

“Death and migration: perspectives from the post-Soviet space”

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This issue proposes to take up a research theme that has undergone a strong renewal of interest in recent years, that of "death and migration." This issue aims to shed light on an area which has been little studied from this angle (the post-Soviet space) and to develop an approach which focuses on the management of bodies 'dead in the distance' (deaths *in* migration, deaths *due* to migration) This issue also focuses on the effects of a certain proximity to death on the practices of foresight and mutual aid (when they exist) in the migratory context, as well as their impacts on migration as a whole. In view of the current proliferation of research on these themes, and despite Verdery's pioneering work on the political stakes of the circulation of the dead in the post-socialist space (Verdery 1999), it is remarkable that one of the most important migratory spaces on a global scale is so poorly represented—this proposal aims to compensate somewhat for this lack.

Migration within the post-Soviet space

Since 1991, the Russian Federation has seen the highest inflow of migrants of any post-Soviet States – and one of the highest in the world. The overwhelming majority of migrants are coming from post-Soviet republics. A variety of migration phenomenon from this region, from the “first” internal economic migrations within the USSR to the current circulations, have been relatively well studied (Thorez 2007; Laruelle 2010; Abashin 2014; Reeves 2017; Hohmann and Kurbonova 2018; Abashin 2019; Demintseva 2020). However, the experiences of the deaths of relatives, colleagues, neighbours, compatriots and acquaintances among these immigrant populations has been little explored.

There is no territorial, demographic, economic, religious or political homogeneity in the post-Soviet space. However, it can be thought of on the basis of a common historical experience, that of the Soviet Union (Hann et al. 2003) and its particularly notable effects on contemporary experiences of migratory movements (whether it be political engineering in terms of migration, a certain relationship with foreign countries, the ability to circulate, or plurilingualism and familiarity with the Russian language, etc.). In fact, since the collapse of the USSR in 1991, migration dynamics in the region have largely contributed to the maintenance of Russia's centrality as a provider of resources to “brother” countries. Russia has rapidly become one of the world's leading countries in the number of migrant arrivals—initially Russian-speaking ‘compatriots’ who settle or resettle in Russia. These flows have then become composed mainly of citizens of former Soviet republics (Ukraine, Belarus, the Caucasus and Central Asia), territories often referred to in Russian as “near abroad” (*blizhe zarubjezhe*) (Laruelle 2010). Thus, among the more than 12 million entries onto Russian soil declared to be for professional reasons in

2014, more than 77% come from former Soviet republics (Hohmann 2019). And although more migration destinations have recently diversified (to Turkey, South Korea, Gulf countries, the United States or Western Europe), Russia remains a central figure, not only in the geopolitics of migratory flows but also in the experiences of individuals and transnational know-how.

The purpose of this issue is to shed light on the current state of these movements and experiences from a specific approach: that of the movement of people who died far from home, within this space, as well as the conditions under which their circulation is made possible after death. Analysis of the reciprocal and mutual effects of death and migration (what one does to the other and vice versa) has particularly progressed over the past decade, as evidenced by the comprehensive literature review recently carried out by Françoise Lestage (2019). Work of the previous decade emphasised the forms of organisation of migrant groups or “communities”, around the repatriation or burial of the dead (among others, Chaïb 2000; Gardner and Grillo 2002; Gardner 2002; Petit 2005; Berthod 2006; Aggoun 2006) The most recent decade, however, has shown a diversification of approaches. Among them, we can cite impact of border violence and the effects of securing borders on the risk of death in migration, the ethical and political issues linked to the identification and territorialisation of sometimes (often) unclaimed foreign bodies, and the forms of political contestation linked to care and dignity of the dead – one’s own or those of others (Heller and Pezzani 2014; Steputtat 2014; Kobelinsky 2017; Kobelinsky and Le Courant 2017; Ural 2016; Stierl 2016; Anteby-Yemini 2018; Berthod 2018, Cuttita and Last 2020). The issue of the REMI coordinated by F. Lestage on death in migration in 2012 already heralded this diversity (Alaoui 2012; Moreras and Tarrés 2012; Saraiva and Mapril 2012; Lestage 2012), which has only become even more pronounced since then.

This issue thus proposes to capture a particular moment – that of death happening abroad – within a particular space – the post-Soviet space – in order to understand not only how migratory flows are perpetuated and anchored in the territories of arrival, but also how the management of the deceased can contribute to perpetuating and shaping transnational groups over time, on both sides of the borders they cross.

A twofold approach is at the heart of this publication project: on the one hand, a questioning of the financial, logistical and ethical logic – still poorly known within this very large space – which governs the collective management of the dead and their burial on the spot or repatriation. On the other hand, a questioning of the effects of death (its daily proximity, its representations, its effects on the feeling of danger, on migratory projects etc.) on practices of preventive practices and adaptation to risk, both in relation to the administrative and financial situations of immigrants and the socio-political and media contexts surrounding migration. In particular, we propose to explore the practices of creating communal resources as linked to the will to care for the dead, whether it be through associative or mutual organisations, political mobilisation, or via networks linked to the workplace.

