

“Our People, Our Rules, and Our Border!”: Village Networks, People’s Economies, and the Functioning of the State at the Western Edge of Ukraine

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“OUR PEOPLE, OUR RULES, AND OUR BORDER!”:
VILLAGE NETWORKS, PEOPLE’S ECONOMIES,
AND THE FUNCTIONING OF THE STATE AT THE WESTERN
EDGE OF UKRAINE¹

INTRODUCTION

This article examines the local economy of a small village community situated in Transcarpathian Ukraine, relatively close to the Slovakian-Ukrainian border that was originally established in 1945 between Czechoslovakia and Soviet Ukraine. I uncover the beginning of this particular local economy and the favours that ensured the smooth running of economic activity in the local region under Soviet rule, and I trace its transformation over time. The local economic activity I researched² is currently most visible in the everyday operation of the external Schengen

¹ I am grateful to Juraj Buzalka and the anonymous reviewers of *Etnografia Polska* for their comments on earlier versions of this paper.

² Presented data come from a year-long period of ethnographic fieldwork in 2018/2019, while data regarding the recent Russian aggression were gathered in 2022 through online calls with my informants. My doctoral field research project served as basis for my 2018/19 ethnographic research and was approved by the Institute of Social Anthropology, Comenius University, before I entered the field as part of my studies. I am grateful for the generous funding of my 2018/19 doctoral fieldwork to the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology in Halle (Saale), and namely to Chris Hann and his initiative the “Visegrád Anthropologists’ Network”.

By employing narrative and informal unstructured interviews during my research, I looked at people’s perspectives on life and turns of events in socialist and post-socialist period, with particular regard to their economies and livelihoods, and also to village politics. Participant observation of public and private events, respectively of locals’ everyday activities in the village and home environment, allowed me to build rapport, but also a safe space to conduct mostly unplanned, informal interviews on sensitive topics (e.g., illicit practices). I want to state that I have no personal experience with actual instances of illicit livelihood strategies (e.g., smuggling) discussed in this article, and also that I have no information about actual cases of carrying out of such practices by my informants.

border³ and the municipal office, from which so-called *favours* are facilitated. However, in local memory, other village institutions (for instance, the local unit of *kolhosp* [Ukr. “collective farm”] and the municipal office) were also spaces from which favours were once facilitated. My primary concern is to explain which particular circumstances caused the practice of favouring from within state institutions to emerge in this village community. I demonstrate what constituted its basic characteristics under the socialist regime and how these attributes have changed over time. I discuss how the past and present expressions and functions of favouring relate to changes brought by bigger political-economic (socialist and post-socialist) transitions. I explore the implications of these economies (carried out in the form of cross-border businesses) for the local community and also for the functioning of the state at the border since the softening of border regime after dissolution of USSR. Finally, I explore the impact of the observed economies and the personal connections, utilised in these economies, on the facilitation of the two-way movement of people and commodities through the Schengen border in times of Russian aggression in Ukraine. I look at the locally-remembered agency of three generations of communal leaders who belong to a particular family network and their role in people’s economies from around the beginning of the socialist era in Transcarpathia (1945) to the present day.

First, I look back into the socialist history of the village and, through local perspectives, I illustrate the ways these economies developed under socialism, with regard to the changes brought by regime and pro-communal agency of two-generations of local leaders. Next, I use the concepts of *post-peasant economy* (Buzalka 2022) and *economy of favours* (Humphrey 2017; Makovicky 2017) to comprehend this local economy theoretically. I suggest this economy is an unintended product of socialist modernisation, based on a non-calculative rationale connected to the traditional mores of the village community (shared view on morality, solidarity and belonging expressed in intra-communal cooperation). In the third part, I argue for the expanding scope of these economies into new institutional spaces arising from the administration of the Schengen border in the post-socialist period, which introduced vast political-economic changes. I then describe these economies as the basis of informal, cross-border business, mobilised around the third-generational communal leader who has supported his community since the material crisis of post-independence Ukraine in the 1990s. In the fourth part, I conceptualise the three-generational agency of the local family in these economies in terms of the state’s functioning (expressed in the form of the international border) using James Scott’s (1990) concept of *hidden transcript*, and I argue for the key role of these morality/solidary-based economies for the actual functioning of the state since the end of socialism. In the final part, I shift to the recent Russian aggression against

³ The external Schengen border (or just Schengen border) separates the Schengen area (space formed by European countries, including Slovakia, where controls on borders are abolished to provide free movement of people and commodities) from those which are not (including Ukraine). Thus, on the Slovakian-Ukrainian border, which is an external Schengen border too, various types of controls are still present.

Ukraine and suggest that the actual subversion of border administration and village institutions by the local family network is an essential instrument for facilitating the movement of people and commodities through the Schengen border. It is also a strategy of coping with the recent crisis for the village community and as well as for those passing through the border (that is, both those fleeing the Ukraine or those providing humanitarian support).

