

Chapter 8

Migration to the Czech Republic: Personal Stories About Running *from* and Running *Towards*



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8.1 Labour Migration as a National Policy: An Introduction to the Czech Context

As a receiving country, the Czech Republic perfectly illustrates the model of international migration based on a set of push and pull factors linked to the economic disparity between itself and sending countries (Sassen-Koob, 1981). Given the significant labour shortage in the Czech market and the alleged demand of Czech companies for a foreign cheap labour force, economic migration, particularly from eastern European countries, is on the rise, thus creating conditions for economic exploitation (Mezzadra, 2011).

Studying the Czech Republic in the context of migration reveals important insights into how the state introduced mechanisms designed primarily to encourage an influx of cheap foreign labour, failing to account for migrants' broader societal integration and take into consideration basic needs such as access to healthcare services, schooling, and so on. Given the often-temporary nature of employment, the migrant contract worker is excluded from pathways towards citizenship or the benefits of permanent residence, while refugees and asylum seekers are confronted with various barriers in their attempts to integrate in the labour market. In this regard, it is important to mention that the analysis was conducted before the Russian war in Ukraine and it does not reflect potential long-lasting changes in migration governance resulting from current institutional responses to the new wave of refugees.

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The focus of this chapter is to highlight barriers as experienced by migrants themselves rather than to evaluate the efficiency or nature of integration policies. In this sense, the chapter dwells upon literature that does not necessarily focus on the normative dimension of integration policies that reflect an idealised projection of society or version of an integration process (Erdal & Oeppen, 2013). Instead, by taking the perspective of interviewed migrants as fundamental, it perceives integration as a process defined by a continuous assessment of barriers and opportunities.

The chapter's focus are micro perspectives expressed in individual trajectories within the context of meso- and macro-level structural conditions. Drawing on 14 in-depth biographic interviews with migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers (MRAs) conducted in the spring of 2020 in the Czech Republic, the chapter analyses biographies of integration in the labour market. Particular attention is given to critical moments or those critical life junctures we name turning points that generate epiphanic, life-changing experiences. This approach is inspired by Denzin's conceptualisation of epiphanies as 'moments of crisis' that 'alter the fundamental meaning structures in a person's life' (1989, 70).

The chapter is structured as follows. We first provide background information on barriers to labour market integration at *macro*, *meso*, and *micro* levels. Next, the chapter introduces the methodological approach and elaborates on the process of recruitment and interviewing. We then follow by discussing the various contexts in which turning points and epiphanic experiences were described by the interviewed migrants. More specifically, we explore the critical junctures that led our participants to the decision of migrating. Then, we focus on epiphanies related to positioning in terms of social status and professional aspirations and, finally, we look at the transformative impacts of social interactions structured by discrimination.

8.2 Socio-economic and Political Context: Integration Barriers at the *Macro*, *Meso*, and *Micro* Levels

Since 1990, the Czech Republic has been an immigration country with the main routes of immigration being from post-socialist countries and Vietnam (Drbohlav, 2016; Freidingerová, 2014). The country's little historical experience with migration coupled with historically record low unemployment rates¹ and significant labour shortages lead to a high predominance of economic migrants rather than refugees or asylum seekers. In a context in which a large number of businesses rely on an inflow of foreign workers, government policies promote a vision of migration as being primarily short-term and regulated according to the country's economic needs (see Czech Government, 2015). For comparison, at the end of 2019, before pandemic restrictions were implemented, the Czech government approved 9.6% of the 1400

¹Unemployment in the Czech Republic was 2.4 per cent in April 2022, the lowest among the EU-28 (Eurostat, 2022)

applications for international protection it received while having issued almost 130,000 work visas for third-country nationals. Despite the Covid-19 pandemic, the demand for foreign labour force remained high: at the end of 2020, the shortage of labour was expressed in the 337,453 job vacancies officially announced. Of these, 80 per cent were made available to workers from third countries with a focus on jobs requiring only low qualifications. In the case of 57.7 per cent of available jobs, employers asked only for primary education (Ministry of Industry and Commerce, 2020) and over 30 per cent of available vacancies referred to the occupational category of plant and machine operators and assemblers (*ibid.*). The nationals of Ukraine, Vietnam, and Russia accounted for almost three-quarters of all foreigners living in the Czech Republic (Czech Statistical Office, 2021).

