Russian Migrant Journalists in Ukraine After the EuroMaidan: From 'Middling Transnationals' to 'Voluntary Exiles'?

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Numerous Russian media professionals have moved to Ukraine in the last decade. These migrants can be seen as contemporary mobile, highly skilled, transnationally connected professionals who made a lifestyle choice by relocating to Ukraine. However, after the EuroMaidan, their move has also become increasingly political. Drawing upon a series of interviews with Russian media professionals living and working in Ukraine – and addressing their social relationships, professional practices and thoughts on return migration – I analyse the ways in which the lifestyles of these 'middling transnationals' can be affected by the political tensions between host and home countries. This paper draws upon the idea of transnational ties being not necessarily durable and supportive but, rather, flexible and multi-directional. I argue that the annexation of Crimea and the armed conflict in Donbas have altered migrants' cross-border connections with Russia; however, instead of tying them to a place and excluding them from global networks, it might also push them towards inhabiting multiple transnational spaces. These observations highlight the political dimension of 'middling transnationalism' which is usually not considered in migration scholarship.

Keywords: middling transnationals; armed conflict; Ukraine; Russia; EuroMaidan

Introduction

Numerous Russian media professionals have moved to Ukraine in the last decade to continue their career, motivated by a comparatively free and pluralistic media space, new jobs, safety, personal relationships and/or a more preferable political environment.[1] The EuroMaidan, the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and Russia's military intervention in Donbas have all contributed to their numerous decisions to move to Ukraine or extend their stay there (but also to move away, for some, which is beyond the scope of this study), thus making this migration increasingly and overtly politicised.

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This population of migrant media professionals is quite unique. They could be seen as contemporary mobile, highly skilled, transnationally connected professionals who have made a lifestyle choice by relocating to Ukraine. At the same time, they have travelled from a country that has violated the territorial integrity and sovereignty of their host country, to the country under attack, so their move has inevitably been connected with a political choice. The war has also altered their opportunities to maintain intense cross-border connectivity.

Focusing on a set of interviews with Russian media professionals living and working in Ukraine, and drawing upon migrants' accounts of their social relationships, professional practices and thoughts on return migration, this study analyses how the lifestyles of these 'middling transnationals' can be affected by the conflict. This paper discusses not only the practical difficulties of staying embedded in transnational fields but also the journalists' own implications of changing or limiting their transnational engagements. I demonstrate the increasing complexity of contemporary migration as reflected through the contingent and uneven character of transnational engagement in politically tense circumstances. Theoretically, I also argue here that 'middling transnationals' as a migration category is not necessarily politically unproblematic and that its political dimension should not be underestimated by scholarship.

Why look at these subjects from a migration research perspective? It is worth stressing that, clearly, not all Russian journalists who have at some point worked and lived in Ukraine should be seen as weapons of an information war who are supposed to produce manipulative narratives, undermine the idea of Ukraine's sovereignty and/or European development, mentor Ukrainians and engage in all sorts of subversive activities. However, neither should they be approached as victims of Putin's regime, enlightened revolutionaries or brave Russian opposition members. This population has been quite diverse and, for theoretical purposes, this paper concentrated on those members of it who were, broadly speaking, inspired by the Maidan and motivated by it in their migration decisions, critical of the Russian regime and supportive of the idea of the democratic development of Ukraine. This case of pro-Ukrainian Russian migrant journalists in Ukraine demonstrates an interesting development in mobile individuals' life trajectories.

At the same time, it also does not seem to be an easy topic to discuss in the current circumstances, neither among experts and public intellectuals nor, particularly, among those who are heavily politically engaged in Ukrainian affairs. The academic relevance of the topic may virtually go unnoticed, while the ideas of the ongoing armed conflict and widespread information manipulation, Russian-ness and past belonging to the Russian media sphere of such research subjects often bring to the fore politicised and emotionally charged reactions. The major risk here is that the multifaceted experiences of migrants – contemporary Russian migrants specifically and Russian migrant journalists in particular – are ignored or approached in a simplistic manner. This is why I suggest that it is important to see these subjects as migrants in the first place. It is true that they are also an interesting case for a study in the fields of political science, media studies or Russian studies. However, I hope to demonstrate with this paper that Russian journalists in Ukraine are a valuable case from a migration research perspective which might help us to understand and problematise how the protests and armed conflict there affect different populations and their migration characteristics – including the figure of the flexible mobile professional that is so widespread in the contemporary academic migration literature.

