Qualitative Approach to Migration Research: From Categories to Processuality

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to present the advantages of a qualitative approach in migration studies. Regardless of its proven validity, the qualitative perspective is still underutilised and remains overshadowed by research inspired by (neo)positivist, quantitative and statistical methods in migration studies. The paper seeks to prove the hypothesis that qualitative research, and the biographical method in particular, enables research on migration in its processuality, provides insight into the interconnection between the structure and the agency in all migration phases, and shines a light on power relations that produce unequal outcomes of these movements. The significance and reach of qualitative approaches have been demonstrated through the analysis of particular methodology solutions and the findings obtained by the research on the contemporary international migration of women from Serbia in the European context. The first section of the paper is a comprehensive overview of the application of theoretical and methodological approaches in migration studies, followed by an elaborate description of individual methodological procedures as well as relevant findings of the mentioned research. The main contribution of this paper is that it shows how qualitative research enables the re-examination and deconstruction of categories within which we are used to observing migrants and which actually represent a reflection of the administrative management of international movements.

Key words: women in emigration, agency, biographical method, migration strategies, Serbia

1. INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, population movement is recognised as one of the basic features of modern society. Our era is often referred to as the "age of migration" (Castles and Miller, 2009). Economic globalisation, revolutions in the spheres of technology, transport and communication, as well as transnational communities, have indisput-

ably enabled the exchange of goods, information and ideas, thus advancing and facilitating the movement of people. The importance of the migration phenomenon in modern society is best demonstrated by the proliferation of papers, empirical research, academic studies and projects addressing this topic.

According to its scientific conceptualisation, the term "migration" carries various meanings, so it is not possible to establish a conceptual consensus. Apart from not being consistent in terms of substance, it is not value-neutral either. On the one hand, when used to describe the spatial mobility of actors of lower socio-economic statuses, it implies mandatory concepts of governance, securitisation and control (Iosifides, 2011). On the other hand, when observing migration among actors from the top of the social ladder, movement becomes not only a desirable lifestyle but also an imperative that is frequently idealised (Grgurinović, 2013: 134). Therefore, when studying this concept from a sociological perspective, it is extremely important to examine the unequal social relations of power behind the migration process.

As expected, the multidimensionality of the phenomenon has resulted in a great variety of migration theories, each of them nurturing its epistemological and methodological specificities. While migration research initially developed through qualitative approaches within the Chicago School, and thus the first large-scale study of migrants *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* (1919–1921) by Thomas and Znaniecki actually opened the door to the application of the biographical method in social sciences (Bogdanović, 1993), quantitative approaches have always prevailed in empirical studies dealing with this topic. This is so because governmental and international bodies in charge of migration continue to encourage quantitative research in multiple ways, believing that it will result in the creation of 'objective', evidence-based policies.

This paper aims to point to the benefits of studying migration from a qualitative perspective and, through findings obtained by a study that relies on the biographical approach, highlight the importance of considering migration as a process and rethinking generally accepted categories. The study in question is part of a doctoral dissertation that deals with the phenomenon of modern international migration of women from Serbia in the European context. More specifically, the focus of interest is the migration practices and migration experiences of women who left Serbia after 2000 and were active in the labour markets in France and Germany at a critical moment of the study. The expression "active in the labour market" covers the participants who were employed, regardless of the formality of the engagement and official employment status, as well as those who were actively looking for a job, if they did not have one at the given moment. The primary focus of this paper is to present the methodological solutions and narratives relating to the migrant strategies of the respondents, thus pointing to the contributions of qualitative ap-

proaches to the study of migration and highlighting the epistemological limitations arising from the uncritical acceptance of administrative categories through which we often observe migrants.

The remainder of this paper will first provide a chronological account of the application of methodological approaches in migration studies. Then, based on the descriptions of specific methodological solutions used for the empirical part of the doctoral dissertation and a review of individual results, it will provide arguments in favour of qualitative research.

2. THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL APPROACHES TO STUDYING MIGRATION

Theories of migration, which have been developing for the last few decades, have actually been criticised very often by the very scholars specialising in this field. That criticism concerns the obsolescence of the categorical apparatus, which relies too much on empiricism while at the same time being fragmented and single-disciplinary. Instead of generating hypotheses and guiding empirical research, existing migration theories are mainly used to offer retroactive explanations. The starting point is usually common-sense, empirical observations, which are then dressed up in abstract terms drawn from the general reservoir of social sciences. The purpose of this intervention is to upgrade the formal status of the empirical observations and translate them into a conceptual framework (Bakewell, 2010). Besides, the theories have remained deeply entrenched in separate scholarly disciplines and their analytical, linguistic, methodological and epistemological assumptions (Schmitter Heisler, 2008: 98). Approaches developed within migration studies are predominantly single-disciplinary and therefore self-referential – the validity and advantage of one's own discipline are demonstrated precisely by referring to that specific discipline. Massey called this phenomenon "disciplinary parochialism" (Massey, 1990 according to Castagnone, 2011: 2), accusing this self-containment of generating fundamentally different findings that do not communicate among each other. The phenomenon of migration is so complex that it requires an interdisciplinary, and even post-disciplinary approach (Favell, 2008), although various authors, such as Castles (Castles and Miller, 2009) or Portes (1997) rejected the idea of a grand migration theory as insufficiently fruitful.

Building a theory within already existing disciplines has required reliance on their epistemological postulates and uncritical acceptance of the division into qualitative and quantitative methods, so in a methodological sense, migration was observed from the perspective of methodological holism, methodological individualism and methodological nationalism. As already mentioned, although the monograph on

the Polish peasant by Tomas and Znaniecki provided a basis for the development of the biographical method in social sciences (Bogdanović, 1993), after the initial interest, qualitative research approaches were suppressed by positivist-empirical epistemology.

2.1. Causal approaches

Until the 1970s, economic approaches had been absolutely dominant in theoretical terms, primarily the neoclassical economy of migration, which generated causal explanations both on a macro- and micro-theoretical level. Spatial differences between labour supply and demand were highlighted as structural determinants of migration. At the micro-level, the figure of the migrant was equated with a rational, free and well-informed man who based his decision to move on a thorough analysis of costs and benefits, choosing to migrate to areas where he would be able to achieve the highest possible earnings considering his knowledge and skills. The anticipation of social development was in line with the inevitable theories of modernisation current at that time, predicting that the transfer of the labour force would lead to the uniform development of states and regions. Human capital became an important research concept (Bakewell, 2010). At the same time, quantitative methodology and the data collection techniques it gave rise to, such as a survey or a questionnaire, constituted the gold standard of the stage in question. Besides, all research was primarily designed using methodological nationalism, an approach that assumed that human societies are delimited by the borders of nation-states (Kuti and Božić, 2011). While under these theories methodological holism was applied to obtain scholarly knowledge, methodological individualism still prevailed. Numerous criticisms directed at the idea of a rational and well-informed individual referred to the complete disregard of restrictive social structures, and over the years, social reality has denied the assumption of converged development.

