

**THESES OF DOCTORAL (PhD) DISSERTATION**

**Labor migration among middle-aged families in  
Gyergyóremete**

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### *Aim of the thesis, outline of the topic*

In our research, we examine the impact of labor migration abroad on families in Gyergyóremete, with particular attention to the social and family structural transformations resulting from migration. Interpreted within the center–periphery relationship, Gyergyóremete is a peripheral, sending settlement where employment abroad has long been the dominant form of earning cash.

From the outset, we consider it essential to distinguish between the concepts of refugee and migrant, since media representations and contemporary political discourse often conflate the two, which may distort the interpretation of the social phenomenon under study. For the definition of the refugee concept, it is appropriate to rely on the 1951 Geneva Convention, which states: “owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it” (UNHCR, 2010:3). From this definition, we see that the refugee is a precisely defined legal category. According to IOM (2019), the concept of migrant is much more descriptive than legal: it refers to a person who moves from their usual place of residence to another location, within or across national borders, temporarily or permanently, for various reasons. We emphasize that in our research we focus on the term *migrant* as applied to those who change residence for the purpose of employment, examining the impact of foreign labor migration on families in Gyergyóremete. This is a multifaceted, complex process, whose true roots are often difficult to interpret even with in-depth analysis.

Our choice of topic is important for two reasons, both personal and professional. On the one hand, due to our position at the local Mayor’s Office, we have insight into the broader and more complex effects of this social phenomenon, which influences the daily life of the community. On the other hand, our personal involvement is also significant, since members of our own family have migration experience. In order to maintain objectivity in our research position and preserve professional credibility, we did not involve family members in the study.

Generations who lived through the post-communist transition and Romania’s accession to the European Union experienced profound social changes in their everyday

environments. Structural constraints created a sense of transition and uncertainty, amplified by the emergence of the information society. The inhabitants of our research site faced the dilemma between locality and global mobility. T. Kiss Tamás (2024:323), in defining the concept of “quasi-community,” uses the term *glocalization* to describe the simultaneous extension of attachment to one’s place of residence even when living far away. The unit of our analysis is the transnational family, in which members live apart but obligations and bonds are maintained. Our research examines the present, where the expected results represent both opportunities and challenges, contributing to a deeper understanding of the local community.

The migration community originating from Gyergyóremete in Szeklerland forms the cultural unit under investigation. Data spanning centuries reveal this small community’s attitudes toward social change, which has not left untouched this peripheral, soldier-peasant way of life, marked and tested by historical, geographical, and economic conditions. The pursuit of stability and a more secure livelihood has been the guiding principle of the people of Remete, and it also manifests itself in the life goals and lifestyles of those choosing migration. As insiders of the researched local community, we apply qualitative sociological methods to analyze the mechanisms of migration, its components, deeper layers, and the micro-community’s reactions under structural constraints.

Our research focus can be summarized as follows:

1. To understand emigration and categorize it, we rely on international migration theories. We consider it necessary to review both classical and modern theories. At the same time, we aim to place local migration within international frameworks, raising the question: to what extent can a historically rooted local phenomenon be interpreted through international migration theories?
2. We focus on the impact of labor migration abroad on families raising minor children. How does labor migration affect daily life? How can a husband or wife working abroad fulfill parental responsibilities from a distance? What social and emotional consequences does labor migration entail for transnational families? How does it reshape traditional roles and functions? We find it particularly important to gain insight into the everyday life of those who remain at home, though we do not aim to conduct interviews with children.
3. Employment abroad is driven by goals and motivations. What are the main motivational factors by which our interviewees can be grouped? How have initial

motivations changed, and how are they related to the frequency and duration of labor migration? Is there a connection between the workers' motivations and the choice of destination country?

4. We aim to demonstrate how migrants have managed to adapt inherited ideas, models, and goals to the developmental trends and social realities of their new living environment.
5. Our empirical research was interrupted by the Covid-19 pandemic—an unforeseen event that temporarily halted the world. How did this influence foreign employment? What difficulties did it pose for family members?

Answering our research questions is supported by knowledge of the historical background. We examine and analyze the migration problem after the 1989 regime change, while also considering earlier periods characterized by both internal mobility needs and external pressures, the operation of structural constraints. A central issue in village communities has always been their dual role as retainers or senders of population, the dilemma of leaving or staying, adapting locally to successive social systems, or responding through migration. The most important reaction of those remaining was the continuous reorganization of the community, which paved the way to the future. In both spontaneous and induced migration paths, interrupted continuity, uncertain livelihoods, and the aspiration for a more successful life coexist.

