

# Crossing borders: migration and survival in the capital's informal marketplace

**Paddy Rawlinson and Pete Fussey** examine the experiences of migrants involved in the informal economy and organised criminal activity in East London.

*Major discourses on UK migration tend to be framed by simplistic dichotomies which currently inform policy, media, and public debates: migrants as parasites or providers, exploiters or exploited, victims or criminals. However, our ongoing ethnographic research amongst post-communist populations (PCPs), in particular those from the accession and new accession states such as Lithuania, Poland, Romania, etc., and London's informal and criminal economies reveals a more complex and worrying set of realities. Static boundaries are more or less non-existent as many migrants find themselves, for myriad reasons, constantly traversing the borders between the capital's formal, informal, and criminal markets. This, in turn, requires a constant shifting of identity and status as a means of successfully negotiating passage back and forth across these economic margins. These fluctuations present a challenge to the various agencies within criminal justice and the third sector whose competing agendas are largely based on stable categorisations of migrants.*

One of the politically challenging issues facing the research, especially at a time when right-wing extremism across Europe is gaining support on the back of *inter alia* the issue of migration, is how to take a constructive approach towards

the reality of informal and illegal economic behaviour by migrants from former communist states, without provoking prejudiced responses from the anti-migration lobby. The legacy of systemic corruption and exploitation endemic to former communist societies has clearly engendered culturally embedded survival skills involving deviant and criminal economic activity (Morawska, 2008). However, for the most part it is only when they encounter a suite of new exploitative arrangements at their destination that migrants utilise these skills. Hence, it is the symbiosis between the brutalities of the legal economy and the survival strategies of migrants in the informal and criminal economies within a broader context of neo-liberalism that requires a greater understanding. This is the underlying aim of the research, of which, some of the central themes are illustrated by the experiences of four of our participants.

## **Mutability and mobility**

The majority of our participants entered the UK with aspirations for a better life. Constrained by a 'feral capitalism' that continues to consume post-communist states, they brought an array of labour skills that, until recently, were in short supply in the UK. Yet, even during the better economic times, what many of them have experienced is little more than a reflection of the exploitation and

injustices they left behind. Paid well below the legal minimum requirement, and, on one occasion, having to pay his employers after one week's work (due to deductions from his pay packet) Dima, one of our population, observed 'behind your nice cars and nice streets, when you dig deeper, the structures here are the same as ours'. He was referring to the false promises, nepotism, injustices, and exploitation that he and his family sought to escape. Sergei, an illegal single male (one of a number of migrants from neighbouring non-EU states), works the exploitation he has met here to his advantage with considerable dexterity. Operating as a less-than-altruistic fixer he offers a range of opportunities to service a range of legal and illegal needs and desires. Acting as a sub-sub contractor for a reputable renovation company he is able to provide a migrant workforce willing to operate below the minimum wage and 'off the cards'. His real estate empire assists those subject to blatant discrimination (BBC, 2009) or illegally ejected from their homes by unscrupulous landlords to find accommodation. This role as informal estate agent adopts a theatre of legality, often consisting of wearing council jackets and hard hats and breaking into empty flats which are subsequently squatted by his grateful 'tenants'. It is his immigration service, however, that has been in greatest demand and consolidated his position in these precarious informal networks. A hitherto distributor of forged and stolen passports and himself claiming three different documented nationalities in the two years of our acquaintance, Sergei services the market for state-approved identifiers to provide clients with a temporary (and mobile) identity (Lyon, 2009). It is perhaps in the midst of such activities that one London borough we studied harboured EU-empowered 'Lithuanian' nationals with Belarusian, Ukrainian, and Russian names, having slipped through or bribed their way across the borders of outlying 'fortress Europe'.

Vadim also constantly strives to acquire a vantage point within these

transient 'networks of possibility' (Sennet, 1998). His status as an irregular migrant and nodal point for numerous converging streams within the informal economy leads him to continually navigate interrelated spheres of legitimacy and illegality. His forays into legitimate employment in East London's construction industry, for example, have yielded little financial reward, leaving him exploited and victimised by unscrupulous sub-contractors that took his illegal migrant status to be an opportunity to rob him of his wages. Unfortunately for them, Vadim's vulnerability does not extend far. His awareness that options of formal redress are limited and the ease with which he moves within selected criminal economies has left him spoilt for choice for the appropriate type of violence to address these fiscal disputes. This in turn has generated a new moral dilemma for Vadim insofar as the resort to irregular debt collection through criminal groups allows him to choose the levels of violence to be used in 'persuading' his erstwhile employers to pay their dues. As he puts it, 'The Russians are too crazy, I believe in God so I will use the Albanians'.

Georgii also drifts between the regular and irregular worlds. Now legally in the UK since the EU's 2007 expansion, he deems his £48 an uneven reward for his 10 hours of manual labour when compared to his gangmaster's harvest of six times that. His considerable dexterity in the second and criminal economies, however, has allowed him to supplement this modest income. A stable income in fraudulent and stolen credit cards has yielded opportunities to assist the growth of local pimping empires into the perceived resource-rich landscape of the East London's Olympic marketplace. Rather than coalescing into traditional notions of stratified 'organised crime', such activities develop haphazardly as a result of opportunity and mobility within



networks that provide surrogate forms of social stability and protection.

Whilst jockeying for position in poorly-defined legitimate and illegitimate markets has been a particular East End tradition for many years (Hobbs, 1988), there are distinguishing factors impacting the experiences of post-communist populations in East London. These connect with generations of cultural familiarity with the second economy as the only realistic means of economic survival and the acuteness of both *inter* and *intra* community tensions and the attendant continual spectre of violence. Together, these factors coalesce as survival strategies echoing Engels' famous warning that 'if people are relegated to the position of animals, they are left with the alternatives of revolting and sinking into bestiality' (Engels, 1958). Ognyan was clear regarding the brutalising impact of his situation: 'At home I have a heart. Here, I'm a bastard. I have to be'. While this might be a somewhat romantic notion of his behaviour in Bulgaria it is a sharply accurate statement on the realities of survival for thousands like Ognyan in the Britain's migrant labour market. Taking the 'bastard'

out of the migrant experience requires a more honest reflection by those of us privileged to operate in the legal economy on the pathologies and casual violence of the very system we are so keen to preserve. ■

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