Following the outbreak of the war in Ukraine and due to the size of Ukrainian diaspora, the Czech Republic ranks among the main countries of destination for fleeing persons. As a result of European's Commission decision to activate the Temporary Protection Directive, the Czech Republic implemented the directive into Act No. 65/2022 Coll. (the so-called *lex Ukraine*), which entered into force on 21 March 2022. Temporary protection allows its holders access to health insurance, access to the labour market, education, social support. As of June 2022, the Czech government granted temporary protection to 380,965 persons (Ministry of Interior, 2022). It remains difficult to assess the extent to which the welcoming response to the refugee wave from Ukraine will affect the Czech Republic's approach to migration governance and whether the positive shift in the public discourse will be permanent.

As of now, the integration of migrants in the Czech Republic remains hindered at macro, meso, and micro levels.

From a *macro* perspective, barriers to integration result from an instrumentalisation of economic migrants through technocratic and economic discourses that view migration as an opportunity to access cheap labour. This viewpoint has been commonly shared among employers and emerged as part of official policy documents, reproduced by most political parties as well as by some social partners in the Czech Republic (Hoření, 2019). At the same time, the social, personal, and familial needs of migrants are marginalised. Instead, state regulations adhere to the principles of routinisation and institutionalisation (see Aguilar, 1999) of international labour migration through specific visa regimes in place that are meant to supply businesses with workers on a fast track. This 'managed migration' (Waite, 2009) strategy directs migrants to sectors that are lacking workforce the most, such as manufacturing, which are often low-paid/low-status jobs where they will usually stay only for a limited period given the short-term nature of the visas they are offered. This routinisation is furthermore maintained by recruitment and temporary agencies, which managed to carve an important market niche and capitalise on immigrant labour (e.g. Andrijasevic & Sacchetto, 2017).

Although the Czech Republic was little affected by it, the 2015 migration crisis animated a xenophobic discourse that framed migration in terms of national security (Čada & Frantová, 2019; Centrum pro výzkum veřejného mínění, 2020). This discourse of hostility was reproduced in the programmes of certain political parties

and, furthermore, was reflected at the institutional level. Integration policy practices have often been based on the assumption that foreigners represent a potential threat to the Czech population and their presence should be strictly monitored (Čaněk, 2017). Although the institutional response to the migration wave from Ukraine was largely informed by a discourse defined by acts of solidarity, it remains unclear whether this shift in public opinion is long-lasting.

Barriers to labour market integration are further deepened due to the low accessibility of social and healthcare services as well as schooling (Hoření, 2019).

At the *organisational and institutional meso* level, MRAs encounter a number of administrative and bureaucratic barriers. First, although NGOs are key actors in MRAs' broader societal integration (Hoření et al., 2019), providing administrative, linguistic, legal, social, and employment counselling, their efforts are often dependent on limited funding schemes from the public administration and high demand for services beyond their capacities (Leontiyeva, 2020; Hoření et al., 2019). As a result, their counselling is primarily focused on basic material needs rather than on career development. Entrance to the labour market is also hindered by the complicated and costly process of skills or degree recognition, delegated mainly to universities or regional governments (Čada et al., 2018).

Second, in order to bypass certain legal and bureaucratic barriers, employers turn to specialised agencies and intermediaries to recruit migrant workers. While employers save time and effort on the paperwork, these strategies may have significant consequences on the financial and legal situation of migrants who find themselves in a vulnerable position. The narratives provided by migrants suggest a risk of exploitation by these agencies, initiated even in the pre-migrant stages and not occasionally resulting in indebtedness and dependency. Most recruitment agencies that migrants from eastern Europe contact are managed by their co-nationals. Their contact is almost always provided by someone in the migrant's social networks. Alternatively, they search for contacts and work offers on social media, in groups used for sharing information and exchanging experiences (see, for example, the group 'Moldovans in the Czech Republic' on Facebook).

The role played by communities reveals barriers to labour market integration at the *micro* level. Recruiters are found in the migrants' own communities and such informal transactions of money and job opportunities prevent any official bodies, such as labour inspectorates, from intervening when abuses occur (Gheorghiev et al., 2020).