Our work addresses migration processes and their components. On the one hand, we aim to document the phenomenon; on the other, to interpret it and answer our research questions based on the data collected.

In analyzing labor migration abroad, our research is framed by international migration theories, as they contribute to a thorough understanding of this complex phenomenon and provide a foundation for interpreting our empirical findings. Reviewing these theories allows us to uncover the motivational factors and processes that drive migration, with special attention to economic, political, and social dimensions. Different types of migration are associated with different motivational factors. Highlighting both similarities and differences sheds light on why the unified international regulation of migration remains an unresolved problem.

### *Outline of the methods used*

As a qualitative method, we applied semi-structured interviews during our empirical research. Reviewing the literature, we observed that the combined use of quantitative and qualitative methods is a debated issue in the social sciences. According to Ariel Mitev (2015), quantitative research requires one to follow a predetermined path, touching every point, whereas in qualitative research the researcher must set the orientation points themselves on constantly shifting terrain. A difficulty of the latter is that it does not yield quantifiable results and is hard to standardize. In our research, focusing on the dynamics of migration, we did not aim for quantifiable outcomes, since our “in-depth drilling” sought to uncover details beyond standard approaches. Over the past five years, we conducted 46 interviews. The timeframe of our investigation was extended due to the Covid-19 pandemic, which introduced new dimensions into our research. Accordingly, our interviewees can be divided into three groups: interviews conducted before, during, and after the pandemic.

The foundation of qualitative research is the understanding of events based on detailed and context-dependent data, and the identification of the effects of social situations and interactions through individuals’ speech patterns (Locke et al., 1998). “Qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003:5). In the literature, qualitative research is often described as *interpretive*, which denotes explanation and interpretation. As Bruner (2004:16) explains: “meaning making is placing the encounters with the world in their appropriate cultural context in order to know what they are about.”

The first phase of our research took place between October 2019 and March 2020, while the second phase lasted from September to December 2022. During the study, we recorded 46 individual interviews in the homes of the respondents. The Covid-19 pandemic interrupted our empirical work but also opened a new dimension for us. Accordingly, we supplemented our interview guide with questions related to the pandemic. Although the pandemic initially posed an obstacle, we regarded it as an opportunity, enriching our research with a new perspective through which the effects of the pandemic on families’ everyday lives and migration processes became traceable. The interviews conducted in 2023 were coded and analyzed with the support of the Atlas.ti software. This program enabled the structured processing of respondents’ experiences. Using the data thus obtained, we aim to provide a comprehensive picture of the factors influencing the decisions of migrant workers with

families, as well as how they experience the challenges of living abroad and how their identities are shaped in the new environment.

The primary target group of our dissertation consists of (middle-aged) families with at least one member working abroad and minor child(ren) in the household. The term “middle-aged,” placed in parentheses, designates the age group defined at the beginning of our research. Although we sought to maintain this focus throughout the study, due to the increasingly delayed age of childbearing, both younger and older individuals also entered our sample. Thus, our cohort consisted of mothers and/or fathers between 30 and 58 years of age. Within the sample, there is also a significant group of families who followed the father and settled abroad permanently or semi-permanently.

The central themes of the research included emigration motivations, life and work abroad, the adoption of observed social norms, models, and practices, as well as future prospects, all examined in relation to their impact on the family. A smaller but significant group within our sample consists of individuals who transitioned from initial manual labor to founding their own businesses and advancing into leadership roles. Of strong informational value are the motivational changes revealed in the interviews: while the initial impetus was almost invariably the prospect of higher earnings, over time self-realization increasingly became the central motivation.

Men are numerically overrepresented in the sample (26), but a significant number of women (20) are also present. Many of them have undertaken seasonal work abroad for years, while others followed their husbands abroad for longer or shorter periods and are employed there. Three women in the sample fulfill household responsibilities at home. We attribute particular importance to the interviews conducted with this smaller group, since they provide especially valuable and authentic insights into the transformation of family roles, including the redefinition of traditional gender roles and the changing dynamics within families during periods of labor migration abroad.

As our community has traditionally been a sending settlement—as noted in the previous chapter—a local saying is common: in certain situations, when the husband is absent, “the wife must also be a man.” This expression reflects the social expectation that women—especially when their husbands work abroad for extended periods—must not only fulfill their traditional female roles but also, in some respects, assume the role of “head of household.” Consequently, women left at home take on responsibilities and tasks with which they may not have been familiar previously, through which they develop new competences and skills.