To develop these two points, we propose two thematic axes:

- (1) Caring for the dead in migration: identification, circulation, return of bodies
- (2) Perception of the risk of death in migration: strategy, preventive practices, political activism

Axis 1 – Caring for the dead in migration: identification, circulation, return of bodies

Despite its recurrence in the media, “early” or violent deaths of migrants and the level of care given to deceased migrants have been relatively unexplored in the post-Soviet area. The focus here will be on individual, family and collective practices of managing death far from home or in transit, and the processes of identification and transfer of the deceased’s body. Exploration of the ‘chains of intervention’ and the participation of different actors in these networks – family, village, religious, associative, as well as undertakers or funeral transport companies – will make it possible to involve different scales of constraints and actions in the analysis (border policy, administration of death, welfare system, families’ economic resources, etc.). Starting from networks of relationships woven by death, the practical adaptations of death ritual to the context of life in transit (or in forced immobility, such as during the closure of borders linked to the COVID-19 epidemic), the possible multiplicity of networks (ethnic, religious, territorial) and the constitution of new spaces of mourning and places of memory (Ansari 2007; Rachédi, Montgomery and Halsouet 2016) are also explored.

Paradoxically, the migratory context can lead to caring for the dead of others: the state, by distinguishing ‘its’ dead from the dead of foreigners (Lestage 2019), sometimes encourages the organisation of self-help groups that go beyond these citizen/foreigner categories, with the aim of responding to a certain ‘ethic’ of mourning and death. Thus, it happens that people no longer only bury “their” dead, but also those of others. However, this requires an investment in time, energy and funding that is not insignificant: these practices of caring for the dead in the context of mobility raise questions about the collective way of doing things (Stierl 2016) and encourage us to question the meaning of “community” (Leservoisier 2019) – and in particular the link of identification with the dead. In this context, how are ethnic, religious and civic affiliations negotiated? The post-Soviet space appears all the more relevant for shedding light on these questions as the conception of nationality inherited from the Soviet Union and current nationalist tensions fuel the stage for ethnonymic groups – the ‘Azeris’, the ‘Tajiks’, the ‘Uzbeks’, etc. – to primarily identify along these lines with the purported cultural and religious characteristics. The diversity of practices surrounding the management of dead abroad lend themselves to formation of nuanced and complicated affiliations and networks in the context of death in migration.

Axis 2 – Perception of the risk of death: strategies, foresight, political activism

This second axis is undoubtedly the least explored so far. In Russia, racism (Zakharov 2015; Agadjanian, Menjívar and Zotova 2017; Abashin 2020) and “migrantophobia” (Hohmann 2019) is fuelled daily by a press and geopolitics that are globally hostile to migrants. The significant role of social networks in the circulation of “shock” information (whether perceived as “pro” or “anti” migrants) and rumours contribute to a strong public perception connecting migrants and death. The question here is how representations of death associated with migrants or the migratory project can influence representations of risk and social practices in relation to migration.

While a certain amount of research in other regions has brought the existence of solidarity “funds” to light (Petit 2005), few studies have been carried out to grasp the terms and conditions of participation in self-help networks – or the reasons for not taking part in them. Because, for reasons that can be diverse and that should be explored—instability of the migratory stay, lack of financial means, isolation, fear of the visibility that this may entail, refusal to submit to community control or integration

into the society of arrival that does not require recourse to it, among others—not all immigrant persons wish or have the means to participate in collective strategies for dealing with the deceased in a community capacity. This second axis proposes to explore individual and collective perceptions related to death, in the context of specific administrative and professional situations, family imperatives, health situations or projections into the future, etc. Proximity to (the risk of) death during migration have contributed to the development of preventive strategies of varying degrees of informality, which will be analysed.

The effects of the proximity of death on mitigation strategies can also be approached from the point of view of families remaining in the country of origin. For a long time now, a number of studies on migration have looked at migration from the point of view of those who remain (the “left behind”). Many have highlighted the discrepancies between the expectations and life goals of migrants on one hand, and their families on the other. These studies explore the interdependent, and possibly burdensome expectations of income that can arise, the role of ICTs in the constitution of transnational families, etc. (Archambault 2010; Laruelle 2010; Hoang and Yeoh 2011; Reeves 2011; Ikuomola 2015; Hannaford 2017; Urinboyev 2017).

However, here again, few have studied the effects of death on families and on the societies of departure. Yet the arrival of coffins at airports, railway or bus stations can raise a wide array of questions among witnesses, ranging from the circumstances of death (did he/she die with dignity?), to the value of a life lost early and abroad (Butler 2009; Fassin 2018), to the possibility of continuing the migratory engagement through another family member, where possible. In Central Asia and the Caucasus, migration income is a major part of household resources. How do families cope with the tragic event of the early death of a family member, which at the same time results in a potentially significant loss of income? What can be said or done when, on the contrary, death brings back to the family a “disappeared” relative, one of these people having chosen to break the family bond and its consequences? What ethical or even political considerations can these experiences lead to? These are all questions that seek to shed light on the links between experiences of death, reflexivity and adaptation strategies in migration.

Proposals for articles should be written in French, English or Russian, and should include the author’s affiliation, a title and a 300-word abstract.

They can come from different disciplines of the social sciences, and should be sent to juliette.cleuziou@univ-lyon2.fr before **March 1st, 2021**

General timeline:

March 1st, 2020 – reception of abstracts (reply within the following weeks, *but the notification of acceptance does not necessarily imply acceptance of the article*).

December 1st 2021 – reception of articles for peer-review

April 1st 2022 – deadline to send articles in their final version

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