Nevertheless, faced with challenges resulting in particular from a non-immediate applicability of language skills and a weakening of cultural and human capital in the country of destination, MRAs are often forced to rely on community networks. Although this happens in particular during the first stages of settlement, the structural and cultural dependence on ethnic communities can become permanent and lead to ethnic enclaves and limited integration (Erdal & Oeppen, 2013; Mazzucato, 2008). At the same time, although they represent an important source of information and reassurance in situations of uncertainty, copying the strategies of more 'experienced' migrants can often result in following the same path that leads to precarious employment. In a context determined by structural constraints, however, the reliance on one's community for work opportunities is a risk many are willing to take.

8.3 In-Depth Interviews: The Methodological Approach

This chapter relies on the analytical tools of biographical analysis and adopts the migrants' perspective when identifying the crucial moments that led them to changes of course in their journey. The analysis focuses on subjective experiences, aspirations, expectations, and behaviours of interviewed MRAs.

The recruitment process began with contacting various gatekeepers who come into contact with migrants through Czech language classes, legal assistance, or more complex asylum services. Among the contacted organisations were the Multicultural Centre Prague, the Integration Centre in Prague, the Integration Centre in Brno, the CMAO, La Strada, Diaconia, and the Refugee Facilities Administration of the Czech Ministry of the Interior (RFA). Given the specificities of the Czech Republic as a host country, the sample we targeted was expected to include a significant number of economic migrants from third countries and complemented by refugees and asylum seekers.

In total, 14 interviews (see Table 8.1) were conducted (seven women and seven men) in the spring of 2020, of whom three participants are asylum seekers (one from Venezuela, one from Syria, and one from Russia); the rest are generally referred to as economic migrants. Among the latter, four are from Moldova (two Russian speakers and two Romanian speakers), four are from Ukraine, one from Russia, one from Colombia, and one from Venezuela. In terms of participants' nationality, it is important to mention that two of the interviewed participants hold dual citizenship (Venezuelan-Spanish and Moldovan-Bulgarian). Although the initial decision was to exclude European citizens, we finally decided to include these participants as their experience opens a particular case study for 'second grade' (as one of the participants put it) EU citizens. The participants' age group was quite broad, with the youngest person being 21 at the time of the interview (an asylum seeker from Russia) and the oldest being in his mid-60s (an asylum seeker from Venezuela). All participants came to the Czech Republic within the last 6 years, with the exception of a woman from Ukraine who arrived considerably earlier. Her story was still important to include as she gave a retrospective of her experience as an undocumented migrant at the time of her arrival. Among the economic migrants, we gave further attention to two participants who work in highly-skilled jobs (from Colombia and Russia).

The interviews were conducted in languages with which the participants were most comfortable (Russian, Romanian, English, Czech). One participant from Ukraine required that the interview be conducted in Czech while those who opted for English had a perfect command of the language. Language, therefore, did not constitute a barrier in any of the cases. All participants gave consent for the interviews to be recorded (on a mobile phone, in most cases). Given the lockdown and the Covid-19 restrictions that came into force in the Czech Republic, eight of these interviews were conducted online. Connecting with participants on online platforms did not pose any significant constraints to the course of the interview,