### *A summary of the results in thesis form*

The aim of our research was to analyze the impact of labor migration on families at the local level, in Gyergyóremete. We are dealing with a multifaceted process, as the phenomenon simultaneously affects economic factors and emotions, community and individual networks, traditions and innovation-based initiatives, identities and habitus. Its multidimensional effects can be summarized as follows: income earned abroad contributes to the material well-being of the family, but at the same time may be the source of complex, sometimes not immediately perceptible problems, which bring to the fore the weakening of family ties, emotional difficulties caused by physical distance, and the challenges of raising children.

In the three decades following the Romanian regime change (1990), macro-social processes generated the migrant way of life, since external circumstances did not favor the internal needs or (self-)development of individuals, families, or communities. In the life paths examined, we can perceive how the disintegration of socialism buried livelihoods and opportunities, making not only the everyday lives of individuals, families, and local communities precarious, but also threatening their future. Everything became uncertain at once: in the village, neither the traditional community, nor clear models of proletarian or bourgeois lifestyles could be found. The release of internal reserves after the regime change further deepened the dilemma: as descendants of former peasants, should they (1) embark on a cultural–economic restoration of traditional society, (2) try to build economic potential without entrepreneurial knowledge or capital, or (3) leave it all behind and set out to explore the newly opened world? In all three scenarios, social networks played a decisive role, and as we can see, regardless of location, those who responded flexibly to changes and were open to innovation were the most successful.

In the examined mobile/migratory life paths, we observe manifestations of the aspiration for stability, generally and consistently across different phases. Those who arrived in a new place – “newcomers” – while claiming and shaping space and roles for themselves, contrasted with those left behind who tried to remain “natives” without maintaining the external and internal unity of the sending community.

As a theoretical background, we reviewed the definitions of transnational migration and family, since, on the one hand, women’s employment and, on the other, the development of advanced communication technologies gave rise to this theoretical framework, into which our research target group fits. We considered it important to differentiate between the situations of transnational mothers, fathers, and parents who remained at home.

Whether staying at home or living abroad, respondents predominantly expressed negative tendencies. In their narratives, some positive feelings or thoughts were discernible, but these were immediately overshadowed by a sense of absence. The greatest emotional burden was observed among mothers left at home. They simultaneously had to cope with the sense of loss caused by their partner's absence, the ongoing challenges of a single-parent role, and the increasing weight of responsibility. Although we did not conduct interviews with fathers who remained at home, through the accounts and hints of wives working abroad, we could infer situations, attitudes, and perspectives on life. Nor did we speak directly with children, but deficiencies, difficulties, and challenges repeatedly surfaced in the parents' narratives, albeit in unreflected form.

The Covid-19 pandemic interrupted our empirical research. The temporal pause, however, opened new research dimensions. In interviews conducted during and after the pandemic, the impact of Covid-19 on migration became unavoidable and was thus integrated into our thesis. We analyzed the accounts along the axis of abroad–travel–home. For our respondents, life and work abroad ceased temporarily or became problematic; spatial mobility was suspended, while social interactions changed, with online forms of communication spreading and becoming the norm. Travel restrictions also created internal constraints that physically and mentally affected both migrant workers abroad and their family members at home. During the pandemic, the value of “home” was particularly enhanced; returning home meant truly arriving. The combined analysis of the three dimensions (abroad–travel–home) highlighted long-term effects that, even if temporarily, redefined experiences of labor migration and the sense of home.

The novelty of our research is evident on several levels. It focuses on the local scale and examines only the impact of labor migration, unlike previous large-scale quantitative household surveys. Qualitative research allowed us to analyze processes inductively, on a micro-level, through coding at the level of individuals and families. We observed family specificities, seeking uniqueness beyond surface-level uniformities, until theoretical saturation was reached. Using interview and memo-writing methods alongside data collection, we uncovered personal narratives that are more than statistical data. While we did not emphasize it explicitly, the interdisciplinary nature of our research was crucial, as sociology, psychology, and anthropology were applied together.

In our study, we revealed and analyzed unique migratory life paths. At the same time, we acknowledged our limitations, which outline further research tasks. Thus, we do not consider our dissertation a finished work, but rather a milestone that inspires continuation.

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### List of publications related to the dissertation

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