

Conference Report

Societies on the Move. Migration, Mobility and Displacement in Eastern Europe

1-6 September 2024

*Monte Verità, Congressi Stefano Franscini
Ascona, Switzerland*

This year, an intensive six-day conference brought together scholars from diverse fields and countries to explore the complex social and political consequences of migration and mobility in Eastern Europe. Hosted at the historic Monte Verità—meaning "Truth Mountain"—once a gathering place for revolutionaries, artists, and philosophers seeking to experiment with new ways of living, the event provided an inspiring backdrop for in-depth discussions and collaborative exchange.



Organized through a first collaborative effort by the Centre for Eastern European Studies (CEES) at the University of Zurich, the Centre for Governance and Culture in Europe (GCE) at the University of St. Gallen, and the Ukrainian Research in Switzerland (URIS) initiative at the University of Basel, the event provided a dynamic platform for cross-disciplinary dialogue. Scholars from over ten countries—including Ukraine, the United States, Canada, Germany, the United Kingdom, Poland, Latvia, Austria, Spain, the Czech Republic, and Switzerland—gathered in the scenic setting of Ascona on Lake Maggiore in Switzerland. In addition to thought-provoking panels, the tightly packed schedule offered rare opportunities for networking and forming connections over fine lunches and dinners, a glass of wine or a cup of coffee, fostering meaningful exchanges among colleagues.

Central to the conference was an exploration of migration and mobility in Eastern Europe, with a particular emphasis on the factors, patterns, and societal impacts that have emerged in the post-Iron Curtain era. By examining key geopolitical developments, such as the Yugoslav wars and the ongoing conflict in Ukraine, participants delved into a range of issues impacting both rural and urban spaces, transnational labor flows, and the multifaceted effects on both origin and host societies.

Topics spanned the historical continuum from the late Russian Empire through to today's complex socio-political landscape. Different Panels addressed migration from historical, social, and political science perspectives, offering insights that extended well beyond the conference walls to nurture professional connections and deepen the network within the Eastern European studies community in Switzerland and across Europe.



© Mykhailo Minakov, View from the conference centre on Monte Verità, Ascona

The conference included a schedule with 15 engaging panel discussions, one keynote lecture from Vitaly Chernetsky, and two lively roundtable sessions in the evenings. But beyond the intellectual rigor, there was also some time for a bit of relaxation and, dare we say, *rejuvenation*. Between the panels, participants found time for numerous coffees, brief strolls through the beautiful conference grounds overlooking Lake Maggiore, and perhaps even a spot of tea from the only remaining tea plantation in Europe—according to our hosts. For those seeking a bit more adventure, the late summer offered the perfect excuse for a refreshing dip in the chilly lake, a leisurely shopping spree in Ascona, or an excursion to the Isole di Brissago, a serene island in the middle of the lake that hosts a stunning botanical garden.

The following pages provide a detailed overview of the various panels that took place over the six intense days of the conference. Each session offered rich insights into the diverse topics discussed, ranging from historical migration patterns to contemporary socio-political challenges, all framed within the dynamic context of Eastern Europe's evolving landscape.



© Mykhailo Minakov, Isole di Brissago, Lago Maggiore

Keynote Lecture: Traumatic Rhymes. Contemporary Ukrainian Refugee Experience and the Cultural Legacies of the 1940s Displacement

The first day of the conference was packed with a full schedule of panels, setting the stage for the days ahead, culminating in the evening keynote lecture by **Vitaly Chernetsky**, URIS Fellow at the University of Basel and professor at the University of Kansas. In his lecture, he discussed how the displacement of Ukrainians over time has influenced cultural expression, particularly in literature.

He identified four waves of forced mobility, beginning in the late 19th century, with notable works such as Vasyl Stefanyk's *A Stone Cross* reflecting the first wave. The third wave (1945–1949) significantly impacted Ukrainian cultural heritage, with artists like Iakiv Hnizdovsky and writers like Ulas Samchuk and Emma Andrievska portraying themes of displacement. Chernetsky also focused on the present wave of Ukrainian displacement, highlighting contemporary authors like Iryna Shuvalova and Sofiia Andrukhovych, who continue to explore exile and forced mobility in their work.