2.2. Macro-analytical approaches

The following stage of development of these theories was marked by a macro-analytical view of social and economic structures that were seen as the main determinants of migration. Starting in the 1970s, the theories of the dual or segmented labour market (Piore, 1979), the world system (Wallerstein, 1984) or global cities (Sassen, 1991) underlined that uneven spatial and sectoral development produces spatial and sectoral differentiation and inequality, migration being both the cause and result of these mechanisms, merely reproducing unequal power relations (Iosifides, 2011). Migration is an option resulting from the penetration of

market relations into poor countries rather than an individual act of desperate escape from misery. Theories examining integration issues were also marked by a general paradigm shift, where the previous optimistic and functionalist definition of assimilation as the only certain outcome was replaced by a conflict approach underlining racial and ethnic inequalities (Schmitter Heisler, 2008). Methodological holism, which prioritises structural explanations, mainly reduces human activity to a mere epiphenomenon of structure, falling into the traps of structural determinism and reductionism. The incorporation of structural factors into explanatory schemes not only failed to prevent a comprehensive empiricist presentation of migration movements (Iosifides, 2011), but methodological nationalism became the gold standard that has remained the starting point of many studies to this day. That period saw an increase in the number of international comparative studies that became an important element of national efforts to manage migration and were based on demographic statistics or survey research (Hoffmeyer-Zlotnik, 2007).

In the following decade, criticism of various versions of (neo)positivism and quantitative empiricism became louder. More and more authors called for methodological individualism to be updated in an interpretive, Weberian way, and for methodological constructivism. Thus, for example, Halfracee and Boyle (1993) stressed the need for a major shift in the study of migration from an empirical-behaviourist paradigm to a paradigm that would examine intended human agency using qualitative, biographical methods. They highlighted the central role of migrant life trajectory as a whole in understanding the decision to migrate, as well as the importance of studying intentionality and self-reflection. While the authors did not reject quantitative methodology, stating that the "tyranny of behaviourism" should not be replaced by the "'tyranny of the biography'" (Halfracee and Boyle, 1993: 345), the biographical method was so often implemented through a qualitative approach that, nowadays, it is almost equated with it.

In their application of qualitative methodology, realists take a step further, striving to show that qualitative research can expand the scope of its application beyond the traditional inquiry into the role of subjectivity, lived experience or micro-interaction, and that it can shed light on the issues of interconnectedness between structure, actors and social causality in migration studies (Iosifides, 2011).

Nevertheless, even today, there is a strong tendency to favour quantitative research methods. Privileging one of these two methodological orientations is always connected both with internal scientific factors, such as methodological dogmatism or the inclination of certain journals to prioritise one orientation, and with non-scientific factors, which are the result of changes in the social functions of science over the recent decades (Ilić, 2013: 525). Thus, for example, in capitalist societies, positivist approaches are perceived as objective and neutral and are assigned the

role of interpreters of the "real situation on the ground", providing a basis for creating practical policies.

2.3. Meso-analytical approaches

The following stage was marked by a shift in paradigm and a focus on neglected concepts from the meso-analytical level. Having moved away from traditional units of analysis such as the (free and rational) individual and nation-states, critics of the dominant macro- and micro-approaches turned their attention to medium-scale social collectives as determinants of migration. Thus, under the new economy of migration, it was established that the decision to migrate does not have to be made by an individual who only follows their interests, but can be taken at the household level if there is a need to reduce financial risks and diversify sources of income. At the same time, attention was drawn to migrant networks, that is, interpersonal ties among migrants, former migrants and non-migrants, creating a supra-spatial connection between the area of origin and destination (Massey et al., 1993). Although it was precisely the "uncovering" of migration networks and other phenomena lying at the central analytical level, such as transnationalism and transnational social spaces, that brought about major changes in migration studies, certain authors argue that shifting the focus to meso-units of analysis did not contribute much to the development of migration theories, in so far as they remained trapped in the old divisions into structure and agency (Bakewell, 2010).

2.4. Transnationalism

Changes associated with globalisation and the transformation of the role of the nation-state, especially from the 1990s onwards, have led to new theoretical concepts of global migration movements. Transnationalism disputed the central role of the national state in the analysis of migration, and therefore the line of theory and research that relies on methodological nationalism. It also rejected the traditional notions of assimilation and integration of immigrants by introducing concepts such as hybridity, post-national or transnational citizenship, etc. (Schmitter Heisler, 2008). Transnationalism not only made it possible to observe migration as a process instead of seeing it only as an irreversible, permanent act, but also gave rise to *mobile* and *dynamic* methods for studying migration movements (Castagnone, 2011). *Mobile methods* are specific in that they involve researchers themselves moving along the respondents' migration trajectories, thus generating multi-local data from the same people. On the other hand, *dynamic methods* include inter-

views with the same respondents at multiple points in time (*multi-timing*), which allows for the tracking of migrant trajectories over time.

Although transnationalism has made one of the most important contributions to the study of modern human movement through new methods combining the depths of qualitative insights with the advantages of longitudinal approaches, the concept itself has been widely criticised. The critics underlined the insufficiently precise terminology, questioned whether it was a new phenomenon at all, and rejected the idea that maintaining ties with relatives or sending remittances can be defined as a transnational activity without additional contextualisation. Besides, some authors argued that rejecting the nation-state system was premature. Despite the efforts of this framework to overcome the limitations of both structuralist and individualist migration theories, there is a tendency to overemphasise the role of agency in the formation, functioning and reproduction of transnational migrant communities (Iosifides, 2011). From a sociological point of view, despite the value and analytical strength of the theory of transnationalism in underlining certain aspects of the migration phenomenon, the main problem remains its insufficient contribution to clarifying how structure and agency are connected, that is, its proneness to neglecting global and local power relations.

According to certain scholars, in order to deepen the understanding of the migration phenomenon in the 21st century, it is necessary to focus on three specific research topics: 1) migration experiences; 2) migration transitions, that is, analysing the changing patterns of migration; 3) migration and transformation, that is, examining the interaction between migration on the one hand and social, economic and political changes at the national, regional and global levels on the other (Iosifides, 2011: 39). These topics require a review of the interaction between local-level factors, which directly affect migration decisions and strategies, and a series of structural political, economic, and social factors and processes that facilitate and limit the agency of migrants. Changing power relations are, therefore, essential for understanding migration, migration outcomes and strategies (Bakewell, 2010). Only research designed in this way may improve our in-depth understanding of modern migration.

3. STUDY OF WORKING EMIGRANT WOMEN

3.1. Objectives and research questions

The general objective of the overall study was to reconstruct the migration practices of emigrant women from Serbia, as well as to conduct a sociological analysis of the interdependence of gender relations, on the one hand, and migration experiences at different stages of migration (pre-migration, during migration and after changing the country of residence) on the other. Previous studies have shown that gender relations are both products and determinants of social relations, although their latter role is less noticeable and researched (Blagojević, 2012). The basic method is qualitative, the approach is biographical, and the data collection method is problem-centred interviews (Witzel, 2000; Witzel and Reiter, 2012).

Several research questions guided this empirical project as a whole, but this paper will focus on only one of them – the contribution of qualitative approaches to migration studies. In what way do in-depth, biographical insights lead us to rethink the body of knowledge about migrants, their motives, decisions, strategies and experiences? This question should, in fact, open up a debate on the justification of using well-established categories in theoretical approaches and empirical studies dealing with migration, such as the division into documented and undocumented migrants, student-, work-, or family-related movements and the like. Therefore, do the state, statistical and administrative categories created to manage migration truly reflect social reality?