FAVOURING FROM ‘BETWEEN THE LINES’ IN SOCIALISM

Brashovo⁴ is a village in the Transcarpathian region⁵ of Ukraine, located in its north-western part. It sits on a relatively flat terrain, a few dozen kilometres from the region’s capital, Uzhhorod. It is situated within reach of the almost 100-kilometre-long Slovak-Ukrainian Schengen border and the border-crossing point Ubl’a–Malyi Berezhnyy. The vast majority of its inhabitants identify as Ukrainians and only a very few individuals as Rusyns. The ethnic composition of Brashovo has remained relatively homogeneous over the course of its history, despite various ethnic policies and initiatives that Transcarpathia experienced (Magyarisation, Russification). Brashovo’s population is currently evenly split between the Greek-Catholic and Orthodox churches.

Before World War I, Brashovo was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and in the interwar period it was subsumed into the First Czechoslovak Republic. Brashovans remember these periods as dire times because attempts to improve the living conditions of the mostly-rural population, which was devoted to traditional livelihood strategies like peasantry, through modernising the region were not successful. People escaped dire conditions initially through seasonal migration to the Hungarian lowlands, and later to the industrialised region of Czechoslovak Moravia. Sometimes they even emigrated to the United States. Brashovan families still remember using these ways out, which were possible until the region’s incorporation into the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic in 1945.

In addition to the highly-monitored international border installed near the village in 1945, other socialist institutions and policies were introduced. One such policy which noticeably impacted the life of the predominantly rural population was that of collectivisation. A so-called *kolkhosp* was established in the village, where lands previously owned by peasant families were taken away and collectivised by the Soviet state. The lands were then handed over to be operated as a collective farm which was, at that time, employing roughly between one fourth and one third of Brashovo’s population.⁶ Meanwhile the greater part of Brashovo shifted to paid work in the growing industry in surrounding cities during the first decades of socialism.

⁴ I altered the actual name of the researched village and the names of my respondents.

⁵ Zakarpats’ka oblast’ (in Ukrainian) is Ukraine’s westernmost administrative part, bordering with Romania, Hungary, Slovakia and Poland.

⁶ Estimate of local elders.

The mobilisation of villagers into *kolkhosps* was slow during the 1940s and 1950s, as people generally refused to engage with the collective farms, and even actively resisted working there and occasionally protested openly. More often locals engaged in sabotage of the collective farm's daily operation (see Allina-Pisano 2010; Magocsi 2015; Marples 1992). Jessica Allina-Pisano (2010) in particular takes a close look at several local, historical examples of subversive strategies carried out in *kolkhosps* settings (including theft and squandering of resources, and infringements of workplace duties) that expressed villagers' efforts to preserve the economic autonomy of their individual households. These strategies were also used to ensure the continued functioning of their traditional household economic model in parallel with – and often at the expense of – the state-run *kolkhosps*, all of which meant that the *kolkhosps* struggled to draw local support.

In Brashovo, such pragmatic and subversive strategies are vividly remembered as informal agency, carried out “from within” Soviet structures and “for local people”. Locals remember mostly the ways in which members of one particular family network, probably the wealthiest local peasants in the pre-Soviet era, who I refer to here as the Brisudskyy family, were able to obtain a number of positions in the structures of the socialist state (*kolkhosp*, municipal office and border administration). By favouring, from within Soviet structures, this family was able to provide material resources for other local families.

What most people pointed out when speaking about the significance since early socialism of this family network, and in particular its leader, for the community was that (in words of a local elder, Ivan):

Uncle Mykola was a great man that this village remembers, even though this all happened a while ago. He was a great goodman, knew how to do everything at the plot, and to get along with people... But first and foremost, he knew people would suffer if there were some further conflicts [because of the establishment of kolkhosp]... But uncle Mykola willingly offered himself to our kolkhosp, to Communist Party, and served as its member. Or, at least people “up there” [referring to district/region-level state representatives] thought so. But truly he was with us, his people, all the time, helping us, quietly providing our families with stuff from kolkhosp which was once ours. It did not matter how things were done... He was doing this for his people and as far as I remember, those apparatchiks from Uzhhorod had not even noticed someone was ripping off the state.

Theft from *kolkhosp*'s resources, squandering and misuse of machinery on people's own garden plots are just some examples mentioned by villagers who remember “the everyday reality of *kolkhosp*'s operation” (words of local elder, Igor), and examples to which one of them refers to as “helping” and “providing” in the excerpt above. The family network is most commonly recognised for transacting “from within” the state structures to benefit the community. It is still seen locally as responsible for taking this openly non-resisting, yet covertly subversive, stance in relation to any novel state policies and institutions in times of political-economic transformation. Thus, based on the memory of locals, the dominant family network (and notably Mykola Brisudskyy Sr., its head) found a way to illicitly favour their peers, mostly

families of those working in the *kolhosp*, irrespective of their denomination or other demographic characteristic, with state agricultural material resources or the use of machinery. This proved useful for locals’ home-grown gardens and enabled them to partially subsist economically.

