

Un-grateful migrant

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In April 2024 during our fieldwork in Bela Krajina, I and a couple of colleagues were, after previous arrangements, invited to one of the local non-governmental organizations. Even though the main focus of our research was the Slovenian-Croatian border, that day we talked with two women from Ukraine who found refuge in the Bela Krajina region. Their resettlement occurred as a result of the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Anastasiya, a woman from the south of Ukraine, came to Bela Krajina shortly after the beginning of the Russian invasion, in March 2022. Slovenia was her first destination choice because her family members reside here. Anastasiya talked with us exclusively in Slovenian, emphasizing her efforts to learn this language: "I try to participate in every course in the Slovenian language I am eligible for. I took many of them already because it was important to learn the language. I study a lot". She went on describing her current working situation:

Now I work in a kitchen, and I mostly take care of cooking. I am satisfied with my job, but it is hard sometimes. Above all, I am very happy I can legally work in Slovenia. I am grateful for such a warm greeting, and I see my work as an act of helping and paying back for the support and kindness I received. If I cannot do much to help, I want at least to work well for Slovenia to show that I am thankful. (...) Back in Ukraine, my husband also worked in a kitchen. At that time, I promised myself never to follow in his footsteps because imagining myself in front of the enormous kitchen pots and appliances was impossible. I always laughed a bit at his job and now it is my job. (...) I have a Russian colleague at work. I know our co-workers were wondering how we were going to get along. To their surprise, we understand each other very well. I remember that once she exclaimed: „I am from Metlika, not from Russia!" (...) I am integrated well into the community. Me and my children speak Slovenian and have local friends. I appreciate my life here, even though it is way different than how it was in Ukraine.

Alona, the other woman from Ukraine, moved to Bela Krajina in April 2022 because of her husband who had been employed in the region before the war in Ukraine. She recently finished an educational programme at a Ukrainian university and works online for a corporation. Alona also talked with us in Slovenian, explaining her family situation:

My family is still in Ukraine. In Bela Krajina, it is me, my son, and my husband. My son is in kindergarten, and I am proud of how well he is doing. We are happy with the Slovenian kindergarten and the diverse activities it offers. (...) I also attended various Slovenian courses and many different meetings and events organized by the local associations. I feel integrated with and welcomed by the locals. I do not have much to complain about. I agree [with Anastasiya, O.P.] that Slovenians are good people. I have not met an unfriendly Slovenian yet.

From this and other conversations with Anastasiya and Alona, it was clear that both women were underlining their feelings of gratefulness towards Slovenians and the Slovenian state. When listening to them I asked myself: is it possible that the received benefits and help somehow trigger the feeling of gratitude and of being indebted? During the conversation, no criticism of Slovenia or Slovenians was expressed. They portrayed their reception in Bela Krajina with very bright colours, focusing only on the positive aspects of their life in Slovenia. Both spoke highly of the locals and highlighted the kindness they encountered. Especially when talking to Anastasiya it was evident that she wanted to emphasize how integrated she is in the local environment and how much she strives to thank the Slovenian people. The only downside she mentioned was the complicated paperwork in the country. The conversation revealed a certain pattern of behaviour.

Fred R. Berger (1975) indicated two main factors influencing the feeling of gratitude: the value a particular gesture holds for the recipient and the degree of sacrifice in making the gesture. In the case of migrants, gratitude might often feel like an obligation.

Who is a *grateful migrant*? Kaja Jenssen Rathe describes a sort of unwritten contract between a migrant and a host country: "The 'host' has provided 'a home, an education, and a future', and in return, it is the duty of the 'guest' to 'be humble and grateful'—presumably forever" (2023: 250). The most striking conclusion drawn from this quote is that the figure of a *grateful migrant* is a migrant individual with a debt to pay - a debt coming solely from their circumstances. Following Rathe (2023), migrant indebtedness does not always result just from being grateful but is frequently imposed by the country's locals. This perpetuates further the cycle of dependence and

marginalization. In turn, to find out what it means to be an ungrateful migrant, one does not have to look far. For instance, the headline published in the Slovenian right-wing journal, Demokracija.si (2020) goes as follows: “This is gratitude! A migrant, to whom Serbia provides free food and shelter, vandalized a public facility with a stick”. Citing a similar example from Poland, published on right-wing Rzeczpospolita.pl (2023): “Mentzen: Where is the gratitude of Ukrainians? They took advantage of the Polish government's foolishness”. Releases like this one imply that a migrant displaying deviant, antisocial behaviour is automatically assigned the “ungrateful” label. This specific discourse targets migrant persons and aims to discipline and position them on the societal ladder.

The words “grateful” and “migrant” create one consistent phrase solely because of the nature of migrations. For gratitude to be true, it should not be imposed or forced; it shall come from the heart. As well as genuine **solidarity** does not aim to create debt.

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