3.2. Theoretical and conceptual framework

The theoretical concept relies on theories of structuration, therefore, on the interdependence of structural and action factors (for the application of structuration theories within migration studies, see Morawska, 2013). These approaches seek to overcome the antagonism between actors and structures, arguing that structures at higher levels of abstraction constitute the dynamic limits of the possible within which actors act, but that at the same time, at the level of immediate social surroundings, actors evaluate their chances, define their purposes and undertake strategies whose (un)intended consequences, in turn, affect these lower, local-level and, over time, larger-scope structures (Morawska, 2013: 69). When applied to migration, this theory implies that the activities of migrants are neither simply the products of structural constraints nor outcomes of their individual free will. Rather, they are the results of dialectics of power to (act) and power over (things or

people), as these actors (re)define their purposes by using or opposing structures (Morawska, 2013: 71).

The initial framework consisted of several key concepts. Although the term "migration" may have various meanings, here it implies long-term movements, those that are already ongoing or that the actors wish to last for at least a year. However, migration is understood as a process (Castles and Miller, 2009). This is important in so far as this interpretation of migration actually enables overcoming the "permanent settlement migration paradigm", under which migration is defined as definitive emigration from the country of origin and settlement in the country of destination (Castagnone, 2011). Abandoning the former understanding of migration as a one-time event made it possible to accept that modern migration is often a non-linear, "fragmented journey" (Collyer and de Haas, 2010: 478). This expanded concept of migration allowed researchers to redirect their attention to mobility, issues of returnees, multiple and circular migrations (Favell, 2008). However, the mainly positivist-oriented sociology of migration still struggles with researching mobility because it has to crystallize the fluidity to examine it. This particular study overcame that limitation by using a biographical approach.

The main research subject, migration experiences, refers to the descriptions and interpretations of events, feelings and meanings that individuals ascribe to the entire migration process, starting from decision-making, through resettlement, to integration. They are always individual and personal, and their understanding, again, is best achieved using a qualitative approach. On the other hand, by generalising experiences, one can gain insight into migration practices, that is, patterns that are no longer individual but repeated in specific groups and the wider population.

The following important conceptual idea was to observe migration as a gender-determined and gender-structured process. This means that, while migration appears to be gender neutral, its motives, flows and consequences always follow gendered lines of division. Since asymmetric power relations entail different levels of access to resources, it is clear that differences in migratory patterns also reflect gender inequalities (Boyd and Grieco, 2003). Empirical studies have shown that factors that reduce women's independent migration include gender roles within the household, women's lack of social and economic independence, difficult access to networks that provide information on how to enter a country or find work, and gender norms about the inappropriateness of women migrating alone (Jolly and Reeves, 2007). Besides, in addition to being gender-selective, migration is a gender-sensitive process – men's and women's experiences differ even after migrants reach the receiving country. The official legislative framework affects migratory experiences through its impact on the status that women receive upon entering the

country, that is, through regulations that provide opportunities for inclusion in the labour market. If they enter the country as "dependants", their status in the destination country is conditioned by their relationship with the "main immigrant" and their residency status (Boyd and Grieco, 2003). And if, additionally, legal provisions restrict labour market access to dependent household members, women are prevented from engaging in economic activities until certain conditions are met. Even if they enter the labour market, they often occupy traditionally "female" professions. These jobs are of lower status, have limited prospects for social mobility, and since they are also paid less than traditional "male occupations", inequalities are reproduced in migrant households. Immigrant women often find themselves in informal employment arrangements, have poor access to migrant networks and lack social support. Due to the mechanisms described above, the normative framework pushes migrant women into relationships of economic dependence within the household, making them vulnerable and exposed to discrimination and abuse.

However, despite structural determinants, migrants are active operators who can influence migration outcomes through their engagement. Therefore, the next important piece of the conceptual puzzle lies along the lines of new feminist theoretical notions underlining that the agency of emigrant women cannot be ignored (Kofman et al., 2005; Morokvasic, 2014).

In this sense, an important concept is life strategies, understood as a relatively stable pattern of action aimed at the consumption and conversion of resources in order to secure a social status (Babović, 2009). This notion indicates that, despite the structural constraints placed on them, women actively use available resources to influence migration and employment statuses.

3.3. Contextual framework

The spatial framework of the study was limited to Serbia as the origin country and France and Germany as the destination countries. The choice of countries was influenced by the classification of European Union countries into six regimes of reconciliation of work and family life according to family policies, labour market structure, gender norms and standard of living[1] (Matysiak, 2011; Kotowska et al., 2010). Unlike France, whose family policies strongly focus on the employment of

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[1]   The countries are divided into the following groups — from those in which institutional solutions support the reconciliation of work and private life most to those in which this harmonisation is difficult: 1. Nordic countries (Denmark, Finland, Sweden); 2. Benelux countries (Belgium, the Netherlands, Luxembourg) and France; 3. Anglo-Saxon countries (Ireland and Great Britain); 4. German-speaking countries (Germany and Austria); 5. Southern European countries (Greece, Italy, Spain and Portugal); 6. former socialist countries (Kotowska et al., 2010: 9-11).

mothers, in Germany, social support for working parents is low, social benefits are traditionally adapted to the model of a family with a male breadwinner, and social norms do not support the employment of mothers (Kotowska et al., 2010: 9-11). Besides, their immigration regimes differ (Wallace Goodman, 2010; Janoski, 2010). Therefore, while these two countries are similar in some structural characteristics important for the subject and aim of this research, such as the fact that both are traditional destinations of Serbian emigrants or that they belong to the same type of welfare state, their differing gender and migration regimes leave an opportunity to understand the link between the macro-dimension and gender relations, family and work arrangements.

The study timeline covers the period from 2000 to the present day, which is considered to cover the last wave of emigration. The year 2000 is seen as a turning point in the periodisation of external migration for two reasons. First, it marks the end of the war period of the 1990s, during which forced movements were frequent and refugee and humanitarian emigration channels were open. On the other hand, that year is regarded as the beginning of the "unblocking" of the social transformation that followed the fall of Milošević's regime. After the collapse of the Yugoslav socialist social system, Serbia went through a period of blocked transformation, and during the years analysed herein, numerous social changes took place, which ultimately led to the consolidation of the capitalist system of reproduction of social relations (Lazić, 2011). These macro-level social changes affected the migration potential of Serbian citizens and its fulfilment.

The theoretical-conceptual framework described made it possible for the research subject – emigrant women – not to be selected from pre-established categories, but for active migrant women to participate regardless of their formal migration and employment statuses. This made it possible to separate the motives of migration from the movement channels available to women and to provide insight into the fluidity of migration flows and how women struggle to reach the desired social positions.