The key position of this family network within the community became even more strengthened over the time, as locals recall. After its leader Mykola Brisudskyy Sr. served in the executive of Brashovo’s *kolhosp* in early socialism, in the 1970s and 1980s his son Mykola Jr. went “in his father’s shoes”, as he became the village head and “another true leader of people” (words of local elder, Kyrylo).

In addition to being considered “a good, helpful and skilful guy” within the community, according to villagers it was mostly the informal, pro-community agency (locally referred to as “legacy of his father”) in which he had been engaging since his youth which was decisive for his rise to the position of village head. Apart from his talent for keeping local families content through the informal redistribution of state resources, he at the same time kept district and region-level representatives confident about his devotion to the Communist party. It was in this period when his family network, including his extended family members, also strengthened their reputation among village patrons by obtaining a majority of village council and executive of village institutional seats. Thus, as Brisudskyy family network united the extended family relatives of Mykola Jr., including his cousins, uncles, aunts and their spouses⁷ within high-ranking positions in Brashovo’s institutions, it represented the most dominant political unit in Brashovo. Two other extended-family networks, however, are also remembered for obtaining of high-ranking positions in local institutions, although, to a lesser extent, and without maintaining as many numerous favouring channels as other family or neighbourly networks, as the Brisudskyy had.

Like his father, Mykola Jr. was a local Communist Party and *kolhosp* member who “did not mind getting his hands dirty for them [the Brashovans]” (words of retired village priest, Petro). However, now his pro-community agency not only provided material opportunities for others (via redistribution of resources to other family networks), but it also had visible outcomes in the modernisation of the village, for example in a new school and library being built, and village infrastructure being renovated. Hence, in this generation of the Brisudskyy family network, subversion of the state extended into the municipal office and council also, and is remembered as a form of sincere engagement in community beneficence.

Additionally, for locals who remember everyday life in socialism, this way of subversively transacting ‘between the lines’, or as they say, of “doing favours”, is

⁷ Association of individuals with this family network has been based on family-bond to its leaders, or to a leader’s close relatives, ever since the socialist past. Nevertheless, locals stated that even when someone was not considered a member of the Brisudskyy family network through family bonds back then, they could still get into very intensive, mutually-benefiting relations with this network. Even now, the Brisudskyy family network’s members, unlike members of other family networks, have numerous patron-client bonds with their supporters, who are either their neighbours, (former) employees in institutions run by Brisudskyy, or, as I will further illustrate, have been involved in their informal businesses.

considered part of the everyday economy termed locally as *selyans'ke zhyttya* [Ukr. “peasants’ life”]. However, Brashovans’ memory of this way of life under socialism not only connects to illicit favouring, but also to everyday cooperation strategies perceived as more traditionally rural. This co-operation “made the life easier back then” (according to 60-years old local, Dmytro), and the two generations of Brashovo leaders are remembered as enthusiastic goodmen for such aid.⁸ These favours, performed between members of family or neighbour networks, included ad hoc lending of agricultural goods and services (e.g., help in people’s gardens, lending of agricultural machinery) and providing with expert services, mostly by local electricians, plumbers and masons. Moreover, favours were also connected to villagers’ participation in traditional gatherings held by families or organised communally (e.g., harvesting of crops, slaughtering of farm animals).

It is worth noting that these favours are remembered as being used in everyday interactions between other local family members and members of the Brisudskyy family network. As Svitlana, administrative worker in the municipal office from Mykola Brisudskyy Jr.’s era, remembers:

Although we were just neighbours and not their family, they [Brisudskyy] were really good to us. For example, Mykola promptly provided us with house-building license we sought for some time after we got married with my husband... or, as an employee of municipality I was given many gifts on occasions... And when the need arose my husband [local electrician] did some repair works on Brisudskyy’s house, or my son [kolhosp worker] helped the Brisudskyy during grape harvest in their vineyard, both cost-free... because we were thankful to Brisudskyy for what they were doing for us, neighbours, and for the community for generations.

Thus, it may be implied that favours from members of the Brisudskyy family to their supporters (i.e., to neighbours or those who worked in institutions informally run by the Brisudskyy family network), were usually returned in the form of favours with the aforementioned contents of everyday importance to locals. The agency of the Brisudskyy family was, then, usually followed by these kinds of assistance from members of other family networks to express their gratitude to their village leaders.

APPROACH TO PEOPLE’S ECONOMIES

Although these economies resembled some traditional traits of peasant community (relevance of inter-familial cooperation and frequent socialisation at characteristic rural activities and events), I theorise this economic activity using Juraj Buzalka’s (2022) notion of the *post-peasant*.⁹ Everyday strategies, including favouring from

⁸ Brashovans use term *gázda* (equivalent of English “yeoman”) on both Mykola Brisudskyy Jr. and Sr. to accentuate their engagement in cooperation and socialisation in activities and events perceived as “peasant-like”.