Studying Russian journalists in Ukraine as migrants

This paper is based on 10 semi-structured face-to-face interviews conducted in Kyiv in late 2015 with media professionals who had moved from Russia to Ukraine before, during and after the EuroMaidan, and on 60 media articles in the English, Russian and Ukrainian language. By 'Russian journalists', I mean those who had lived and worked in Russia and in the Russian media prior to moving to Ukraine and who could self-identify

as part of the Russian media world at some point in their biographies. I selected respondents who were them-selves the subjects of post-Maidan media stories focusing on Russian migrants in Ukraine. This study is, thus, an exploration of the particular qualitative characteristics of Russian journalists' lives in Ukraine two years after the start of the EuroMaidan, focusing on relatively prominent personalities who were supportive of it. These generally pro-Ukrainian subjects have been selected to achieve homogeneity of the sample.[2] The re-spondents' names have been anonymised, except for the two journalists who died in 2016: Pavel Sheremet and Alexander Shchetinin.

I spoke with seven men and three women, including three editors, four journalists and three people who, at the time of the interview, did not consider media work to be their main or only occupation. My respondents worked in online media, magazines, radio and online TV, often freelancing for a number of outlets. Among my informants, three moved to Ukraine after the Maidan, one just prior to it and six before 2013. Six of them were either working for local Kyiv-based outlets established by Russian teams, or making occasional appear-ances in such media (see Malyutina 2017 for more detail on related methodological concerns).

As migrants, the respondents arrived from the country which had been, effectively, waging war against Ukraine since 2014 (Czuperski, Herbst, Higgins, Polyakova and Wilson 2015; Miller, Vaux, Fitzpatrick and Weiss 2015; Rácz 2015). Moreover, since the Russian state media have been heavily engaged in manipulative, information-distorting practices in the context of the armed conflict (Lucas and Pomerantsev 2016; Rácz 2015), the journalists' (past) belonging to the Russian media space may be viewed by their Ukrainian audiences as incriminating and suspicious.[3] It is worth noting that Russian and Ukrainian media spaces could be described as having been entangled and overlapping before the Maidan and, to some extent, even after the start of the conflict – although in a much more complicated way, which I discuss in the following sections.

Russian media professionals are quite diverse in terms of background, career trajectories, political views, migration circumstances and involvement in social networks. At the same time, they are usually highly skilled migrants who have gained media experience back in Russia and/or other countries. Working in Ukraine did not mean marginalisation and precarious working conditions for my informants; they spoke about this as an exciting job-related and personal experience, an escape from an oppressive environment or a career step. They also recognised, however, the local risks and challenges they could face: from potential physical risks to a decrease in income and from the prejudiced attitude of audiences (such as stigmatising their Russian-ness and previous work in the Russian media) to self-imposed limitations on writing about sensitive issues (such as not commenting publicly on Ukrainian political matters) (Malyutina 2017).

While there are connections among the members of this population, they do not form a tightly knit and bounded ethnic, national or linguistic community. Nor does their work fit into the framework of 'migrant media': it is not the migrant audiences that they or the media organisations they are working in are targeting specifically. In other words, even though, at the time of the interviews, some worked in media outlets that were created by (predominantly) Russian teams, neither their jobs nor their personal relationships and political views confine them to some ethnic bubble in their migrant lives in Ukraine. Being Russian-speakers or not speaking Ukrainian did not seem to pose any significant problems according to the respondents (and was certainly part of Ukraine's attractiveness as a host country); at the same time, many of them were learning Ukrainian and admitted that proficiency in this language was helpful in terms of gaining the trust of local audiences and establishing some connections.
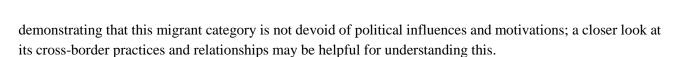
These migrants were affected by a combination of reasons when making their mobility decisions. These were usually related to work, family and personal relationships and, increasingly in the last few years, politics and safety concerns. Although many have come to work on particular media projects, this is not simply eco-nomic migration: the move does not necessarily signify an increase in income or job stability. Some had