4. METHODOLOGY

4.1. Biographical method

The entire research set-up required a methodology that transcends the deep division into structural and actor approaches. Therefore, a biographical approach was chosen, which explores the interdependence of personal and social changes and processes by examining the biographies of various social actors. Although there is no consensus on the name of the method itself, and some authors call it the life-history or life story method[2], they all agree on one thing: it contributes to seeing actor and structure not as opposing concepts, but as parts of a process in a mutual dialectic relationship (Guhlich, 2017). Biographical research has developed within various theoretical paradigms, so it relies on different ontological foundations, while an additional level of complexity is provided by the debate over what can be considered biographical data. While some acknowledge only the analysis of documents created without the influence of researchers, such as letters, diaries, autobiographies, blogs, vlogs, etc., others consider it legitimate to analyse any document, regardless of whether the material was created with someone's help or not, as long as it points to the actor's view of their own experience (Bogdanović, 1993). Given that the latter view prevails, a large amount of biographical data is created today through various types of interviews, that is, through situations involving a direct exchange between social actors and researchers.

While a typical subject of biographical research is individuals, this methodological procedure has also found its place in studies examining collective units of analysis (Bertaux and Thompson, 1993; Bertaux and Delcroix, 2000). This methodological approach aims to "lead to knowledge of the subjective experience of participants in certain events and situations, and to understand the motives of their actions and behaviour from their point of view, their 'definition of the situation and to understand the motives of their actions and behaviour from their point of view, their 'definition of the situation'" (Bogdanović, 1993: 121). However, some authors argue that applying the biographical method is not only limited to the knowledge and understanding of the subjective side of the studied phenomena, but that it also enables the reconstruction of causal flows (Iosifides, 2011). The biographical meth-

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[2] Life history means an account of a life based on the collection of a written or transcribed oral account requested by a researcher. It is later edited, interpreted and presented in various ways and is often associated with other sources. It can be topical if it only focuses on one segment of a life or complete, if it tries to cover all the details. A life story is understood as the respondent's story of their life or a segment of it, as told to someone else. As with life history, it can refer to a whole life or only one segment of it. It implies a more active role of the researcher, so the obtained data are the result of an interactive relationship (Ojermark, 2007).

od is extremely common in migration studies, being used to examine a wide variety of phenomena – from motivation and making a decision to move, through issues of identity and the process of social integration, all the way to the role of social capital and transnational migration networks in encouraging and maintaining the phenomenon of migration (Iosifides and Sporton, 2009). This method is significant for migration studies in so far as, through the examination of duration and sequentiality, the path travelled, personal and collective memory, it enables the concept of trajectory to gain a central place in biographical theory (Apitzsch and Siouti 2007), thus recognising migrant trajectories as an important research subject. The epistemological assumptions behind this method have enabled researchers to reconstruct the entire life of migrants taking into account various stages and movements, to become aware of and explore transitions from one migration category to another, to trace the interconnections between various life spheres (educational, family, work) and migration, that is, to investigate migration in its processuality and longitudinality.

4.2. Problem-centred interviews

As already mentioned, biographical data today is mostly collected through in-depth interviews, which are often equated with narrative interviews (Jovchelovitch and Bauer, 2000). Given that the main purpose of this data collection technique is to create a detailed biographical story with as little intervention as possible, researchers are reduced to "active listeners" of life stories, their single task being to encourage the narrative with a well-designed and carefully formulated "generative question". However, due to the doubt that the position of epistemological constructivism would be heuristically fruitful in the study of interdependence between gender relations and migration practices, data was collected using problem-centred interviews (PCI) – in-depth, biographical interviews that lie between narrative and thematically-oriented approaches.

In a methodological sense, problem-centred interviews partially rely on the theory generation process developed within "grounded theory", which criticises hypothetical-deductive procedures because they only enable collecting and verifying data arising from the operationalisation of the main concepts. They also accept the position of "sociological naturalism", characterised by the researcher's openness to the research subject. However, insights obtained during interviews must be organised through an inductive-deductive relationship. This means that the inevitable prior knowledge generated by the researcher serves at the data collection stage as a heuristic-analytical framework for designing questions during the dialogue between the interviewer and the respondent. Flexible procedures prevent

the researcher's perspective on the problem of interest from overshadowing the respondent's and that the theory from overriding the data collected (Witzel, 2000; Witzel and Reiter, 2012).

This is achieved through a specific interview structure. On the one hand, narrative-generating communication strategies are used: introduction to the conversation, general exploration of the topic, *post-hoc* questions. On the other hand, strategies generating understanding are used, too: specific exploration with elements of reference to previously presented information, asking direct questions to clarify and understand a topic, and to confront the data obtained. At the beginning of the interview, the respondents are asked a general, introductory question to reveal what they find important concerning the research subject (general exploration of the topic). This is followed by the second part of the interview, designed thematically to verify the knowledge accumulated before the interview (specific exploration of the topic). During the structured part of the interview, the researcher introduces new, theoretically relevant categories, but always refers to what the respondent presented in the first, "free" part of the interview. In this way, the very important issue of reciprocity is incorporated into the interviewing method, and during the conversation, a dialectical exchange is immediately established between the empirical data that is collected and analysed, and the theory on which the research questions, framework and design of the research are built (Galletta, 2013).

In this particular study, in order to obtain insight into all stages of migration movement, an interview guide was created consisting of three segments, each covering one of the three phases – 1. pre-migration; 2. movement and initial adaptation; 3. settlement. The parts started with an introductory question, after which a dialogue developed between the respondent and myself, with full appreciation of the topics and narratives each of the emigrant women presented. In the last part, I asked the respondents to tell their life stories with a special reference to three spheres of life – family, work and migrant. During problem-centred interviews, in addition to the interview guide, the researcher also uses a short questionnaire that serves to collect basic socio-demographic data about the respondents, which was also the case in this study. While during the first two interviews, I asked the respondents the questions from this questionnaire at the beginning, in all the others I left its completion for the end of the interview. It turned out that the questions from the questionnaire introduced certain topics "too early", without a previous biographical review, that they seemed partially suggestive and that they spoiled the flow of the conversation. Therefore, I revised my initial decision on the order of the steps. While the fieldwork was very exhaustive, the advantage of conducting it by oneself certainly lies in the possibility of self-reflexive redefinition of research decisions.

4.3. Sample

A non-probabilistic, purposive sample was designed to encompass two sub-samples corresponding to selected destination countries. During the selection of the respondents, it was only important that they left Serbia after 2000, and that they were working in the destination country. The way of entering the country, legality of the current migrant status, motives for emigration, type and formality of the work arrangement were not decisive determinants in selecting participants. Such broad frameworks made it possible to overcome bureaucratic and artificial categorisations. Migration flows are changeable, as is the legality of employment status (Bobić and Babović, 2013), which is very difficult to examine using quantitative methodology. For example, it is sufficient to exceed the authorised stay in the European Union without a visa, which is limited to three months, by just one day for one's status to change from regular to irregular.

Besides, the formation of the sample was based on the theoretical assumption that the level of education and family status would define migration experiences (Mason, 2002), so it was necessary to ensure sample heterogeneity in order to gain insight into different varieties (Robinson, 2014), which was achieved by introducing disproportionate quotas. Two socio-demographic characteristics were taken as key for the work status of emigrant women – education level and partner/family status. Therefore, the planned sample included 30 women in each of the destination countries, combining the quotas according to different levels of education (primary school; secondary school; college/university and a postgraduate degree) with the quotas according to partner and family status (no partner, cohabiting/married without children, cohabiting/married with children, single mother). Per each country, the planned sample was supposed to include a third of the respondents from the mentioned educational categories, up to 10 respondents without a partner, half of the respondents with children and half without them, as well as a total of up to 10 respondents who had the experience of single parenting during their lifetime.