⁹ Buzalka (2022) theorises the term *post-peasant house*, but I adopt his perspective on the factors influencing the presence of the model of people’s economic activity under socialism.

within state institutions by networks around two-generational communal leaders, represent coping mechanisms adopted by village community in order to adapt to profound structural changes. These changes are connected to industrialisation and urbanisation, while “the socialist economy, weakly penetrated by market relations [...] nurtured practices which had their roots in an agrarian era” (Buzalka 2022, p. 45). Under the centrally-planned economic system, then, people, and Brashovans among them, relied on “kinship ties, [...] exchanges, and values associated with an agrarian past” (p. 45).¹⁰ According to Buzalka (2022), this reliance “further produced relations reminiscent of the village community” (p. 45). Thus, I refer to a *post-peasant* model because people utilised rather traditional social foundations and forms of morally and solidary-based cooperation and socialisation in the village community during socialist modernisation. Accordingly, they were able to stay self-sufficient and to exert influence over the everyday operation of the village’s political institutions through cryptic favouring practices from within these institutions.

Moving from the origins of these economies to their logic of functioning, I use *economies of favours* to refer to the acts illustrated here not only because locals use the term *favour* (*posluha* in Ukrainian). Applying Makovicky’s (2017) definition of *economies of favours* to the state-subversive practice of favouring, I suggest it highlights a specific, idiomatic register of action, which is irreducible to a cost-benefit rationale. Favours, enacted by the Brisudskyy family, are considered here to be a part of an *economy of favours* because these favours are remembered as gratuitous (usually not directly returned) moral acts with benefits to the community. They are based on a distinctive performance within the state administration that enabled a particular network to influence the administration’s actual operation according to locally-shared moral values. In addition, in terms of the acts performed and conceptualised as *favours* it is, however, also necessary to stress the importance of the “moral aesthetic of action that endows the actors with standing and a sense of self-worth, and [...] the circles that provide the recognition” (Humphrey 2017, p. 51), in the case of Brashovo, of the connections between the family networks belonging to local community.

To recap, I theorise these practices, enacted across two Brisudskyy generations, as *post-peasant* because they were expressions of traditional village sociality that enabled the community to adapt to regime developments at a local level. They were also expressions of an *economy of favours* whose practices represented gratuitous performances expressing and adhering to the community’s moral values in different areas of the village institutions’ actual operations and rural cooperation. Further they enabled members of a particular family-network to become respected community leaders.

¹⁰ The values observed in Brashovans’ practice of favouring (and in memory of it) are morality, solidarity, a sense of belonging to village community and a connection to a rural/agricultural way of life (so, to the notion of “the peasants’ life”).

In the next part, I move on to the post-socialist period and describe developments in Brashovans' livelihoods in terms of transforming political-economic conditions. Analysing the agency of the third-generation communal leader in the new political-economic circumstances which came into being after the dissolution of socialist state and introduction of market-economy, I aim to update Chris Hann's thesis about "the *everyday moral communities* of socialism [which] have been undermined but not replaced" (Hann 2002, p. 10, emphasis in original). Brashovans' economies and the agency of the third generation of leader are, then, approached as particular, everyday expressions in people's "micro-worlds", which were capable of reacting to the situation after the collapse of the socialist regime's "macro structures" (centralised party-states and administered economies). In particular they "produce autonomous effects that may have unexpected influence over the [new] structures that have been emerging" in post-socialism (Burawoy & Verdery 1999, p. 2). Thus, members of the Brashovan community partaking in these economies shall not be perceived as mere observers of larger processes "happening to them", but as participants in these processes, as people who are competent in "making some sense of the world around them" (Humphrey 2002, p. xvii).

In terms of this ability of people to react to changing political-economic conditions, I argue that despite the practice of favouring that emerged under specific circumstances (for instance, institutional constraints imposed by the socialist regime), and later in the post-socialist period (that is, after the establishment of a market economy and an independent state) favouring was transformed, while at the same time maintaining its importance and moral dimension for people. Despite being built on the traditional parameters of village community (morality, solidarity, common belonging, rural- or agriculture-based cooperation and socialisation) and having once been carried out from within the village's institutions, the practice of favouring actually later expanded into new spaces, namely the Schengen border administration, as a result of the changing political-economic conditions in the post-socialist period. Added to that, I also suggest that the observed agency, the de facto favouring of villagers with economic opportunities as part of a flourishing, informal, cross-border business not only improved people's economic prospects during a crisis-laden 1990s, it also ensured the continuity of an actually informalised operation of state institutions (according to community values) in the post-socialist period. Then I broaden my argument by theorising the relation between people's economies and the state border through Scott's (1990) concept of *hidden transcript*, and suggest that the continual, morally-based agency of the Brisudskyy family network can be understood as a crucial practice of influencing the functioning of the state long-term.

