to a more active understanding of citizenship, while experience of another culture represents a significant step towards this transformation.

...I feel somewhat responsible about what sort of country you make you also have. But they'd rather not get into it. Because, why. It's still the same, there's no point and we always go for the lesser evil. But there is no need to do anything. Myself, I like active people who organise festivals or cultural events, or just go and do stuff spontaneously. Our education system doesn't motivate young people to do this. I only realised this two or three years ago. Took a while. (K. E.)

Eventually I took it for granted 'cause I was fed up with the attitude. Complaining, cussing and the last one to turn off the light. I hate that. So as soon as I came back, I realised this really annoyed me and started to focus on people who want to do something worthwhile. Today, I listened to an interview with a sociologist who claimed that a person is the average of his five friends and that he/she looks for people who he/she would like to be like. I didn't do this with an aim, but I just found it natural (P. C.).

The motive of activity and social responsibility is demonstrated in the acceptance of the role of bringer of change. The picture of young Slovaks with migration experience changing society is present in public discourse. Regular interviews with active young people who returned from abroad also helps form the picture of the bringer of change. Some respondents, however, showed a certain amount of separation from this portrait: “I think it's all a bit blown up. I don't feel special or better. It's all “in” but there are lots of active people in small cities in Slovakia and none of them went to any fancy schools but do great and important things.” (Z. R.)

The identification with the role of bearer of change is reminiscent of Schutz’s reflections in The Homecomer. Everyone who leaves home encounters two feelings: the feeling of longing for home, and the feeling of bringing something new, something acquired abroad. Here, the person is faced with the situation generating conflict. The Homecomer forgets that years of practice arise from
years of experience. Every social and cultural habit is tested by generations. In the eyes of people, the Homecomer represents someone who disturbs the peace and questions the knowledge rooted in the past (Schutz, 2012: 356). This disturbance is not caused by his/her presence itself. The main source is the attempt to alter the way things are.

Sometimes they accuse us of going abroad, and bringing it all back here, we don't want it, we're a traditional society, don't like differences, don't adapt well and so on. So it's a sort of a challenge for me to show these people that the world is opening and it doesn't matter what you want or don't. I don't want to sound above anybody, but there are some things we perhaps understand better. This is the negative aspect, especially on how people who have not travelled much see me and that I travel a lot and also bring new stuff such as openness. (M. C.)

It depends on the people and it really depends on whether they are older than me, and how much older. It's usually the older people that start saying no, this or that is not possible. With the older people it's usually about anti-arguments, whilst with the young people, we can communicate about how this could be done and why, but there is still, more negativity. (R. H.)

Out of passivity: socially oriented activities of returning emigrants

The acceptance of an active role of young people in society and the narrative of responsibility is practically realised in the people's day-to-day activities. These activities have different characteristics. Some are in the form of small steps that the respondents consider minor, but at the same time emphasised that they would not have taken these steps before migration. These small steps can be perceived as “micro-dramas” in which our respondent acts against the practice of passivity. Young returnees admit that these actions are not leading to broad societal changes, but their aim is not to cause great revolutions. In this case, the respondents see their objective in the application of small steps leading to continual change. They are proud of even small advances and set a positive example.

I filed a complaint against a bus driver who was being particularly rude to a mum and her two kids, as I was standing waiting for a different bus. I was so angry, I wrote the company. It was a young mum, a bus full of people and no one said a word. Before, I would have never done that, but now I see, one shouldn't act like this towards another person. It can be done differently. (Z. A.)

Online, I'm well hard.(slang for very tough) I don't only tell people off, but also try to tell them what or how to say stuff. Don't tell a woman she belongs to the kitchen if you wouldn't say it to your own mother. Think a bit. People ask me why you are wasting your energy that you won't change anything, which is probably true, but I can't help it if it's just unfair. I always say that even if one person reading it thinks about it and changes, it's worth it. (K. E.)
The concept of small steps resonated among the answers of our respondents. Even if they did not immediately participate in public activities, they pointed out that society changes via small steps. They did not call for radical change, but wanted to see it happen and are willing to contribute. Emphasising the importance of small steps is probably related to the rationalisation of the situation after return. It is however, impossible to change society from day to day. Yet, the belief in small modifications brings hope for greater change in the future, so people do not have to regret returning home.