However, it quickly became apparent in the field that it is extremely difficult to find respondents who have completed primary school. Except for one respondent, who completed the sample in France, the few women with whom I established informal contact either did not enter the labour market or were unwilling to participate in the study. The migration experience of the interviewed respondent with primary school did not differ much from the practices described by emigrant women with secondary education – all of them were employed in service activities "reserved" for migrants (cleaning or care services). On the other hand, during the research, it became clear that those women who graduated from universities in Serbia often did not succeed in finding jobs equivalent to their level of education, sometimes

due to the impossibility of validating a diploma, and more often due to their (lack of) knowledge of the language. Precisely because of these two research insights, I decided that skewing the sample towards highly educated emigrant women was necessary to increase the heterogeneity of the experiences covered. Thus, education quotas were redefined, the new goal being to have at least a third of the sample with primary or secondary education. It was again confirmed that drawing strict lines between categories when studying the migration process is not an advantageous decision in terms of heuristics, and that the possibility of reflection allowed by independent field research is extremely important.

In both sub-samples I conducted more interviews than planned because some were excluded immediately upon completion[3]. The sample obtained in France included a total of 30 respondents, one of whom had a primary school education, 11 had a secondary education, five had a university degree, as many as 12 had a master's degree and one had completed a doctorate. The sample obtained in Germany included 11 respondents with secondary education, 13 with a university degree and six with a master's degree. Other pre-defined quotas were met: in France, nine respondents were without a partner, eight were cohabiting or married without children, and 13 were cohabiting or married with children. The quotas for the German sample were, respectively, 10 – 11 – 9. In each sample, half of the women had children, while the other half were childless; and a total of nine of them had the experience of single parenthood during their lives.

I reached the respondents through several channels – personal acquaintances, associations and organisations of the Serbian diaspora in France and Germany, social network groups gathering the diaspora, Serbian language schools abroad, embassies and churches. Besides, sometimes the study participants themselves recommended other potential respondents, thus facilitating the process of establishing trust.

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[3]   A total of 39 interviews were conducted in France. One was excluded because the respondent had arrived before the year 2000, two because the women had had very rare experience with working arrangements, two because the respondents were active university students rarely entering the labour market, three because the respondents worked in international organisations and actually had no contact with the French labour market and another one because the respondent was not willing to discuss her partner relationships, so the interview was not meaningful. A total of 36 interviews were conducted in Germany, four of which were excluded due to rare work arrangements, two due to a too short stay in the destination country (two to three months) and one due to the difficult mental state of the respondent, who nevertheless insisted on telling her story.

4.4. Interviewing

I interviewed the respondents in France and Germany, environments that were familiar and "natural" to them. While the majority of interviews were organised face-to-face, some conversations were also conducted via the *Skype* application, especially in Germany due to the diversification of experiences. The empirical part of the research was conducted over a period of three months, because I myself faced restrictions when it comes to staying in the EU. The field work was possible thanks to the "Civil Society Scholar Award" grant, awarded by the Open Society Foundation, without whose financial support the research idea could not be realised. The structural and financial obstacles Serbian researchers face could be the subject of a separate paper.

Face-to-face meetings were mostly scheduled in public places, such as cafés and restaurants, rarely in the respondents' homes, which was certainly the essential condition for establishing mutual trust. Before starting the interview, I clearly explained the aim of the study to all participants. Besides, all of them were asked for permission to record the conversation and provided with an explanation of how the audio recordings would be handled and for what purposes the anonymised transcripts would be used. The interview would begin only after a respondent gave verbal, informed consent.

Except for one respondent, who refused to discuss her partner relationships, as a result of which her interview was excluded from the final sample, there were no withdrawals during the conversation. All emigrant women who did not want to participate in the study refused contact in advance, and these situations were exceptionally numerous. This certainly raises epistemological questions about the systematicity of the insights gained and attitudes towards (un)collected data and experiences, but these questions go beyond the scope and purpose of this paper. Since additional (material) incentives for participation in the interview were not offered (except that representation costs in places where we conducted the interview were covered), the participants who agreed to cooperate were certainly motivated by their own desire to contribute to understanding the migration process. They wanted to speak frankly about their experiences.

Nevertheless, the respondents needed some time to get used to being recorded and to start openly presenting their stories. The feminist approach to interviewing additionally helped in this. The basic characteristics of this type of interview are careful listening, encouraging the respondents to express their thoughts and feelings freely, and respecting their statements as experiences, and not only as a source of data (Reinharz and Davidman, 1992: 27-28). Unlike scientific interviews, which are standardised to promote "objectivity" and encourage distance and even

a hierarchical relationship between the researcher and the respondent, feminist interviews allow the expression of empathy and friendliness. For feminist authors, participation and emotional connection are valid research tools (Vives, 2012: 62-63), so establishing long-term and egalitarian relationships between participants in this relationship is not only permitted, but also expected.

Three elements of my identity that the respondents were familiar with even before the start of the interview certainly contributed to the establishment of an egalitarian relationship – the fact that I am a woman myself, that I am a mother who had to separate from her daughter during field work, and that I am not part of their community (perhaps more importantly, that I was leaving as soon as I finished the field work). These three elements moderated the establishment of mutual relationships in various ways. Besides, I did not ask the respondents for any evidence to support their stories, although some of them showed their passports on their own initiative, thus proving their migration statuses. Finally, during the specific exploration of the topic, I encouraged the respondents who did not immediately feel safe to describe their semi-legal experiences by presenting anonymous examples of other emigrant women. Only after being assured that they were not alone or the only ones engaging in a given practice, were they ready to talk about paid marriages with destination country nationals or their false recognition of paternity, job applications with false documents, domestic violence, alcoholism or feelings of guilt about having to leave their children in Serbia. At certain moments, the interviews were extremely emotionally exhausting for both parties, which I was not prepared for at all. What is more important, however, is that according to the respondents themselves, the interviews had a therapeutic effect on them.

5. RETHINKING ANALYTICAL CATEGORIES: A CASE OF LIFE STRATEGIES IN EMIGRATION

5.1. Thematic data analysis

The recorded interviews were very extensive – they provided me, as a researcher, with a vast wealth of data collected, and they helped the emigrant women to see their life trajectories in a new way. After I completed the field part of the research and returned to Serbia, all the interviews were transcribed in detail. I conducted an inductive thematic analysis on the obtained material, within which open codes were assigned to logically and semantically separated text units.