FAMILY NETWORK, VILLAGE INSTITUTIONS AND THE BORDER

Brashovo experienced the consequences of the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the creation of an independent Ukrainian state in 1991. Hyperinflation of the

official currency caused the collapse of state production and distribution chains, while chaotic privatisation of previously state-owned properties (including the *kol-hosps*) left the vast majority of Brashovans without official livelihoods. Moreover, “political instability hindered the building of functional administrative institutions like tax authorities, and escaping into the untaxed shadow economy was easy” (Sutela 2012, p. 4).

People remember this period as a time when their livelihoods depended on intensive cooperation within the village community. Villagers solved vast shortages in state food production by partial subsistence and reciprocal exchange of home-based products. The lack of official services was addressed through the exchange of resources (wood for heating, house building products) and trading of skilled assistance between neighbours (expert services were favoured between locals). Even though households “started preferring to count what, to whom and in what amount was given [sic]” (sixty-year-old Oksana), locals still stress today the importance of the inter-familial networks’ everyday economies for their survival in the early 1990s. Hence, since the emergence of independent Ukraine, Brashovans have improvised in terms of livelihood strategies and have used already-established channels of favouring that function in parallel with the official economy.

The change that provided people with economic opportunities was the transformation of the international border. In particular, the opening of a new border-crossing in 1995 between the villages of Ubla and Malyy Berezhnyy, not far from Brashovo, and the later admission of Slovakia into EU caused what Jessica Allina-Pisano (2009, p. 274) described as an “explosion of trade”. In Brashovo the price difference and softening of the border-regime caused a similar demand for cheap spirits, tobacco products and sweets, as Allina-Pisano observed in another Transcarpathian village, while in Brashovo these commodities were sold predominantly in kiosks along the village’s main street, which profoundly changed its appearance.¹¹ There were, however, more profitable ways of improving the economic situation, according to villagers.

One of them was cyclical economic migration through the newly-established border crossing, mostly to Czechia’s Moravia region, where some Brashovans have had distant relatives since Czechoslovak rule in Transcarpathia.¹² Even today, work migration to Czechia (or other nearby countries) in organised travelling groups remains a popular strategy for improving people’s financial situation.

However, there were different, more ‘shadowy’ economic strategies for which Brashovo became known for being ‘smugglers’ village’, and which offered “instant, big money” (Borys, former smuggler). Because of the introduced quantity limits on transferring the most popular commodities (tobacco products, spirits, fuels)

¹¹ *Kiosks* were often run by Brashovans living along the village’s main street, who either engaged or were associated with those who took part in other forms of informal business (that is, smuggling).

¹² Another family link to present-day Brashovans exist in some villages in Hungary, where their ancestors migrated for agricultural work before the First World War. A few distant relatives of Brashovans are also scattered across Eastern Slovakia, which belonged to the same Czechoslovak state as Brashovo between 1918 and 1939.

from Ukraine to Slovakia, smuggling businesses flourished all along the Ukrainian borderlands, and particularly in Brashovo in the 1990s and 2000s. It is rumoured by locals that at the beginning of the 2000s at least one quarter of Brashovo's households directly depended on incomes from smuggling (of tobacco products, spirits, fuels), while at present more than half of them engage in some kind of informal economy (smuggling, petty-trade, or self-employment) or work migration.

As many past or present smugglers noted, it was more profitable to engage in smuggling from the position of belonging to a local smuggling network than to do so individually. Also, as one of the former smugglers, Oleh explains, engagement in a local smuggling group was not solely an economic decision, but a reflection of the importance of the communal ties for him:

I tried travelling to Moravia for some years, working on the building site. It was good money, but I missed home, family. And there turned out to be better options, when I was able to remain at home, make better money, and have people I know for decades around me, [...] I did what I had to do for my family, started to do some jobs for my cousin, who was very helpful in this, [...] who gave us opportunities, [...] because he had these connections at the border – relatives, neighbours who worked as border guards, or like that [...] It was not ideal sometimes, doing the jobs through the border, I had problems with law because of it [...] But there were always my people, my man, Vasil, who took care of me and gave me many opportunities to earn good money while still being at home.