Civic participation – Life in NGOs

An experience with small micro-dramas and everyday conflicts creates a mood of dissatisfaction that is important for the formation of more formalised activities and innovations. The platform in which the activities are realised is, in some cases, provided by non-governmental organisations (NGOs). In this context, we need to explain the position of non-governmental organisations against a background of Slovak society. Central Europe does not have a continuous past tradition of the functioning of civil society’s elements. More importantly, the term NGO used in a certain political context often raises questions as something suspicious. In other words, it often means introducing and enforcing new and liberal cultural models that are contrary to the traditions of Slovak society. Sometimes this can literally mean action against Slovakia in favour of foreign states. The metaphor of an internal enemy has regularly appeared in political discourse in situations of political instability since the time of the rise of Slovak society. However, after the migration crisis, the term non-government has become an imaginary enemy for a part of the population. A similar situation exists in the EU’s other new member states as well. In the case of returning migrants in our research, we can distinguish two forms of relationships with NGOs. The first is joining an existing NGO and the second is starting one.

One of the aims of working with NGOs is to meet people with similar opinions and experiences. Integration in an active group also presents a form of therapy, support and strengthens young people’s resolution to remain in Slovakia. Non-government organisations are the means for a young person to make and implement changes. The effort to benefit their home country appears as one of the motives that explains their return home and is also seen in the response to problems of their return as discussed above.

I knew that I’d be among the people who want to stick out a little. Not that they’d have a particular need, but it’s just how they are. Even being in a group of people similarly different is great support. Meeting with them and seeing what they’re doing and what problems they’re facing. (M. R.)

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7 Seen especially as suspicious are organisations such as Transparency International, Open Society Found, Via Iuris, Amnesty international, organisations for protections of the rights of LGBT community, organisations for the rights of migrants and ecology activists.
I applied to the “Institute of Antiquity” and we’re all friends till now; a group of young, active individuals. I knew then, that I wanted to stay here, live here and do something valuable. The possibilities are endless. And there are so many problems, so there is plenty of space to grow. (K. P.)

The establishment of a non-government organisation is the second option we have encountered in the socially oriented activities of young people returning home. In this section, we look at a story of a cultural centre in a small regional town in Slovakia. The organisation was founded by people who had studied abroad. Their main focus is on cultural activities tied to the town and locality. The cultural centre started as a response to the absence of space for alternative and independent cultural performances and art. Another motive was to avoid boring jobs in corporate open space offices in the capital city:

Of course, when I moved, all my friends in Bratislava told me how they were gonna recommend me to all sorts of companies. And that would be just as boring as anywhere else abroad, so I preferred the option of staying here in a small town. I didn’t really know what was next, but my friends also came back and we thought of starting a cultural centre. We really went for what we wanted and what we didn’t have in our town and what we were actually capable of doing. We thought up this place to create something. (K. C.)

Existing social contacts played a significant role in establishing the cultural centre. This is nothing surprising. According to Cassarino, the success of migrants in the process of implementing changes depends on their ability to mobilise resources for their return (Cassarino, 2004: 266). Part of mobilising resources is also the existence of social networks in the home society. As we have mentioned in the theoretical part, current technological changes helped to maintain this form of mutual connectedness easier than in the past. Another reason why the centre could be founded was the biography of the founders. Before leaving Slovakia, all founders of the cultural centre actively participated in the local alternative theatre community.

The cultural centre also acts as a certain counter-balance to formal public organisations. The city has a regional gallery and a cultural centre. However, in terms of representatives of the independent cultural centre, these institutions are less dynamic and less current. The reasons for this are the political nominations for the directors that caused the current administration to be incompetent as no one comes from an artistic environment at all: “Corruption and nepotism is also part of the artistic community, this is really terrible in Slovakia” (Field diary 23.10.2017). In addition, to introducing new and fresh art, it is also important for the cultural centre to bring new ideas into a small city. For example, they organized a LGBT Film Festival, the One World Film Festival on Human Rights. This was summed up by one of the founding members: “We decided to bring the world into our small town”. (J. M.). An important attribute of the centre is to serve as a creative networking hub for the small city. Therefore, the centre also supports young volunteers from other EU countries. These volunteers work and run a Language Cafe, where it is possible to meet and talk with them. Sometimes they
prepare local foods and lead lectures about the differences between societies. This activity serves not only to improve the communication skills of the citizens, but also contributes to better understanding of other cultures. Through these volunteers, the centre also indirectly supports the local Roma communities, as the volunteers assist at the day care centre. Funding for the centre comes from several sources. Sale of books, running the café and, to a large extent, grants for the promotion of art.