Ukrainian spouses, although this was never mentioned as the only motivation for moving. While other motivations may include the desire of these middle-class individuals to live and work in an environment where freedom of expression and media pluralism are seen as being more prevalent than in Russia and which may be interpreted as more attractive, less oppressive and/or less depressing,[4] this is not exactly lifestyle migration[5] because it largely happens against the background of an armed conflict between the home and host countries. For a significant number of those currently living and working in Ukraine, the EuroMaidan, the annexation of Crimea and the conflict in the East, combined with the unprecedented pressure on independent media and freedom of speech, and the increase in militant state-sponsored propaganda in Russia, have played a special role in the decisions to move to Ukraine (or to stay there, if they had moved before 2013).[6] However, neither can their experiences be squarely compared with those of refugees fleeing war (although there are a few refugee journalists from Russia) for the same reason: their host country is under hybrid attack by their home country, in terms of both military and information warfare. Finally, with regard particularly to those who moved before the Maidan and decided to stay throughout the dramatic events that followed, their perceptions of migration may shift dynamically from a personal choice to a more political decision.[7]

How can we, then, approach this peculiar group of migrants who, apparently, cannot be easily pigeonholed into a category? The trend in migration research has been to increasingly avoid unequivocal categorisations, seeing them as not sophisticated enough to account for often multifaceted and dynamic migratory situations. For instance, Van Hear (2003: 13) challenges the categorisations of forced migrants as 'in some ways illusory', stressing that different kinds of movement may be experienced over time. Kubal (2012: 7–8) questions the concept of 'illegality' and its derivatives as being 'applied far too easily while in fact they denote many different legal statuses', invoking 'semi-legality' instead, and claiming that 'one should look at the variety of semi-legal statuses placed on a continuum between two poles "legal–illegal"'. This corresponds to an interest in 'going beyond polarity' in examining migratory experiences (Ryan, Klekowski von Koppenfels and Mulholland 2015: 199). In her research on post-EU accession Polish and Lithuanian migrants in the UK, Parutis (2014) argues against a rigid distinction between low-skilled and highly skilled migrants or simply classifying her respondents as economic migrants, since their work experiences are dynamic and multilayered and, in addition to economic gains, they are seeking personal and professional development.

Like Parutis, in order to approach these migrants, who do not quite fit into particular pre-existing categories, I suggest using the term 'middling transnationals' – introduced by Conradson and Latham (2005a) as a response to transnational scholarship's then predominant focus on mobile elites and migrants from developing countries. 'Middling transnationals' are usually educated, mobile individuals who occupy more or less middle-class or status positions both in their countries of origin and in those to which they are moving, and who are drawn to new places not only or not necessarily by the attractions of the labour market but also by 'an appreciation of their wider social and cultural affordances' (Conradson and Latham 2005b: 290). For such migrants, mobility is 'intimately bound up with practices of self-realisation and self-fashioning' (Conradson and Latham 2005b: 300). The term 'middling transnationals' is also not unproblematic, though – as stressed by Ryan *et al.* (2015: 199), who point out the risk of the use of 'middling' as a vague grouping. However, while this term in a broad sense could arguably be employed to describe the experiences of many Russian journalists in Ukraine *before* the Maidan, things have become more complicated after the revolution, the annexation of Crimea and the start of the armed conflict in Donbas.

The existing literature on 'middling' migrants explores lifestyles, relationships and mobilities that are taking place against peaceful backgrounds; the political dimensions of such migration are usually relatively unproblematic. However, what happens to 'middling transnationals' when politics and war start playing a significant role in their migration experiences? In the rest of this paper, I try to answer this question by

demonstrating that this migrant category is not devoid of political influences and motivations; a closer look at its cross-border practices and relationships may be helpful for understanding this.

Transnational lifestyles

Transnational connectivity implies border-spanning links and interactions between people and institutions due to the growth in communication and transportation technologies, which may range from sustaining ties with local communities and families 'back home' and the exchange of material resources, travel and communication, to overlapping political memberships and involvement in home-country politics (Levitt 2001; Portes, Guarnizo and Landolt 1999; Vertovec 1999).