According to locals with experience in smuggling, it was decisive that the network operating the informal cross-border business since the 1990s was the already-established Brisudskyy family network, whose leading members were considered “patrons” because they provided economic opportunities to their supporters from the community. Thus, the agency of this family network from within the state structures (favouring of job opportunities in smuggling) has remained recognised as a key factor for the well-being of the village community. Unlike in the past, favouring did not occur only from within the local state institutions, but from within the administration of the nearby border-crossing, which has employed a few members of the Brisudskyy family network, and thus represents an ideal space for establishing informal business in the post-socialist era. However, the Brisudskyy's way of retaining the position of communal leaders remained very similar to that in socialism. This is to say that it depended on a morally-plausible distribution of favours from the members of this family network to other local family-networks among the various ranks of the village community. These ranks comprise the supporters who tend to cooperate with the Brisudskyy family network and have been economically dependent on it since socialism. Or as former smuggler and supporter of Brisudskyy family, Roman, stated:

In dark times you turn to those you have good experience with, with whom you and your close ones shared the past... I did what I was told to [to smuggle], had a good life – same as my dad who worked under Uncle Mykola [Jr.]. And how I gave back to Brisudskyy's? The least I could do was to help them in whichever way possible, whether asked, or not... I helped them to renovate their houses, assisted on their family's or municipal feasts they organized, drove them to places... I was there, always, ready to give back one favour after another.

During the crisis in the 1990s, as before, another leader emerged, Vasil, son of Mykola Jr., grandson of Mykola Sr. It was he who built businesses upon fair and loyal relations with the supporters of his family network (in some cases lasting two generations) and took care of them. Despite not having experience with executive functions, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, Vasil, as his ancestors did, turned out to be a respected member of community. By utilising family connections in the administration of the border (relatives employed as border guards since socialist times), in the 1990s, Vasil's popularity in, and importance for, the community arose because he assisted in his peers' group-work travels through the border to Czechia and facilitated others' partaking in smuggling jobs through the border.

Proof of his importance for the community was reflected in the growth of his smuggling group, which started with around ten men and grew over the next decades. Moreover, in the late 1990s, he was elected village head and served the village for some twenty years (he was in office during my research) because "he remained important for people the whole time, offering us [note: locals] the opportunities when needed from both of his places, from the border and from the office" (as was noted by Hrihor, former smuggler).

Favours from Vasil or his close relatives to his supporters outside the Brisudskyy family network cannot be reduced to goods or money, although sometimes these are also the objects of favours, for which I have never known them to demand returns. Specifically highlighted by villagers are favours in the form of solidary interventions in cases of the need to provide livelihood opportunities to his supporters, or their relatives. During my stay, I observed mostly cases when particular tasks related to informal businesses run by the Brisudskyy family were assigned to members of other families by Vasil or his close relatives.

One of these was when Pavlo, an elderly former smuggler from Vasil's group, and his neighbour, sought to find at least temporary employment for his son Marko, a recent college graduate, and asked Vasil for his help during a private dinner party. A few weeks later, Marko started working in the municipal office as Vasil's part-time assistant and occasional driver of local, work-related group travels to and from Czechia (organised by Vasil), while some time later he admitted to also "smuggl[ing] a bit, here and there, according to Vasil's instructions". The return of this particular favour containing livelihood opportunities, the favour's explicit value, or any other details related to it, were not discussed or mentioned during my stay. Even though Pavlo and Marko seemingly returned the favour to Vasil later by their very pro-active volunteering during preparations for village festivities (sponsored by the municipality), all three (Vasil, Pavlo and Marko) emphatically stated that their favours were "cost-free". All three also stated that it is not future return, but the preservation of genuine and solidary relations within the community that is important in such favouring. However, one inference from this example we may draw is that despite the fact that returns are not expected after Vasil's (or his relatives') favours, such favours are typically followed by his supporters' efforts to benefit the Brisudskyy or the community specifically in areas of life where the

Brisudskyy family network's interests lie (informal business, local politics, and most visibly in public life).¹³

It is apparent that Vasil's social talent for negotiating with and leading people, that is, to instruct them and favour them with opportunities or resources, is still valued among villagers and influencing socio-political relations in the village since the 1990s. Vasil's facilitation of people's local economies, then, proves that in Brashovo, throughout the post-socialist transition, "favours have not disappeared, [...] because their implications are ongoing [...] and [...] simply because people are used to, prefer, and value highly acting this way" (Humphrey 2017, p. 53). The practice of favouring expanded into new spaces (border administration) since the emergence of the 'quasi-market', and thanks to Brisudskyy family-network's agency its morality- and solidary-based character has remained essential for people's economies and livelihoods. Hence, in the post-socialist period, favours maintain their original functions (outside of economics) for Brashovans, as these acts give rise to the "lasting relationships and circles of beneficence/gratitude, and [...] confer a sense of self-worth within these arenas" (Humphrey 2017, p. 69).

However, in order to understand the implications of such economic practice in its fullest, we also need to look outside the community and reflect on how it connects to the institution of the border, which has not only remained important for locals' livelihoods in the last thirty years, but has also been a space where favouring has been present. In the next part, I conceptualise these economies as constitutive to the institution of the border, and favours conferred as *hidden transcripts* (Scott 1990) whereby Brashovans are able to adjust the actual operation of the state since socialism.