Migration and Nation Building in Ukraine

The panel on "Migration and Nation Building in Ukraine" featured two key presentations. **Bohdan Kolesnyk** from the University of St. Gallen introduced eight types of subjectivities present in Ukraine's public discourse and how they shaped the nation-building process from 2013-2022. **Mykhailo Minakov** from the Kennan Institute explored the role of nationalization in Ukraine's post-Soviet development, presenting a "post-Soviet Tetrad" of democratization, marketization, nationalization, and Europeanization. During the Q&A, a feminist critique was mentioned as an example of how the subjectivity framework often reinforces patriarchal structures, marginalizing female perspectives. The panel also debated the relationship between different subjectivities and the dominance of ethnocentric views in Ukraine's nation-building.

Receiving Societies

The panel on "Receiving Societies" examined various dimensions of migration and integration. **Karolina Czerska-Shaw** explored how transnationalism and diaspora influence civic entrepreneurship and nation-building, focusing on the fluid, informal networks that support transnational civic spaces. She highlighted the increasing corporatization of mobilization efforts by international organizations and businesses. **Sandra King-Savic and Karolina Czerska-Shaw** discussed how migrant networks are shaped through successive waves of forced migration, using the cases of former Yugoslavs in Switzerland and Ukrainians in Poland, emphasizing diaspora as a dynamic, evolving process. **Jannis Panagiotidis** analysed the perception of Eastern European immigration in Germany, noting the historical suspicion towards "the East" and the unique challenges faced by Eastern European migrants, including their exclusion from "white privilege" and objectification in labour markets.

Labor Migration

During this panel, **Ulf Brunnbauer's** presentation examined how Yugoslavia's *Gastarbeiter* (guest worker) programme reinforced both internal and external inequalities, contributing to the country's economic issues and eventual collapse. **Jeff Sahadeo** discussed labour migration from Central Asia and the Caucasus during the final years of the USSR, focusing on how the propiska system limited permanent settlement in major cities and how migrants navigated Soviet urban life through social networks. **Zuzana Uhde** analyzed the East-West inequalities in cross-border care work, arguing that Eastern Europeans are marginalized as "inferior European others" but still benefit from some global privileges due to their inclusion in whiteness. She emphasized the gendered dynamics of migration, particularly in the care sector.

Migration and the Decolonization Debate

The final panel of the first day explored various historical frameworks surrounding migration and colonization. **Frithjof Benjamin Schenk** discussed how Tsarist Russia denied its colonial status, viewing territorial expansion as appropriation rather than conquest, while exploring migration patterns in the late 19th century and how the state monitored and supported these movements. **Botakoz Kassymbekova** analysed the Soviet Empire through the lens of settler colonialism, focusing on land expropriation, the assimilation of indigenous populations, and the dissolution of indigenous institutions. She highlighted the role of language, culture, and policies like *korenizatsiia* (indigenization) in maintaining dominance and shaping narratives.

Religion and War

This panel explored the intersections of religion, conflict, and displacement in Eastern Europe and the EU. **Tornike Metreveli** examined how Russia's Orthodox Church (ROC) uses "canonical territory" to assert influence in geopolitical conflicts with Georgia and Ukraine, highlighting the alignment between the church and state and evolving religious discourse under Patriarch Kirill. **Lucian Leustean** discussed the role of religious communities in responding to forced displacement within the EU, noting the lack of coordination and the EU's institutional unpreparedness to engage with faith-based actors in humanitarian work. **Ansgar Jödicke** offered a theoretical perspective on religion's influence in conflicts, proposing "weak forms of religious exceptionalism" as a basis for social divides and heightened ideological commitment. The discussion addressed the politicization of religion, Moscow's shifting stance on the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, and ROC's adoption of "civilisationism."