However, as suggested by Guarnizo, Sanchez and Roach (1999: 367), transnational relations and activities 'do not follow a linear path and are not necessarily and inevitably a progressive process'. While transnational social spaces and relationships have been described as durable in some literature (Pries 2001), scholarship generally stresses the uneven, differentiated and unstable nature of migrants' transnational engagements (Al-Ali, Black and Koser 2001; Jurgens 2001; Smith 2005).

This study follows the argument that transnational ties are not necessarily a universal or a permanent characteristic of contemporary migrant lifestyles, stressing that they can be connected with tension, mistrust and the dissolution of personal and professional networks. Relationships are affected by cross-border mobility and, in this process, new mobile subjectivities may emerge 'to manage difference and re-find points of comfort defined by shared meanings' (Butcher 2009: 1353) that are also connected with changes in emotional and affective states accompanying mobility (Conradson and McKay 2007).

Migration scholarship addresses the implications of migrants' border-spanning social ties that exhibit 'considerable fragmentation and tension in both instrumental and affective terms, even in a favourable social and political climate for sustaining them' (Moroşanu 2013: 353). The reasons why cross-border ties with the home countries of individuals embedded in transnational social fields may decline can vary. Jurgens (2001: 100) suggests that this may happen when the country of origin loses its role as a point of reference or as 'a central pole for the intimate lived experiences of second- and third-generation migrants'. However, even within one generation of recent migrants, transnational links may weaken or disappear with time, either when individuals' lifestyles or involvement in local social networks change (Ryan, Sales, Tilki and Siara 2008: 684–685; see also Kivisto 2001) or due to 'tensions related to values, life-course or career progression, leading to incompatibility in the long run' (Moroşanu 2013: 368). Ryan *et al.* (2015) warn against taking the transnational links for granted – even those of relatively affluent migrants who have access to contemporary communication technologies – and argue that such relationships 'require ongoing effort and mutual commitment to ensure that the connections endured despite physical separation'. In more extreme cases, traumatic or shocking experiences connected with the (former) homeland may decrease the willingness to engage in its affairs (Al-Ali *et al.* 2001). Butcher (2009: 1364) summarises the feeling of dislocation as a result of seeing the home country '"differently" (from a distance)', as well as being driven by 'emotional responses of no longer feeling related to former anchors such as family and friends "back home" because of shifting frames of reference between the expatriate, and family and peers who have remained in [home country]'.

How exactly do these frames of reference shift in a situation that is as politically tense as the Russia–Ukraine conflict and that creates an unfavourable 'social and political climate' for sustaining transnational connections? In the rest of this paper, I explore how transnational and local practices and engagements have been challenged by the current political situation.

Migrant life trajectories

Russian media professionals moving to Ukraine has not been a linear, one-dimensional movement that uproots the individual and ties him or her to a new location. Initially, transnational lifestyles were developed that involved more-or-less-regular travel between Ukraine and Russia – having part of the family across the border, retaining personal and professional connections, keeping their Russian citizenship and not feeling the practical need to obtain a Ukrainian passport. The move from one country to another has been described as a somewhat gradual and smooth process by many journalists. Some already had connections with the Ukrainian media sphere prior to the move which, in such cases, has become a relocation rather than a revolutionary change. One of the respondents, self-describing as a journalist and human rights advocate, spoke about 'not really having left Russia' and regularly visiting his 'parents and a cat' there.

Another interviewee, the former editor-in-chief of an influential Ukrainian publication, recalled the ease of the commute and living in two countries for a while, before the Maidan:

> I first moved, myself [in 2010] – my wife and two daughters stayed in Moscow until the end of the school year. I commuted between Kyiv and Moscow for half a year. (...) It was quite convenient – you fly on Monday morning, and it takes five hours to get from home to work (male, interview on 7 November 2015).