BORDER, STATE AND COMMUNITY

The border should be understood as a state institution whose operation does not depend solely on top-down political impositions. Borders are spaces "where it is possible to see the potential conflict between the citizens and their state amplified to the maximum" (Polese 2012, p. 22), where "local moralities overlap, conflict, and partially replace the state morality" (p. 34). Thus, they are spaces "where the powers of the state are monumentally inscribed" (Wilson & Donnan 1998, p. 8). In order to approach the border as the expression of state power in all its complexity, we should consider the role of groups in negotiation with state power, while paying particular attention to identities, values and relations within these groups. Added to that, when approaching the border as a state institution in a *relational approach*, we consider the past experiences of people that shape their understanding of how

¹³ As in socialism, such mutual favouring was not limited to individuals or families of the same denomination or of any other demographic characteristic. Right to the present day, the strongest indicator for engaging in favouring with someone is past experience with the person's extended family network.

states should operate in certain settings. How is the image of the state negotiated by particular social-political units (e.g., family networks) that constitute it, and what of the embeddedness of actors in the functioning of state institutions (Thelen, Vetter, von Benda-Beckmann 2014)?

Applying this approach, I argue that in the context of the border located nearby the village of Brashovo, the past experiences of Brashovans with the socialist state regime are being reflected in their current agency. Thus, agency takes up residence in the subversion (and negotiation) of state administration via acts of favouring from public offices and institutions that have been run informally by local family networks since socialism. When approaching the border (or other state institutions) in its fullest form, we should acknowledge the influence of the communal experience with the socialist regime, and the position of local family networks that operate as units of social-political organisation, embedded in formal structures.

Looking closer at the character of the three-generational agency of the Brisudskyy family network in the context of its influence over state institutions, I propose this agency should be conceptualised as a *hidden transcript* (Scott 1990). Scott’s sense of agency resembles the *hidden transcript’s* form and function for locals, basically representing the overtly unarticulated, but covert everyday practices employed by locals to resist authority in a way that seemingly does not breach official regulations. Performing favours from ‘between the lines’ of socialist village institutions (while feigning compliance with formal rules), then, represents inventive and, at first glance unrecognisable, ways of subversive coping through inter-familial connections and according to shared moral and solidary village community values. Thus, influence over the operation of the border(-crossing) and local state institutions should be understood in terms of the continuity of this *hidden transcript* (i.e., favouring from within state’s structures, according to community’s moral rules) from socialist into post-socialist times.

It is important to account for larger processes enabling the continuity of favouring (in form of *hidden transcripts*) in post-socialism. As Hann (2017, p. 121) puts it, “especially when there was no stable currency to facilitate the functioning of markets [...] people fell back on the informal institutions upon which they had depended under the quite different conditions of single-party central planning”. In practice, the “personal connections became even more crucial in key domains of life, for example in obtaining a job” (p. 121). The unpreparedness of the state’s political-economic apparatus, then, should be considered a push for further engagement from the family networks in a state-subverting and community-supporting agency. Thus, on the larger scale of post-socialist transformation, “grey economic practices [such as favouring, in case of Brashovo] continue[d] to provide a safety net for many people, who in turn continue[d] to view them as moral acts, within the proper order of relations within families and communities” (Pine 2015, p. 39).

Therefore, if we are to acknowledge the actual influence of the village community on functioning of state institutions since socialism, we must also include this moral aspect of their economies in the equation, and stress that the informal daily

transactions within state institutions reflect shared morality- and solidary-based values, and a sense of belonging to the community. How does this perspective alter, though, in light of the recent situation in the borderlands?

SOLIDARY CONTEXT OF FAVOURS IN TIME OF WAR

Since the beginning of the war in Ukraine, the external Schengen border shared with Ukraine has been under extreme pressure. People have been fleeing the country to safety since February 2022, while simultaneously humanitarian aid has been flowing in the opposite direction. Border-crossings represent spaces where those migrating and those providing assistance have been interacting daily. The border-crossing located relatively close to Brashovo became one point of encounter; in February and March 2022, kilometres-long queues of people trying to reach the border-crossing crowded onto Brashovo's main street.

Brashovans remember this period vividly, particularly because they were providing assistance to people fleeing to safety, either on the border-crossing, near it, or in their village. When the waiting time was counted in days, Brashovans were aiding those waiting for the passage through the border by providing them with food, hygienic products or whatever they needed. Brashovans noted they were also keen to let them use their homes to rest before waiting in line for the border-crossing again, and the village facilities were also used for this purpose. Local families provided aid along the main street of Brashovo, where the people queueing waited in their cars. The Brisudskyy family even installed a temporary stall at the village's crossroad where refreshments were offered cost-free. The Brisudskyy's also helped those fleeing the country on foot by providing them with transportation to the border-crossing and aiding them in their passage through the formal procedures by utilising the family connections there.