Table 8.1 Profiles of Interviewees

	Age	Gender	Country of origin	Migration year	Education (primary, secondary, tertiary)	Current occupation in the host country	Occupation in the country of origin
Interview 1, (Victor)	Mid-30s	M	Colombia	2014	Tertiary	Working in IT	n/s
Interview 2, (Anna)	Mid-30s	F	Ukraine	2016	Tertiary	Unemployed	Pharmacist
Interview 3, (Lena)	Late 20s	F	Ukraine	2017	Tertiary	Barista	Police forces
Interview 4, (Alvaro)	Mid-20s	M	Venezuela	2018	Tertiary	PhD student	Student
Interview 5, (Ion)	Late 30s	M	Moldova	2019	Secondary	Warehouse worker	Working in the military abroad
Interview 6, (Ina)	Mid-40s	F	Moldova	2017	Primary	Unemployed	Director of marketing cosmetics department
Interview 7, (Lida)	Late 30s	F	Moldova	2018	Primary	Cook	Unemployed
Interview 8, (Vasilij)	Late 30s	M	Ukraine	2017	Tertiary	Warehouse worker	Various odd jobs abroad in Russia, then Italy
Interview 9, (Leonid)	Early 20s	M	Russia	2019	Secondary	Unemployed	Student
Interview 10, (Sofia)	Mid-30s	F	Russia	2019	Tertiary	Marketing (junior)	Marketing (senior)
Interview 11, (Daniel)	Early 40s	M	Moldova	2017	Tertiary	Printing company (factory worker)	Graphic designer (newspaper)
Interview 12, (Naz)	Mid-30s	F	Syria	2015	Tertiary	IT	Translator (English)
Interview 13, (Maria)	Mid-40s	F	Ukraine	2000	Tertiary (recently graduated in the CR)	NGO worker (assistance to migrants)	Unemployed
Interview 14, (Gael)	Mid-60s	M	Venezuela	2018	Tertiary	Unemployed	University teacher

with the exception of one participant (a woman from Moldova) who seemed to be intimidated by what could have been another person in her room.

The topics of trauma, abuse, and violence were particularly relevant in the interviews with refugees, such as Gael from Venezuela and Leonid from Russia. When talking about their experiences, they led the interview at their own pace, with the interviewer intervening only when there was a need for clarification. It is important to mention that, prior to the interview, they had already told their story and described their traumatic experiences in detail to the authorities processing their applications for asylum. As a result, they were able to talk about their experiences in a more detached, but also well-structured manner.

During interviews, particular attention was paid to moments and testimonies that could be qualified as turning points or epiphanies in migrants' life trajectories. In the narrative-biographical inquiry, the interviewer was searching for recalled experiences that had a transformative effect on participants, marking a profound change in their relationship with themselves and the world. Instances of angst, depression, self-doubt, or disillusionment, but also memories of regaining hope and setting new plans served as important indicators.

Finally, this analysis offered an opportunity to reflect on the notion of positionality. The interviews were conducted by a researcher who is a migrant herself, which proved an advantage during both the recruitment process and interviews. The position of an insider with similar cultural, linguistic, or ethnic heritage created a distinct social dynamic between the researcher and the participants, with the main advantage being that most respondents were able to speak in a language they were most comfortable with, allowing for a more authentic expression of emotions and feelings. At the same time, ethno-nationality was not the only element that influenced the relationship between the researcher and the interviewees. The researcher was also a woman, a student, speaking both Romanian and Russian – all these identities redefined the notion of the insider and created context-specific dynamics. The only constant element that transcended different situations across all interviews was the shared experience of being a migrant, which gave the researcher an important insight into potential structural barriers that the respondents have encountered in their journey.

8.4 Turning Points and Epiphanies in Migrants' Life Trajectories

The research participants experienced epiphanies in life trajectories in relation to three major themes: decisive moments in taking the decision to migrate; experienced changes in terms of social status and professional aspirations; and life-changing understandings that resulted from interactions structured by one's identity, language, or nationality. Table 8.2 summarises the turning points that prompted epiphanic moments in our participants' subjective accounts.

Table 8.2 Typology of Turning Points

	Pre-migration TPs	Social status and professional aspirations	Language, identity, and discrimination
Interview 1, (Victor)		Inability to pursue aspirations (–)	
Interview 2, (Anna)	Looking to make a change after a failed marriage (+)	Change of occupation (+)	
Interview 3, (Lena)	War (–) A violent work environment (–)	Downwards mobility (–) Change of occupation (+)	Hostile work environment (–)
Interview 4, (Alvaro)	Persecution (–), economic hardship (–)	Inability to pursue aspirations (–)	
Interview 5, (Ion)			Hostile work environment (–) Social stigma (+)
Interview 6, (Ina)		Learning about the social security in the Czech Republic (+) Downwards mobility (–)	Social stigma (+)
Interview 7, (Lida)	Economic hardship (–)		
Interview 8, (Vasilij)			Hostile work environment (–)
Interview 9, (Leonid)	Persecution (–)		
Interview 10, (Sofia)	Meeting her partner (+)		
Interview 11, (Daniel)			Hostile work environment (–)
Interview 12, (Naz)	War (–) Discrimination (–)		
Interview 13, (Maria)		Change of occupation (+)	
Interview 14, (Gael)	Persecution (–), economic hardship (–)		