The activities of the centre are accompanied by a latent conflict. Contrary to the thought that a part of the problem lies in the value setting of the centre, this is not the case. Representatives of the centre argued that their activities still concern a relatively small proportion of the population, so local politicians do not consider it an ideological threat. The main source of conflict comes from the division of city politics into two rival camps (Left and National Conservative and Right and Liberal). The centre was formed during the time of the previous mayor (from a Right and Liberal party). He provided the unused space but considered it something of an experiment. His view was: if the centre prospers, it will be a bonus for the town. If it does not, it does not matter. However, the current Mayor connectsthe support of his predecessor with political affiliation, and considers the centre linked to the opposition. The founders suddenly and unwillingly became a part of a political struggle in a small town. “We had no idea they would take it to such levels. All the time we are trying to be strictly apolitical” (J.M.) However, as the centre has already managed to establish a circle of supporters, it can no longer be closed down. The conflict can be seen in restrictions: for example, increasing the rent on the basis that the centre sells drinks and therefore is not a cultural centre, but a pub. Another example may be the banning of opening a small summer terrace due to the damage to the pavement.

It was this ban that prompted a spontaneous protest in the city, where the supporters of the centre brought their own chairs and drank coffee in the street. Mutual distrust between the members of the cultural centre and representatives of the municipal self-government is expressed in the following quote: “People, who agree with these political opinions and are in the family, or whatever you want to call it, won’t ever come here because they know what the black list is” (H.E.). The centre also played an important part in the biggest demonstrations since 1989 (60,000 people in Bratislava, 2,000 in the small town, which represents every 10th person). The importance of the centre for the success of the demonstrations was significant because its existence enabled the interaction of active people from different areas (ecological activists, cultural activists, teacher unions, students). As a result, the reaction to the events was much faster.

Conclusions

Migration processes are closely linked to broader social, economic and political events. In an international, as well as a Slovak context, the extent of migration is rising and its forms are becoming more diverse. In relation to the topic we started with the fact, that migration is a cycle and has several stages. It is not only the process of leaving the country but a process of returning as well.
The return can be a necessary response to an unsuccessful migration, but can also be a long-term, planned decision. In this study, we focused on the voluntary return of young Slovaks after some time spent abroad. The expansion of the European Union and the subsequent financial and economic crisis caused a more dynamic movement of people. Political decisions (e.g. Brexit) also influence return migration and affect young people from new member states.

The process of return migration of people from new member states is often studied through economic optics and the return home is primarily analysed by economic categories. This is mostly the threshold of saving enough money to return home, the behaviour of the individual on the market or income bonuses. The situation in Slovakia is characterised by a high number of young people studying or working abroad. Therefore, their return migration is not only an economic phenomenon but also contributes to social innovations. We observed how young migrants become an actor of change and thus modify life in their immediate circle, community and even society. This impact on society in Slovakia and other new member states has not yet been processed and it is worthy of further attention. Equally as relevant as economic topics are the social remittances and cultural innovation which young returning migrants bring from host countries.

The topic of the relationship between young returning migrants in Slovakia and NGOs has recently come to the foreground. Post-communist states show a relatively high mistrust towards political parties and institutions. In the case of our research, we observed that this does not necessarily mean apathy towards politics. On the contrary, young and educated returnees presented themselves as politically active. They often use an apolitical way of participating. In the context of past Czechoslovakia, Václav Havel’s term “unpolitical politics” is often used. This means engagement without engaging within the political structure. Perhaps, engagement while distancing oneself from political support. However, if we look closely at protests in Central European countries, their successful initiators are usually newly established civic organizations and NGOs – Poland (Komitet na obranu demokracji), Slovakia (Za slušné Slovensko) – and young people using new social media (Petrović and Petrović, 2017).

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