Conflict and Development in the South Caucasus

The final panel of the second conference day explored the complex dynamics of conflict and infrastructure development in the South Caucasus, with a focus on the Second

Karabakh War and Georgia's transport projects. **Vicken Cheterian** highlighted Turkey's prominent role in supporting Azerbaijan militarily, which has shifted the regional power balance, while Russia, traditionally an ally to Armenia, adopted a more neutral, mediatory role rather than direct involvement. **Franziska Smolnik** examined Georgia's ongoing transport infrastructure projects, which are intended to increase regional connectivity and integrate Georgia more closely with international networks. However, these projects raise concerns about environmental impacts and the disruption of the region's natural defences.

Roundtable: War, Atrocities, and Reconciliation

The roundtable discussion on "War, Atrocities, and Reconciliation" focused on the Crimean Tatars, an indigenous Muslim community that has faced significant displacement and persecution, particularly following Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014. The discussion not only addressed the future of this community and their prospects for reconciliation but also examined broader challenges in post-conflict reconciliation in the context of Russia's ongoing war against Ukraine.

Key issues raised included how to approach the cultural and political integration of Crimean Tatars into broader societal contexts, both within the diaspora and in the context of ongoing displacement. **Elmira Muratova**, who has been deeply involved in researching the impact of the annexation on Crimean Tatars, and **Vicken Cheterian**, whose work focuses on ethnic minorities and national conflicts, contributed crucial expertise to understanding the complexities of reconciliation for this group.

The roundtable explored how the community's historical trauma—from the 1944 Soviet deportation to more recent dislocation—continues to shape their identity and survival strategies. Participants debated potential pathways for healing and preservation of Crimean Tatar culture and rights, even as many members of the community live in exile or face continuing challenges under Russian control. These themes were framed within the broader context of the conflict in Ukraine, underlining the difficulties of reconciliation in a time of ongoing geopolitical violence and displacement.

Diaspora

The panel on "Diaspora" explored various aspects of émigré communities and their influence. **Kai Willms** examined how Cold War Polish émigré intellectuals acted as knowledge negotiators between the U.S. and Eastern Europe, highlighting the role of the Polish Institute of Arts and Sciences of America (PIASA) and tensions between émigré generations. **Felix Krawatzek** analysed the identity and civic engagement of Russian-Canadians, noting their limited involvement in Canadian politics and Ukrainian refugee aid, while highlighting generational differences in gender roles and national identity. **Fabian Baumann** discussed Ukrainian émigrés in the interwar period, emphasizing how autobiographical writing and education abroad were used to consolidate Ukrainian

nationhood and prepare for political activism, despite internal conflicts and Russian scepticism.

Migration and Gender

The last panel of the third day addressed the intersections of migration and gender in the context of Ukraine. **Oksana Udovyk** explored "feminist urbanism" and the idea of "green recovery," questioning who defines "better" in the rebuilding process and advocating for displaced individuals to have a central role in shaping future Ukrainian cities. Using the photovoice method, Udovyk captured personal experiences and aspirations to incorporate them into urban planning with an inclusive, feminist perspective. **Yuliia Soroka** examined the survival strategies and identity discourses of women migrating from Ukraine's occupied territories, highlighting the different challenges faced in longstanding versus newly occupied regions.

Repression and Mobility in Belarus

In this panel, the contributors examined the effects of repression and migration on Belarusian identity and mobility. **Iryna Herasimovich** discussed how restricted mobility and forced migration have shaped Belarusian self-perception, especially under Lukashenka's regime. **Nelly Bekus** explored the evolution of Belarusian nationhood since 1991, noting a shift in migration patterns post-2020, with significant diasporic communities forming in Poland and Lithuania. Bekus highlights the creation of initiatives like the Coordination Council, which aim to sustain a sense of Belarusian national identity across borders, reflecting an evolving concept of nationhood that transcends Belarus's geographic boundaries.

Migration and Language

This panel explored the intersections of migration and language, focusing on the linguistic experiences of diasporic communities in Europe. **Cristiana Lucchetti** examined the post-Yugoslav diaspora in Switzerland, highlighting the gap between institutional multilingualism and the everyday multilingualism experienced by speakers of BCMS and Albanian, who face limited state support for language and cultural programs (HSK). **Tomáš Glanc** discussed Russian cultural migration amid the Ukraine war, exploring how geographical dislocation impacts cultural identity. **Aleksej Tikhonov** analysed "Russian stores" in Berlin, Vienna, and Zurich, focusing on rebranding strategies and the use of language and alphabets on storefronts to navigate shifting social perceptions and community identity.