The same kind of local knowledge and intimate relationships were also used on the entrance into the Ukraine, because from the very beginning of the war, material aid started flowing into Ukraine via border-crossings, including the one nearby Brashovo. "[T]hose who were carrying it needed to pass the border without any problems and delays, as soon as possible", Vasil Brisudskyy explained to me. He added that his network had a role in assisting the groups providing humanitarian support to get past the border:

That is our role, our duty, to work things out our way when there are struggles for others, for the country. It is our people, our rules and our border! When the war started, we knew what to do, we knew our people need to help those passing through the border from both directions. We have many friends from Slovakia who help our country, and for that they need to pass the border with hygienic products, clothes, and other stuff which is heading to regions of Ukraine... It is simple... when someone wants to pass the border with help, materials... I just talk to my family or neighbours who work at the border, and we sort things out at the border-crossing... It is our way of help, because we know how slow it is to get through the border sometimes... so we do what we know best, what we have learnt

from living by the border... We make the passages as swift as possible for people who are helping us, Ukrainians, because it is our duty to do so... by any means necessary.

Statements like this highlight the importance of informal agency, performed as a *hidden transcript*, which in recent crisis has involved local networks helping people fleeing the country and providing humanitarian support. Vasil's words suggest that during the crisis the established channels of gratuitous favouring (from within the state administration) extended the boundaries of the village community, and were actively used to express solidarity with people who found themselves in hardship. Although these channels, used in local people's economies, originate from a strong local foundation, namely, inter-familial relations within a village community, it is necessary to stress these channels' importance for the community in the broader sense of the word too. Thus, groups interacting at or near the border rely just as much on such channels. The recent crisis, then, allows us to perceive the moral underpinnings of Brashovans' agency, performed beyond the local community, with the aim of ensuring the well-being of groups currently in hardship. Hence, as the statement above and in particular utterance “It is our people, our rules and our border!” indicate, the everyday operation of state institutions follows the principles and rationale of the locally-developed favouring agency, which connects to the sociality and values of the village community, and which these days appears to remain solidary in its nature.

CONCLUSIONS

In this article, I focused on the local economy present in the Transcarpathian border village. Using the concepts of *post-peasant economy* (Buzalka 2022), *economies of favour* (Makovicky 2017; Humphrey 2017) and *hidden transcript* (Scott 1990), I reflected on the origins of these economies, on its functional logics and on its implications for the community and the current operation of state institutions. I suggest the practice of favouring, currently undertaken from within village institutions and at the border, and often illicitly, draws from the traditional parameters of village community (moral values, cooperation and socialisation in a rural setting). It can be understood as an inventive and enduring adaptive strategy of a resilient border-village community in terms of an changing political-economic conditions since socialist times. I illustrated that favouring within these economies not only serves as a means to an end in the material and economic spheres, but it has wider implications for the organisation of the local community (in the local leaders' structures across three generations). It also shapes village and network members' long-term participation in the actual functioning of state institutions. Additionally, I illustrated that agency within these economies, at first carried out from within the local institutions of the socialist state and later expanding to the administration of the border, has remained a meaningful strategy in recent times too. The ability to perform the favours, and

thus to informally operate around and through the border and beyond, then, turns out to represent a morality- and solidary-based strategy affecting the operation of the state and everyday life of local community. Such favouring has also taken its place in the form of facilitating the community to provide aid to those passing through the border during the recent crisis.

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MATEJ BUTKO

“OUR PEOPLE, OUR RULES, AND OUR BORDER!”:
VILLAGE NETWORKS, PEOPLE’S ECONOMIES,
AND FUNCTIONING OF THE STATE AT WESTERN EDGE OF UKRAINE

Key words: local economy, village community, state, border, Ukraine

This paper aims to present local state and border administrations in terms of people’s everyday economies (their function and purpose). Instead of seeing local state institutions and border administration from a top-down perspective, I present them as socially negotiated, since the days of socialism to the present, by locals who have lived by (and made a living from) the international border with Slovakia for almost eighty years. I particularly reflect on the social relations and informal practices carried out through the border and performed from within local state institutions, and the unwritten rules of people’s economies in a particular Transcarpathian village community in Ukraine. I argue these economies, carried out within family networks that form a village community (built on sense of common belonging, trust, and moral obligations to peers), have served to establish local networks as effective means for gaining control of public offices and institutions (including the administration of the border) during socialism and in post-socialism. Hence, the local economy is presented as a model of transacting within and between local family networks in the environment of the local state and border administrations, whose functioning is strongly influenced by sociality and practices of the village community. The community, I posit, had adapted to socialism as a state regime by developing a performative competence to act according to communally-shared rules, albeit sometimes beyond formal rules. Adding to the key influence of interactions and transactions within local networks’ economies on the functioning of the border, I argue that the economies here served also moral and solidary purposes in times of more recent crises, that is, during the ongoing war in Ukraine that has brought extensive traffic to the external Schengen border. Favouring as a key resource in managing, negotiating and ultimately subverting official structures and institutions should thus be considered a core strategy of long-term resilience of local collectives against past and present adversities.

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