Thematic analysis is a fundamental cross-theoretical and cross-epistemological method of qualitative analysis, which identifies, analyses and interprets patterns (themes) within detail-laden data. This type of tool is compatible with various the-

oretical and epistemological positions as it enables reporting on the experiences, meanings and realities of research participants, but also on how these realities are constructed (Braun and Clarke, 2006). There are two main ways in which researchers can search for themes within their data. One implies inductive or "bottom-up" analysis, which is data-driven in so far as the identified themes emerge from the material itself. In contrast, theoretical, deductive, or "top-down" thematic analysis is driven by the researcher's theoretical interest in the field, and is therefore more explicitly analytically shaped. Apart from them, there are also hybrid, combined or inductive-deductive models in which pre-prepared thematic schemes are supplemented with those arising from the data (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006). My decision to analyse the collected material inductively stemmed from several previous research decisions: the theoretical framework combined already known concepts, but in a slightly different way. Besides, it was a kind of exploratory research, and I did not come across any previous schemes that would be developed enough that I could rely on them. On the other hand, the abundance of material and the selection of problem-centred interviews, which enabled theoretically relevant concepts to be introduced after the narrative part, allowed me to immerse myself in the data without fear that something important for the research questions would be missed.

I mainly combined two coding strategies: descriptive and in vivo. While the first implies that roles, processes, actions, places and other relevant elements that may be identified in the text are assigned the researcher's descriptions, the second refers to the use of expressions and phrases from the narrative, which keeps the codes closer to the experiences of the respondents (Saldaña, 2009). It is important to note here that, since the aim of the analysis was not content analysis, that is, quantification, frequency was not taken as a decisive factor in determining the importance of individual codes and topics (for the difference between thematic and content analysis, see Vaismoradi, Turunen and Bondas, 2013). Verification of coder reliability in the form of researcher triangulation was not possible because the form of the project required my individual work on the material, although it is unquestionable that it would contribute to the quality of the study (Vidicki and Stojšin, 2021). The analysis was conducted in MAXQDA, a software programme that facilitated, accelerated and deepened the entire process in a technical sense.

When it comes to analytics, the most difficult part was coding and unfolding the narratives in the third, often most fact-laden stage – life in the destination country – when the women talked about their experiences concerning migrant, work and family statuses. The analysis showed that the relations between the statuses in these three spheres are interdependent to such an extent that examining only one of them, without knowledge of the other two, would be heuristically fruitless. Even

a simultaneous examination would not be sufficient to understand the relationship between the migrant, work and family spheres when the methodology relied on predefined categories. An in-depth understanding of the agency of emigrant women and the strategies they opted for was only possible through a biographical approach. For example, the respondents entered France and Germany in different ways. The largest share of women with higher education came to study, while the largest share of those with a middle level of education took advantage of the possibility of entering without a visa, after Serbia was placed on the white Schengen list in late 2009. The sample also included women who legally resided in these countries based on the right to family reunification, and in a slightly smaller number, those who came thanks to their invitation and a work visa obtained back in Serbia (medical workers in Germany were prevalent in this group). Among the respondents were those for whom this was their first migration experience, as well as those who had previously lived outside their country of origin – some as children, with guest worker parents, and some immediately before moving to the country where the interview was held. They had various motives for their (last) migration, which often did not coincide with the way they entered the country and the type of visa obtained. For some of them, departure was the fulfilment of youthful dreams of living in a particular city, in a certain cultural circle. For some others, it was the need to advance in their careers. Some of the women were motivated to leave by their financial situation, with some of them having their livelihood threatened by divorce, and others by extremely poor working conditions in Serbia. Some moved for love and obtained a family reunification visa. Others also moved for love, but remained undocumented and lived "without papers". There were also those who had to flee from domestic violence and aggressive partners across the border.

In the following text, through the example of one of the identified themes – migration strategies – I will try to point to the value of using qualitative methodology in migration studies, especially because it allows for rethinking and redefining the analytical categories within which we are accustomed to observing modern migration. The following examples were chosen because they clearly illustrate that the motifs for moving are multiple and often different from the way of entering the country, that migration statuses are changeable products of the game between structural constraints and the agency of actors. The purpose of the mentioned quotes is to vividly evoke the struggles that my respondents led in order to migrate and stay in the destination countries. The entire material has been anonymised by replacing the names of all respondents with pseudonyms, their ages have been aggregated, and important data, such as the names of the places they come from or where they live, have been omitted.

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5.2. Evidence-gathering strategy

One of the strategies present exclusively in France is the "evidence-gathering" strategy. This form of struggle to legalise the position is absolutely dominant among emigrant women who entered after 2009 and work mainly in the cleaning industry. Although France's immigration policy has been marked by a shift towards a restrictive model in recent decades, it is still semi-permissible, as it allows the legalisation of undocumented migrants (Monforte and Dufour, 2011). Applicants must not leave the country for a certain number of years and must have proof of tax payments in their name, by which undocumented migrants prove their loyalty to the republic and are introduced into legal channels.

> *So, we are gathering all the evidence we can gather, proving that we are here, on French territory. Yes, we really want to be regular citizens, join the regular channels, pay taxes. We filed our tax return... stating that we had no income, which is true, we currently don't have what one has to earn for their living, what one has the right to...* (Ana, early forties, France)

The immigrant women gathered the necessary information and advice through the migrant networks of the Serbian diaspora, and they relied on the help of agencies and lawyers' offices specialising in these matters. Such organisations are part of the highly lucrative "migrant industry", consisting of migrant recruitment and employment agencies, lawyers, agents, traffickers and other intermediaries (Harris, 1996, cited in Castles and Miller, 2009: 29).

A significant part of the women interviewed were in a position of semi-legality at least in one period of their migrant careers. Semi-legality is a theoretical concept and a heuristic device that serves to frame various "in-between" statuses and not resort to the concept of illegality every time ambiguities arise in one's legal status. This concept may be viewed as "a multi-dimensional space where legal status – migrants' formal relationship with the state – interacts with various forms of their agency toward the law: their behaviour and attitudes (Kubal, 2012: 11). Semi-legality can be understood as a range of migrants' interactions with the law, demonstrating that the divide according to legal status is not binary (legal–illegal), but rather a continuum that distinguishes citizens, permanent legal residents, temporary legal residents and "other" migrants (Kubal, 2012; Kubal, 2013).

The case of Ana, who entered France legally with a tourist visa, but passed into the category of undocumented migrants after three months, clearly shows that the administrative categories are too rigid to reflect vivid reality. Apart from the fact that she, and the other respondents in the same situation, could not be considered illegal immigrants, the real question is whether they could also be included in the

undocumented category, especially in a country that offers the option of making their status official through documenting tax payments.

5.3. "Yugo model"

The following strategy prevails in Germany, although it is far from being absent in France as well. It is not limited to a single category of respondents, but is widely distributed among all educational levels. Since it is so widespread in Germany among women from the Balkans, it has also received an informal name among the social workers there – the "Yugo model". This strategy occurs in two forms. The first one involves finding a citizen for marriage and is described in an excerpt from an interview I conducted with Ivona, a respondent in her early forties, who lives in Germany:

> I told my husband, it can't go on like this anymore, I'll try to do something my-self. I have a colleague who was a teacher here in the 70s, a very smart and capable woman. She said, come to [a city in Germany], I have a flat. I asked, how am I supposed to come with a small child? She said there was only one way – to get married there.

As a rule, respondents received information about the possibilities of using marriage as a channel for obtaining an immigrant visa through acquaintances who had already lived in the desired destination country.

> I said that to my husband, and already at that time we lived together, but we hardly spoke to each other anymore... it was a disaster as far as the parents were concerned... I said, we have the option to divorce amicably and for me to leave. Come with me if you want to, if you don't want to stay with your mom. But I'm leaving because I cannot stay here. My mother-in-law was really a motive for me to leave. So I said to my colleague that I would come.