Such lifestyles, involving 'having two homes at once', seemed to be quite common and comfortable for a number of people. However, the conflict has impacted on fast and convenient travel. From suspicion at the border and the long checks of (especially male) Russian citizens, to the 2015 ban on direct flights between Russia and Ukraine, crossing the border has become more difficult. However, post-Maidan developments have made living simultaneously in two countries difficult not only in practical terms but also in terms of changing attitudes to the idea of Russia as a home. Alexander Shchetinin, founder of the Novyi Region press agency and head of its Ukraine-based branch, who committed suicide in his Kyiv flat in August 2016, recalled in his interview:

> [Initially, the move] was not connected with some sort of political choice. I just fell in love with Kyiv and started thinking about the ways of self-realisation here. We opened our editorial office in Crimea in 2004 (...) and another editorial office in Kyiv in 2005. But it was an information business for me; I did not think about changing my country of residence or citizenship, I was absolutely comfortable living in two countries at the same time. Novyi Region had 17 editorial offices then and I was constantly travelling. Then, gradually, I relocated to Kyiv and only went to Russia on business trips. Also, I got married in Kyiv, bought a flat. But still, I used to have two homes, in Moscow and in Kyiv. (...) Everything changed after the annexation of Crimea. I had a very clear position. I declared that I renounced my Russian citizenship. (...) This choice is political, after all (17 November 2015).

In his narrative, the journalist demonstrated the transformation of his migration choice from 'not political', to 'political, after all', which seemed to have cemented his decision to exclude Russia from his transnational social space. A similar kind of shift in perception of an individual's own migrant image has been suggested by veteran journalist Evgenii Kiselev:

> Back in 2008, I came here for work purposes after I received a very interesting job proposition. Then bad things started to happen in Russia. I began to dislike Putin's Russia more and more. Long before the [2015]

assassination of [opposition politician] Boris Nemtsov, I realised that it was no longer safe for me in Russia. So I started out in Ukraine as an economic migrant, and became a voluntary exile (Dickinson 2015).

However, seeing the move to Ukraine as a transition from an 'economic migrant' to a 'voluntary exile' appears to be somewhat too simplistic, representing it as a binary choice while, in reality, the transformation reflects a further complication of migrants' positions. Indeed, the already mentioned Shchetinin stopped travelling to Russia, did not have any information business left there at the time of the interview, and spoke about having sold his flat and garage there; at the same time, this did not prevent him from regularly travelling elsewhere for business purposes and spending winters in Thailand. Moreover, even though he had declaratively renounced his Russian citizenship, he admitted still using his Russian passport as a travel document. In other words, it is hard to say that he had become less mobile, lost his ability to inhabit multiple social spaces and work across borders, or got rid of all connections with the country of origin. Such stories suggest that shifts in migrant lives have been not radical but, perhaps, rather sophisticated and differentiated.

Moving to Ukraine does not mean abandoning social and political activities in Russia, although these opportunities are usually reduced. For most of my respondents, the move also meant limiting their professional relationships with the Russian media, which were reduced to the occasional publication or collaboration and maintaining personal contacts. Some said that the ongoing conflict increased the need for the cross-border interconnectedness of the Ukrainian and Russian (independent) media. Yet, for more people, the actual cooperation has become sporadic; answers to the question of the extent to which the connections have been preserved were commonly along the lines of 'Depends on the media' or 'Connections remain exclusively with particular people I know who sometimes ask me to write something'. The late Pavel Sheremet, journalist of Belarusian origin who worked at *Ukrayinska Pravda* and *Radio Vesti* and was killed by a car-bomb explosion in Kyiv in July 2016, spoke about differences in views on events from different locations:

I write for Ogoniok magazine, but very infrequently, because the view on Ukrainian events from Kyiv is significantly different from the view from Moscow. And we often argue with the editor about it. I don't want to adjust to the Russian audience. (...) Sometimes it's impossible to find common ground. That's why I don't work [with Russian media] very actively (16 November 2015).

Smith (2005: 237–238) stresses the importance of historically contextualised and translocalised research that 'forces us to think about the emplacement of mobile subjects' and 'guards against the macro-analytic view of transnational mobility as occurring in a hyper-mobile "space of flows"'. Transnational relationships and communication are not deterritorialised; spatiality and temporality are significant factors for sustaining them, as well as an 'emotional availability and a commitment to continued investment in the co-construction of shared social fields' (Ryan *et al.* 2015: 205). Being in Ukraine does not mean ceasing to follow developments in Russia; however, the local embeddedness affects the results of media work and increases the role of local affiliations, interests and engagements. In other words, place matters: flexible and mobile transnationals are, nevertheless, located in one place at any given moment and develop attachments, relationships and interests that tie them to this location, even if temporarily. As argued by Kivisto (2001: 571), 'the issues and concerns of that place will tend to take precedence over the more removed issues and concerns of the homeland' if most of the time is spent in the host country. For some of my respondents, being located in Kyiv and keeping busy and engaged in local events, may be contributing to a tipping of the balance. Sheremet observed:

Some people keep having their body in Kyiv but their mind in Moscow. This is a road to nowhere. (...) I stopped thinking about Moscow, I only remember it when I think of my children who are studying at

university there. After my friend [Boris] Nemtsov was killed, something got broken inside of me. I don't take part in any Russian liberatory movement or counter-propaganda initiatives, and I'm not going to. I don't know if I'll be back. (...) It is so interesting in Ukraine right now, life is so full of events, that I feel I have enough emotions here in Ukraine.

As I mentioned earlier, maintaining intense cross-border connectivity may become difficult not just for practical reasons; a particular moral stance can be involved here. Another journalist who, at the time of the interview, worked at an online TV station, reflected on these challenges:

I find it hard coming to Russia every time. (...) Sometimes it draws me and sometimes it doesn't – there is a certain degree of nostalgia, the feeling that I haven't been home for a long time, I mean my historical motherland. On the other hand, as soon as I start thinking about what's going on there, the levels of idiocy and stupidity, and of depression (...) I don't really feel like going there. Anyway, there are not many friends left there, many have quarrelled [because of opposing views on the Ukrainian situation] (female, 13 November 2015).

Maintaining relationships across borders is an important element of transnational lifestyles. Most of my respondents asserted that they have not suffered a significant loss of social ties with Russian friends, relatives, and colleagues while in Ukraine, explaining it by initially being part of circles that have been most likely to support Ukraine and to criticise the position of the Russian regime. A number of people spoke about friends visiting them in Ukraine or expressing the desire to do so.

However, the informants experienced the break-down of some social ties. The move to Ukraine *per se* is less likely to cause a strain in personal relationships than contradicting views on the EuroMaidan, Russian politics and the armed conflict in the East of Ukraine. At this point, arguably, the key challenge of transnational social ties concerns the possibility of maintaining the remaining relationships across the border in the face of an ongoing conflict. For instance, Shchetinin said that, while his relationships had seemed unaffected at the beginning of the protests in 2013, by April 2014, after the annexation of Crimea, he was also faced with misunderstanding and difficulties:

I still have some friends in [Russia], and my first wife. But actually, it's the same with her. During the Maidan she wrote, 'We're so proud of you, well done!' But then in spring [2014] she started writing: 'Actually, you guys [in Ukraine] are wrong about the Russian language'. I asked her, 'What about the Russian language?' 'That you banned it'.[8] *I say, 'You came with me to the first [opposition] rallies in Russia. Damn it, you were my comrade in arms, but now you are saying such things'!*

A more recent arrival recalled that he 'had to say goodbye' to a few people since he moved:

I had a rather sad discussion with my favourite school teacher. She had always seemed to be an adequate person. (...) I always thought she had been critical about what was going on. (...) When this schizophrenia [propaganda-triggered patriotism] started, I had to have a serious talk with her. I was told that 'There is a sacred concept of motherland', 'Motherland cannot be wrong', and 'You'll understand it when you grow up'. I said, 'If something like this happens to me when I'm old, I hope there will be someone to suffocate me with a pillow somewhere in a corner'. So we parted company (male, 5 November 2015).

Finally, in addition to professional and personal relationships, I asked my respondents about their views on a potential return to Russia. While some still occasionally travelled to the country, none of the media professionals had immediate thoughts of returning to Russia: there was a sense of a lack of safety, of jobs or of perspectives for social and political change. The most common reaction was that they were not completely excluding the possibility of going back but were not tying their future to a particular location. Typical responses were as follows:

Hope to return when Putin is overthrown (...) it's my motherland after all (male, 7 November 2015).

If the political situation changes there, of course I'll go, it will be very interesting to observe (male, 10 November 2015).

I don't exclude the possibility of return, it's not like I've severed all ties. It's just that I'm not planning to do so in the foreseeable future (female, 21 November 2015).