8.4.1 Turning Points and Expectations Prompting the Beginning of the Journey

I resisted until it was impossible for me to cope. Gael, 65

Most of the conducted interviews pointed to the fact that there had never been one single factor at the root of the participants' decision to leave their place of origin in search of a better life. The interviewees did, however, reminisce about particular moments that played a crucial role in their decision. These moments can be

considered turning points in one's life as they generated the crucial understanding that leaving is the best, if not the only, option. At the same time, the nature of these moments varies across experiences. In the examined sample of interviews, only in a few cases moments like that arose from personal circumstances. These circumstances were present in the story of Anna (2), for whom the decision to leave was prompted by the end of an unhappy marriage. As she explains, 'having divorced him, I simply could not stay there anymore, I needed to change my life'. As she had some acquaintances working in Prague, she decided that leaving Ukraine for the Czech Republic was the best she could do at that moment. In a somewhat opposite story, Sofia (10) moved to Prague from Moscow after marrying her Slovak partner. In her case, she explained that 'meeting him changed my life. I loved Moscow, but now it is more important for us to be together, and I don't mind a smaller city anymore'.

While representing important turning points in the lives of some respondents, these examples related to the intimate personal relations of migrants are hardly representative of the largest part of experiences described in the biographical interviews. In most cases, turning points from which the decision to leave resulted were generated from strong structural factors upon which the participants had little control. In most cases, the understanding that leaving is the only option came under violent circumstances determined by war, persecution, or economic precarity – or all. For Naz (12), the war in Syria was a turning point that changed forever her relationship with the world. She, her husband, and their daughter were left with no option other than to escape Damascus; they chose Prague as Naz's brother was already living for some time in the Czech Republic. At the same time, Naz explained that she was not only escaping war. Her desire to leave was also supported by a personal understanding of the lack of opportunities for women in Damascus, determined by socio-cultural constraints: 'From the time I was small, I wanted to move away; the traditions, religion, treatment of women, I didn't want that for my daughter'. Despite facing social constraints her entire life, the breaking point that prompted the realisation about her prospects as a woman in Damascus came when she was not allowed to choose what to study at university. Instead, an application to study the English language was sent in her name. The beginning of the war and the lack of freedom in choosing to study what she desired constituted turning points as a result of which she could not imagine her future and the future of her daughter in Damascus.

Lena's (3) life was also forever changed by war, except in her case, it was the war in Eastern Ukraine. Before 2014, Lena and her parents lived in Donetsk and enjoyed, as she puts it, 'a comfortable life'. Her parents both had good jobs and Lena herself was looking at a promising career in the police force. After the war broke out, however, their lives changed abruptly. Her parents lost their jobs and decided to migrate to the Czech Republic, while for Lena the turning point came when, as a result of political changes in the region, separatist forces took control of the institution that had hired her. As a reaction to the takeover, she refrained to work for a self-proclaimed government. In that moment, she chose her integrity and safety

over a career in a politically unstable region and she joined her parents in the Czech Republic.

While at a first glance the stories of Naz and Lena seem quite different, a closer look reveals noteworthy parallels. While living in two very different parts of the world, the pre-migration lives of the two women share striking similarities: their decisions to give up their previous lives were not only prompted by the violence of the war, but also by less evident, but equally traumatising, structural circumstances that they experienced as women. Lena's decision to eventually settle in the Czech Republic was not only marked by the collapse of her dreams when war erupted in Eastern Ukraine. She described an equally traumatising experience related to her attempt to return to Ukraine after living in the Czech Republic for a year and try to pursue a career in a region unaffected by war. Her job interview with an all-male group of examiners turned into a violent interrogation, in which she faced deeply misogynistic questions. This traumatic experience not only marked the decision to leave Ukraine again and for good, but to also renounce any prospects of pursuing her dream job.