Up to that point in the interview, Ivona had already stated that the main motive for her desire to leave the country was living in a vertically extended household, which led to constant conflicts between her and her husband. Family organisation is rarely a presumed motive for emigration in quantitative studies.

> But he was asking for money, 10,000 [translator's note: German] marks. We divorced amicably, I had the document translated, because I had to send all the documents to that man so that he could schedule the wedding. He could have been my father, of course. I told my husband, the door is open to you, you are the father of this child and you are welcome at any time.

Payment for marriage is practically a rule in these situations.

So I came here, there was some trouble. That colleague of mine did it because that man owed her money. I borrowed the money, even my husband's father gave me a sum, he told me to leave, just to stay away from my mother-in-law. We got married four days after I came here. (Ivona, early forties, Germany)

Ivona's case is not the only one in which members of migrant networks, who offered help with migration, actually did so for personal gain, leaving the respondents stranded as soon as they took advantage of them. The above excerpt clearly indicates that the coincidence between the motives for departure and the channels of entry and survival in the country should not be assumed in the context of migration studies.

The second form of the Yugo model involves finding a citizen who will acknowledge the paternity of an immigrant woman's child or children and is present only in Germany. This country applies *jus sanguinis*, or the law of descent, according to which a child whose mother or father is a German citizen automatically becomes a German by birth:

This has already become so established here in the services, that when you apply for a child allowance or a visa, the workers roll their eyes... like, it's the Yugo model... and that means that you suddenly register a third or fourth child who has a German passport, or citizenship, and a German father. Or you marry someone. Mostly Bosnians, people from Kosovo, Macedonia and Serbia come here and then register the youngest child with a German. They pay for it to the German citizen who recognises the child and then the mother automatically receives the papers... At the time of pregnancy, it is important to find a German who is ready to recognise and register the child and then the mother has the right to stay until the child turns eighteen, and therefore her other children too. And then the real father of the child stays there as a relative, or illegally, he comes and goes, or the mother suddenly remarries. (Ana, early thirties, Germany)

The described migrant strategy requires strategic planning that involves the entire household, because it implies not only securing substantial financial resources, but also changes in existing family structures and relationships – divorce, remarriage, registering only one child (if financial resources do not allow for more) and therefore and unequal formal treatment of children from the same family. An unintended consequence of this restructuring is the redefinition of gender relations in a micro-environment.

5.4. Prolonged education

The next strategy is one of "lifelong education", mostly observed among younger respondents, but not necessarily only highly educated ones. This strategy implies the instrumentalisation of education to obtain a visa. Highly educated participants testified about how they purposefully enrolled in another master's study or switched to doctoral studies, just so they could extend their student visas. While it is relatively easy to enter both countries based on student documents, transitioning from student visas to those that allow full-time work is not easy. All respondents worked, even more hours than the allowed student maximum, but mostly at jobs reserved for students, such as working at the hotel reception, in agencies assisting immigrants, or as attendants at museums and cultural institutions. Some of the study participants were young women who completed secondary school and had no intention of enrolling in higher levels of formal education, but used the options allowed in France – they received student papers based on attending French language courses. Those emigrant women also participated in the labour market, but in informal jobs, in the sector of cleaning and other care services. Both groups of respondents were actively seeking ways to abandon the position of semi-legality.

Empirical research within migration studies often focuses on a single, narrowly defined group. Although it is indisputable that the differences between those occupying jobs in the primary and secondary labour market are not minor, focusing on a single level of education and/or working position is sometimes counter-productive. Without including respondents of different socio-demographic characteristics and without a qualitative approach, the fact that "different categories" of migrant women apply very similar migration strategies would remain obscured.

5.5. "EU-naturalisation"

A strategy that is unique to the European Union, as a political formation, and Serbia, as a country bordering its member states, is the "EU-naturalisation" strategy. This means using the possibility for Serbian citizens to take the citizenship of a third member state and to enjoy privileges as EU citizens while living in France or Germany. Within the EU as a supranational creation, citizens of member states can move freely and exercise their labour rights in any other member state.

Some respondents exercised their right to obtain dual citizenship (for example, Croatian or Hungarian) even before they decided to migrate. However, Eva, a respondent in her early thirties, resorted to the strategy of obtaining Hungarian citizenship because after completing two master's studies, she was unable to reg-

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ularise her employment status in France[4]. She managed to obtain the required proof of family origin and actively devoted herself to learning Hungarian. Given that she actually had no ethnic ties to Hungary, learning the language was extremely difficult, but she persevered, according to her own words, motivated by the idea that she would finally be able to start "working normally". Eva's student jobs could not ensure a normal existence, so she worked in highly qualified jobs for which she was trained without the necessary work permit. The strong need to abandon semi-legality is also confirmed by the fact that she was rejected for citizenship at the first attempt due to her poor knowledge of the language, after which she continued to learn it and applied again. The second time her application was accepted, so the naturalisation was successfully completed a few days before the interview.

Eva's case not only clearly demonstrates the agency of migrant women, but also highlights another advantage of qualitative approaches. The EU naturalisation is a context-dependent strategy, in that it is only available to citizens who can benefit from bilateral, inter-state agreements on the allocation of citizenship. Classifying migrants into simplified categories, without considering the relationship between the origin and destination countries, without taking into account the context, will not yield heuristically fruitful results.

5.6. Fighting the system

One of the most proactive strategies is "fighting the system". It implies the engagement of all available resources, primarily human capital, in order to fight for one's rights in the prefectures. While it is the state that adopts the legislative framework and forms various migration regimes, researchers have shown that the implementation of these regulations depends on the personal interpretations and preferences of officials – street-level bureaucrats – who are in charge of someone's case (Schweitzer, 2022). This concept was introduced to explain the discrepancy between officially declared government aims and actual policy outcomes. Street-level bureaucrats not only implement laws, but they themselves become policy makers. Owing to their specific position in certain organisations, marked by a high degree of discretion and relative autonomy from an organisational authority, they may create policies while interacting with citizens. Decisions of these officials can have a significant micro-level impact on individual lives and futures, and at the same time they are difficult to control by the state or other authorities (Schweitzer, 2022: 31).

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[4]   According to the law of the Republic of Hungary, which entered into force on 1 January 2011, all interested persons who can prove Hungarian origin can apply for citizenship. In addition, basic knowledge of the language is required (http://drzavljanstvo-usluge-prevodi.weebly.com/).

The fighting strategies were established in both countries. In France, undocumented migrants repeated like a mantra that "the possible is impossible and the impossible is possible" in the prefectures. This narrative prompted emigrants to try to apply for regularisation of residence, even though they did not have all the papers, because the outcome is never known.

On the other hand, the best description of her struggle in Germany was provided by Una, a woman in her early thirties, who struggled to find a suitable job in Germany after completing her master's degree:

> *Then I brought that contract to the Foreigners' Office and said: "There, here you go, I have found a job." And that was the first time they gave me trouble because they said exactly this: "You are overqualified, this is a secretary position, the salary is too low, and you have a master's degree. You should be earning five times more than what they are offering you here."*

Una's position on the labour market, as well as the positions of many other highly educated respondents, was affected by deprofessionalisation, i.e. obtaining a workplace below one's qualifications.