However, a number of journalists seemed to report a radical change in their attitude towards Russia and stressed the impossibility of going back there to live. Notably, such narratives often envisage visiting the country, perhaps in a different political situation; however, Russia as a permanent place of residence seems to be off the agenda:

I'm not going to return to Russia; this is a conscious choice of a different motherland. I even wrote about it – turns out that a motherland can be chosen (male, 17 November 2015).

My friends are joking that I can only possibly return in the capacity of a gauleiter of some oblast [governor of a district]. No, I won't. Maybe just as a tourist. (...) I'm not going back to live in Russia. Ukraine is my home now (male, 5 November 2015).

I was born there, I can't escape the fact that I'm Russian. (...) But I'll never ever live in Russia again, definitely, this is impossible. Some mechanisms have changed inside of me, I can't live like people do there. (...) Ukraine is not perfect, but it is much easier and nicer to live here (female, 13 November 2015).

Stressing the heterogeneity of transmigration as well as the difference in 'rates of access to opportunities in the "receiving" cities that are grounded sites of the translocal interconnectivity', Smith (2005: 243) underlines that not all migrants are able to maintain active translocal ties and that the practice of maintaining them differs. The variety of migrant journalists' attitudes to the idea of return points to the idea of the differentiation of contemporary transnational migration that exists even within migrant populations of the same origin and within the same location in the host society. However, it is also clear that political developments in Ukraine and Russia have had an impact on this population in the sense that they are limiting the migrants' cross-border connectivity with the country of origin.

I argue that the general trend for Russian migrant journalists in Ukraine since the Maidan has been not a shift from one migrant type to another (as some of them have indeed suggested) but, rather, a merging of various migration characteristics. While some of the transnational ties of these mobile professionals have weakened, the latter have not turned into radically different kinds of migrant. This is not to say that, before the Maidan, those of them who moved earlier could be easily categorised. Rather, their experiences have become

even more complicated, possibly incorporating features of economic migrants and political refugees, 'voluntary exiles' and lifestyle migrants.

The literature on middling transnationalism does not usually stress the political implications of mobility. The case of Russian media professionals in Ukraine suggests that war makes the lives of middling transnationals more difficult; however, instead of tying them to a place and excluding them from global networks, perhaps it might push them towards a transnationalism that is not just focused on a home country but which may 'transcend the national, and generally the territorial, principle, with repercussions for identity-belonging' (Colic-Peisker 2010: 467). Indeed, in summer 2017, one of my respondents announced that she was leaving Ukraine and moving to the US to work for a major multimedia broadcasting organisation, while not severing ties with the media outlet in Kyiv and staying involved in its ongoing projects: 'For now, for one year, and then let's see'.

Conclusion

Migration becomes increasingly complex and multidimensional in the context of political crisis and armed conflict; however, the lifestyles and practices of 'middling transnationals' are usually analysed in peaceful environments and in ways that lack attention to the political underpinnings of any such migration. Before the EuroMaidan, Russian media professionals living and working in Ukraine were deeply embedded in transnational social fields. The protests, the annexation of Crimea and the war in Donbas have altered their opportunities and/or willingness to maintain intense cross-border connectivity with the country of origin in a variety of ways – concerning travel, personal and professional connections, involvement in social and political events and the idea of return migration. This is connected with state policies and ongoing military actions, social factors such as declining involvement in cross-border relationships, parallel increased engagement in local Ukrainian social and political life, and the development of a disillusionment and frustration that stimulate detachment from Russian social networks, media and institutions. Such detachment is not necessarily only explained by political reasons.

In this respect, the answer to the question in the title of this paper – whether these migrants have turned from middling transnationals into 'voluntary exiles' – suggests that the events since late 2013 have contributed to a further complication of migration characteristics rather than to a linear shift from one category to another. Living in Ukraine may be described as many things at the same time: an interesting career experience, an exciting adventure, a choice of a more comfortable lifestyle, an escape from a more oppressive society that does not offer suitable career opportunities, a search for journalistic and personal freedom and a political statement.

In this paper, I have drawn upon the idea of transnational ties being not necessarily stable, durable and supportive. I have explored the situation where mobile professionals were confronted with a political factor that was introduced to their migrant lives at the start of large-scale protests and an armed conflict. This particular case study suggests that the decline of cross-border connectivity with the country of origin may, and does, happen in such circumstances. While it may not mean a complete severing of all ties and a loss of mobility potential, it nevertheless affects the migrants to different degrees. This may, at the same time, draw more attention to the ways in which individuals inhabit transnational spaces that go beyond the binary of host–home country, which may be a topic for further research on middling transnationals during political crises. Transnational connections thus demonstrate their flexible and multidirectional nature.