Internal Migration and Population Exchange

"Internal Migration and Population Exchange" was the focus of a panel that examined key historical migration issues and their impacts. **Matthew Pauly** examined the 1921-1922 Soviet famine, focusing on the evacuation of children to regions like Odesa, despite

Soviet preferences for people to stay in their areas, highlighting the role of organizations like the American Relief Administration (ARA). **Zbigniew Wojnowski** discussed the post-1945 Ukrainian-Polish border and the role of Polish consul Wanda Michalewska in overseeing population exchanges and shaping Polish-Ukrainian diplomacy through her fluid national identity. **Julia Elena Grieder** analysed Soviet migration policies in Lviv and Transcarpathia post-WWII, emphasizing how migration was used to address regional imbalances, particularly for non-titular minorities like Germans, Hungarians, and Jews.

Border Management

This session addressed the complexities of border management in imperial and Soviet settings, exploring how borders can limit or promote movement and shape identity. **Franziska Exeler** discussed the Russian-Habsburg-German border region of Myslowitz, examining how border practices and imperial symbols like the Bismarck Tower represented power and control, while also allowing migration and exchanges that were both regulated and fluid. **Stephan Rindlisbacher** addressed Soviet-era Armenia and Azerbaijan, focusing on how the Soviet Union used forced collectivization and border redefinitions to manage ethnic and land conflicts, often exacerbating divisions. The discussion touched on border practices like postcard portrayals, disinfection protocols as symbols of state power, and the variable use of identity classifications, highlighting how borders operated both as hard boundaries and as grey zones of control.

Roundtable: Temporary Protection Status: What Comes Next?

The roundtable discussion "Temporary Protection Status: What Comes Next?" addressed key challenges and developments related to the S-status, a special form of temporary protection granted to Ukrainian refugees in Switzerland. The S-status offers protection and benefits but is limited in duration, leading to discussions on what happens next as these permits expire. Experts like **Simone Zurschmitten** (Head of Temporary Protection Status S Procedures and Resettlement Operations, State Secretariat for Migration), **Babak Fargahi** (Attorney at Law, RISE, Zurich), and **Sandra King-Savic** (University of Zurich) explored the current system's mechanisms, including how the status helps integrate Ukrainian refugees but leaves them with limited long-term stability.

They discussed the current challenges facing the Ukrainian individuals granted this status, including the potential for their integration into Swiss society or the uncertainties surrounding their future as the situation in Ukraine progresses. Key topics included the legal complexities of temporary protection, its implications on labor rights, housing, and healthcare access, as well as the potential for long-term policy changes as the crisis in Ukraine continues to unfold. A particularly important part of the discussion involved the differences in asylum processing for Ukrainian refugees under the S-status versus regular asylum seekers. Ukrainian refugees benefit from faster processing, access to integration programs, and certain rights such as the ability to work, which are not always available

to other asylum seekers, who may face longer waiting times, more stringent entry requirements, and fewer rights.

Displacement in Ukraine

In the final panel of the conference, following five intense days of discussion, **Oleksandra Tarkhanova's** presentation examined the shifting state-citizen relations in Ukraine, especially during crises in occupied territories, drawing from feminist state theory and critical citizenship studies. She highlighted how survival strategies and citizenship practices evolve under occupation, focusing on the legal implications of collaboration. **Viktorija Sereda** analysed the effects of war and displacement on Ukraine's ethnic diversity, with case studies on groups like Crimean Tatars and Meskhetian Turks, and emphasized how Türkiye managed their resettlement. **Elmira Muratova** explored the identity and values of displaced Crimean Tatars, noting the loss of cultural environments, increased religiosity, and a growing sense of Ukrainian national belonging alongside a re-discovery of Crimean Tatar identity.



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