> *Well, then I handled my situation diplomatically. I practically had a nervous breakdown at the Foreigners' Office. (Laughter) But I said: "Ma'am, do you realise that your rules are not in sync with the reality of the labour market? That my German colleagues, when they graduate, have great difficulty finding their first job that pays well? Some have registered as unemployed."*

In her self-citation, Una emphasised the inadequacy and incompatibility of migration regulations with the reality of the labour market. Her struggle continues, therefore, by pointing to the absurdity of the system itself.

> *I am not entitled to social assistance here because I am not an EU citizen. I wasn't unemployed for a single day in Germany. I haven't exploited the system in any way in this country, I am well integrated, I speak the language perfectly, I have a German diploma, I had a German state scholarship and I worked at [state institution]. You want to tell me that after all this, the alternative is for me to return to Serbia at the age of 30 and live with my mom and dad, where my salary would be 400 Euro in the best-case scenario, with my master's qualification from Germany?! My speech left the woman speechless, but literally. "Well yes, but the idea behind these rules is to prevent you from being mistreated here." "No. The idea behind that rule is to protect your citizens, which I understand. But it's not all about money. With this salary, I can pay for an apartment*

and survive. I love this city, I love your language, I love this country and I have friends here, I have built a life of my own and I want to live here."

This part especially highlights the intertwining and complexity of motives for survival in the destination country, which can rarely be reduced to a single level. Una's case is not only about poor market and financial conditions that would await her in Serbia, or about a prolonged transition into adulthood, but also about a certain sense of belonging and emotional attachment to the country where she currently lives. Although the situation there did not fully meet her expectations, her knowledge is underestimated, and she is fully aware of her underprivileged position, Germany still offers a comparative advantage for her, which gives her the strength to confront the official and stand up for herself. In the following segment, the respondent explains the concept of street-level bureaucracy.

So after my whole speech, she forwarded my application, but I was lucky because going to the Foreigners' Office is literally like a land mine. I'm not joking. They have some very nice workers there. Some of them will stick a visa in your passport, and they won't even look at your documents. And some will pay attention to every little letter and harass you for nonsense. And some will be, like, something in between. It literally depends on which official you bump into that day...

The outcome of Una's application was positive, so she continued to live in Germany; however, the struggle for a better workplace on the market, to overcome deprofessionalisation, is far from over. Thanks to the qualitative approach, migration researchers can gain clearer and deeper insight into the relations of power and symbolic struggle. Without understanding them, we can hardly comprehend the phenomenon of modern migration.

6. CONCLUSION

The previous pages describe a part of a larger study on working emigrant women from Serbia who live in France and Germany. I conceived the study as biographical, and through problem-centred interviews, together with my respondents I tried to unravel their migration trajectories. An indisputable contribution of qualitative methodology to migration studies is that it makes it possible to explore migration in its processuality, to highlight the agency of actors and actresses in all migration stages, and to better understand the struggle between structure and actors.

Several described migration strategies prove precisely that the analytical categories (according to the way of arrival, education, legality, position in the labour market) in which we are accustomed to placing migrants, and through which we are used to observing them, are not (always) heuristically fruitful. For example, categorising migrants according to the "motives" of departure, which is actually reduced to the types of visas for which potential migrants apply, is a reflection of the administrative management of international movements, and not the reality for people moving across international borders. Accepting the categories as they are not only fails to reflect their everyday life, it fails to acknowledge the fluidity of the status and the possibility of active engagement on the part of the migrants themselves in order to fight for some other desired positions. Thus, for example, emigrant women who came to France or Germany for the sake of education reported a very stressful struggle for survival in their destination countries after completing their education levels. Many of them were forced to enrol in additional master studies, trying to extend their stay abroad using a prolonged education strategy. They transitioned from the legal, partly privileged, student category into the legal, working category through the instrumental use of education and semi-legal work arrangements. The transition was difficult, but not infeasible.

On the other hand, the equating of analytical with administrative categories often affects researchers who apply qualitative approaches in their studies. The research decision to thoroughly examine processes in a single, narrowly defined group of emigrants actually makes it impossible to highlight similarities and differences in the dynamics of migration status changes between various groups. The strategies described clearly show that the ways in which emigrant women struggle to remain and survive in the destination country are not limited to a single group, but can be trans-group or dependent on context (structure). Young emigrant women with secondary education made choices similar to the mentioned prolonged education strategy – they extended their stays by enrolling in language learning courses. An example of a strategy that transcends the boundaries of administrative groups is the Yugo model, which prevails in Germany due to a specific migration regime. Regardless of their categories, respondents from the entire sample were very active in the labour market and determined to stay where they were. Or at least resolved not to return without a fight.

Finally, the qualitative method also allows us to capture multifaceted relationships between the migration, gender and family spheres, which are often much more complex than what we can perceive when observing them through positivist approaches. The mentioned interdependence leads to the conclusion that the outcomes of migration processes are relational rather than categorical, and that they cannot be observed without underlining power relations. Unfortunately, if we

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are close to accepting these conclusions as scholars, it seems that we are still not ready to apply them as a society.

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The author declares no conflict of interest.

ETHICAL APPROVAL

The author declares that at the time of conducting the study there was no obligation to seek ethical approval from the University of Belgrade Faculty of Philosophy, but confirms that the data collection process complied with good research ethics practices.

DATA ACCESS AND TRANSPARENCY

Analytical procedures are available upon request to the author.

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Istraživanje migracija iz kvalitativne perspektive: od kategorija do procesualnosti

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SAŽETAK

Cilj ovog rada jeste da čitaocu predstavi prednosti izučavanja migracija iz kvalitativne perspektive, koja je i pored svoje dokazane valjanosti i dalje podzastupljena i u senci istraživanja inspirisanih (neo)pozitivističkim, kvantitativnim i statističkim metodama u migracionim studijama. U radu se tvrdi da kvalitativna, a naročito biografska istraživanja, omogućavaju da se migracije istraže u svojoj procesualnosti, da se ispita odnos međusobne povezanosti strukture i agensnosti u svim migracionim fazama i da se prepoznaju odnosi moći koji utiču na nejednake ishode ovih kretanja. Važnost i dometi kvalitativnih pristupa prikazani su kroz analizu konkretnih metodoloških rešenja i nalaze dobijene u okviru istraživanja koje se bavi fenomenom savremenih međunarodnih migracija žena iz Srbije u evropskom kontekstu. U prvom delu rada dat je pregledni prikaz primene teorijskih i metodoloških pristupa u studijama o migracijama, da bi zatim detaljno bili opisani konkretni metodološki postupci i relevantni nalazi iz spomenutog istraživanja. Glavni doprinos ovog rada jeste da pokaže na koji način se pomoću kvalitativnih istraživanja preispituju i dekonstruišu kategorije u okviru kojih smo navikli da posmatramo migrante, a koje zapravo predstavljaju odraz administrativnog upravljanja međunarodnih kretanja.

Ključne reči: žene u emigraciji, agensnost, biografski metod, migrantske strategije, Srbija