Challenging and solidifying:
the dynamics of notions, stereotypes and prejudices about forced migration in Subotica

During and after the Yugoslav wars around 10 thousand forced migrants have moved permanently from Croatia, Bosnia and Kosovo to the Serbian town of Subotica. The town has a solid multiethnic character. In the paper I chiefly use material from about three and a half dozen semi-structured interviews conducted with middle-aged and elderly former Serbian forced migrants and ‘autochthonous’ locals of Serbian, Croatian and Hungarian nationalities in Subotica. I focus on their memories about the 1990s and their interpretations regarding the society of Subotica, the region of Vojvodina and forced migration in general.

Subotica and the northern province of Serbia, Vojvodina, are generally regarded as places with high level of tolerance and historical coexistence in interethnic relations. The locals generally tend to defend this notion in the past and in the present by verbally – but not physically – distancing themselves from the refugees, who “were not able to identify themselves” with these values and they “changed the atmosphere” of the city. The historical context – series of wars and the revival of nationalism – adds more anger to this stance. Political, ethnical and cultural arguments are dominant in the natives’ discourses. They neglect the skills and knowledge of the refugees – indeed, there are usually very suspicious notions regarding whether the immigrants were ‘real’ refugees. Still, there are narratives with alternative registers as well, where the informants recognize the Serbian forced migrants as a typical immigrant group in Vojvodina with a potential to ‘enrich’ the town and the region.

The once forced migrants openly speak about the multiethnic characteristics of the region. The interethnical peace in Subotica is much appreciated by them. Their devotion to Serbian national values, traditional and popular culture is emphatic. However, this makes them even more suspicious in the eyes of some of the locals. Nearly all of the informants managed to find a job and to sustain their social status during and after the war and many of them managed to become nearly ‘invisible’ in the city.

The findings highlight the delicate nature of mass-refugee movements, challenging and forming the general notions about a traditionally multiethnic region.

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