Notes

[1] See, for example, Dickinson (2015); *Echo Moskvy* (2015); *Ukrayinska Pravda* (2015); Sergatskova (2015); Sheremet (2015). Journalists and media managers from Russia have been moving to Ukraine and working there since before the Maidan; however, as my data are limited to post-Maidan interviews and sources, a comparative study of pre- and post-2014 migration patterns is beyond the scope of this research.

[2] By 'generally pro-Ukrainian', I mean those who were supportive of the EuroMaidan – and the idea of the European development of Ukraine – and critical of Russia's actions, such as the annexation of Crimea and military intervention in Donbas. Clearly, not all Russian media professionals who have lived and worked in Ukraine in the last decade fit into this description. As suggested by my respondents and media publications, a number of such Russian professionals have since left Ukraine because of the political changes; a number of journalists have been deported by the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU) because of 'pro-Kremlin' stances (*Novoe Vremya* 2017). However, it was not my intention to address all kinds of Russian media professionals who have ever worked in Ukraine. For the purposes of this paper, I am primarily interested in a particular kind of migrant, whose Russian-ness or media-related professional background is contextually important but not the main focus of this work. In other words, my subjects were middling transnationals who, at the time of the interviews, were staying in their host country partly for political reasons; those who were leaving for political reasons are a different group and require a different study.

[3] The journalists' ways of dealing with possible stigmatisation of their 'Russian-ness' and public perceptions of their past belonging to the Russian media space are discussed in detail in Malyutina (2017).

[4] The results of this study are valid for the time period before 2016, after which the changing socio-political situation, both in Russia and Ukraine, may have started to change the perceptions and motivations behind (potential) migratory decisions. The vision of Kyiv as a safe city (and Ukraine in general, excluding the war-affected territories) and, more specifically, as a relatively safe place for Russian journalists, politicians and activists, is becoming more blurred. The reasons for this have been the murders of journalist Pavel Sheremet in 2016, of politician Denis Voronenkov in 2017 and of other individuals, as well as the 2018 staged murder of journalist Arkadiy Babchenko – an SBU operation to foil an assassination attempt which was heavily criticised by the journalistic community as unethical, undermining trust in the media and the Ukrainian authorities and, ultimately, playing into the Kremlin's hands (*BBC News* 2018). All this is unlikely to contradict my conclusions about the flexible, multidirectional and malleable nature of my respondents' cross-border ties. However, it may suggest that politics and safety concerns are starting to matter more, and perhaps in different ways, than they did earlier, in the lives of media professionals who might be considering moving elsewhere (from Russia or maybe from Ukraine).

[5] Lifestyle migrants are defined, broadly, as 'relatively affluent individuals of all ages, moving either part-time or full-time to places that, for various reasons, signify, for the migrant, a better quality of life' (Benson and O'Reilly 2009: 609). Knowles and Harper (2010: 172) describe such migrants as living 'permanently temporary lives', where further relocation is always a possible option. These features are usually approached as part of the increased transnational connectivity of contemporary migrants. Torkington (2012: 74) locates the idea of lifestyle migration within 'late modern, global, elitist, borderless and highly mobile social practices'.

[6] For some insights into the ways in which Russian media managers and journalists have been dealing with the Kremlin's increasing authoritarianism since Putin's third term and how they developed strategies to survive professionally or remain successful, see, for example, the recent special issue of *Russian Politics* (Schimpfössl and Yablokov 2017).

[7] As suggested by my interviewees, for many of those who moved in the last decade, the move has gained additional meanings, often under the influence of EuroMaidan and ubsequent developments both in Ukraine and Russia. This has included a combination of push and pull factors. The EuroMaidan represented a tangible hope for democratic development, in contrast to the worsening situation in Russia in terms of the Kremlin's tightening control of the local media, making Ukraine be seen as a safer place for work and a promising environment for professional development.

[8] This refers to the temporary repeal of the 2012 language laws after the Maidan, which was presented as an oppression of the Russian language by Russian state media.

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