In other cases, the decision to escape was taken in a context defined by political oppression. Leonid (9) is a refugee from Russia, whose life changed completely in 2017 when the Russian government declared Jehovah's witnesses as an illegal religious group. This had an immediate effect on Leonid, a witness himself:

At first, they went after official entities, they closed down the organisation and confiscated all property, and it seemed for a moment that was that. But as I was finishing school in 2018 and turned 18, I applied for the Alternative Civil Service (ACS).² I wanted to be a law-abiding citizen, so I officially declared that my faith prevents me from joining the military. I also explained that I'm interested in going through the ACS and become an unlicensed assistive personnel and work in a retirement home. My application was denied, since Jehovah's witnesses are forbidden as a religion. This is when I understood that the illegality of this faith doesn't concern only official entities, it would impact me personally, since I don't even have the right to apply for the ACS, and it would only get worse.

Leonid understood that as a 21-year-old Jehovah's witness in Russia he faced either prosecution for extremism or severe physical abuse if he was accepted to join the army. The prospect of extreme violence changed the way he perceived his future and the future of his family, and a decision was made to escape.

On the other side of the world, a similar situation was faced by Gael, a university teacher persecuted in Venezuela for his political beliefs. Gael worked as a teacher for 32 years in art schools and universities

until it was impossible to cope with the political situation. They wouldn't give me any chance to improve my situation at the university, on the contrary, they started to cut benefits, like the health insurance for my daughter. I couldn't get any promotions, they wouldn't improve my salary or work conditions, I was threatened and followed.

²Military service is obligatory in Russia with only a few exceptions allowed. At the same time, military service goes against the beliefs of Jehovah's witnesses.

The motivation to start his journey took a more complex form as Gael's intention to escape political oppression with his family was also motivated by the worsening economic situation they faced. His children's future and lack of opportunities played a crucial role in the decision to apply for asylum in the Czech Republic, considering that in addition to being terrorised and constantly under threat for his political views, he was also worried about the economic situation of his family: 'I was very worried about me and my family, because I know this chain of living. First, you don't find food, then you get sick, and then you die'. In his case, the urgency to leave the country was prompted by the worsening situation at the university, which was illustrative of both political oppression and economic precarity.

In a separate example, Alvaro (4), a young student who fled Venezuela, mentioned that, besides the immediate danger he faced for being an active member of a protest organisation, his decision to escape the country was prompted by a realisation of a total lack of opportunities there given the current situation. In a moment when the persecution of protest organisers intensified, Alvaro decided it was the time to leave.

These are important examples to note as they blur the distinctions between reasons to leave typically attributed to refugees and experiences usually associated with economic migrants. For example, although she falls under the category typically registered as labour migration, Lida's (7) pre-migration experience in Moldova is no less traumatising. After her husband died, she was left with two children and a lot of debt, with no other choice but to seek work abroad. She described the realisation caused by the loss of her partner and how it changed her:

I knew that I was going to a foreign country, among strangers, where I don't know the people or speak the language. But trouble and worries make you close your eyes and just go. And when you arrive, there's no warm welcome...like every person, I went through hardships and a lot of trouble.

While she wasn't fleeing war or political oppression, Lida found herself in a desperate, traumatic situation, out of which the only option to escape was migration. As Crawley and Skleparis (2018) also point out, a closer look at personal, individual stories reveals elements that defy categorisations – such as economic migrant and refugee – typically used in policymaking or academic research.

An analysis of lived experiences of interviewed participants points to a connection between the nature of circumstances that led to their decision to leave and personal aspirations and expectations in relation to the labour market. From this, it follows that prospects of labour market integration in the country of destination do not only depend on structural constraints and opportunities that new environments present. As Koikkalainen and Kyle (2016) pointed out, the chances at building a better life are strongly determined by pre-migration visions and personal aspirations, according to which expectations from the journey are set and plans are created. At the same time, these visions result from personal, life-changing moments of realisation, as presented above. Lida (7), the economic migrant from Moldova who was left with a lot of debt after her partner died, had no particular career aspirations in the Czech Republic; she was willing to compromise a lot and took any work the

recruitment agency had to offer. For her, career growth was not as much of a priority as was the mere fact of being able to work. The way in which Alvaro (4), the student from Venezuela, perceived the weight of his circumstances also influenced the expectations he had of his journey: his main priority was to escape both the possibility of being arrested and the lack of opportunities he was facing. Although he is currently doing a PhD at a Czech university, this was not a priority: ‘The situation was horrible, and I was ready to do here anything that I could – work, studies, whatever’. Similarly, Leonid’s (9) trauma and motivation to leave his country as a result of the persecution of Jehovah’s witnesses had a direct impact on his expectations and approach to labour market integration and resulted in him valuing his safety above all:

The [permanent residence] permit itself is not that important for me. What’s important is that receiving it would mean that I am safe. I’m not looking too much into career growth at the moment. I just want to have a calm life, not thinking about the police knocking on my door, have a place to myself, because I am a bit tired of living the life of someone waiting for asylum, and that’s all.

While there are clear differences between interviewed refugees and economic migrants in their motivations for starting the journey – which are then reflected in their expectations, priorities, and objectives – these experiences share in common the critical understanding that leaving their previous lives behind is the only viable option. Refugees and migrants often took their decisions amidst moments of personal or structural critical situations. These moments represent turning points; however, these could not be viewed as temporarily isolated, as the one and the only one moment. Frequently, the turning points accelerated decisions that had been triggered by a complex of critical moments accumulated in time.

8.4.2 Social Status and Professional Aspirations

I got the taste of this kind of living, actually doing what you are interested in. Anna, 36

As mentioned in the introduction, the growing presence of economic migrants in the Czech Republic is influenced by the acute labour shortage. From the migrants’ perspective, this means that while obtaining a work visa is not necessarily a challenge, the visa itself is issued for specific work positions within various programmes through which the Czech government directs foreign workers to sectors that lack workers the most. As these happen to be primarily low-skilled positions in manufacturing or agriculture, foreign workers are restricted in their choice of work opportunities. In practice, they would have to either repeat their visa application for a different position or find an obliging employer willing to go through all the necessary administrative procedures to facilitate the migrant’s transfer between jobs.

It has been already established that international migration does not only refer to a geographical mobility between countries. Its social dimension refers to navigating economic opportunities in the host country (Cederberg, 2017), following

professional aspirations and improving one's socioeconomic position. It can also refer to downward mobility, when the recognition of professional skills is not facilitated or when the condition of one's work visa restricts the migrants to a specific, usually low-skilled job, as it is often the case in the Czech Republic.

The notion of social status and socioeconomic position in the host country was a recurrent theme in the biographical interviews. In many instances, experienced transformations of social class were accompanied by epiphanic moments, in which participants reflected on their social position and how they viewed themselves. Before migrating to the Czech Republic, Ina (6) was managing the marketing department of a cosmetics store in Moldova. She lived with her two sons in Chisinau, while her husband was working in construction in the Czech Republic for over a decade. Although she often thought of joining him, the prospect of downward mobility was something that worried her deeply:

I also didn't want to move because I had a good job. Between us girls – I liked dressing up for my job, I liked the status, you know how it is... And I knew that if I came to work in the Czech Republic, I could only get a job as a cleaner, the choice would not be great.

Her perspective, however, changed completely after she came to visit her husband and learned about the Czech Republic from his acquaintances:

I was talking with this woman, and I asked her how much she paid for giving birth, and she says "Nothing, because I have insurance"! And I said, well in Moldova I have insurance too, but I still had to pay 400 euros for an intervention, but ok, for you the insurance covered it, but surely you must have paid the doctor something?! And she said again "Nothing!" In the evening, when my husband came back, I told him I want to live here. This changed my perspective completely, not paying anything for giving birth! I was shocked.

From this moment on, Ina imagined a new future for her and her family. Apart from introducing her to the prospect of a secure life and a reliable system of social support, the visit to the Czech Republic made her understand that she wanted to bring her family together, even if it meant that she needed to give up her job:

I understood that before, we lived in uncertainty, one of us here, the other one there, this is no way to live. I feel sorry for families who live like that, we need to aim at living together right from the beginning, and how many families are falling apart because of it.

Nevertheless, despite having found stable employment at a factory and reaching a more secure socioeconomic position, the notion of social status was something that never ceased to bother Ina.

Once she became eligible to be registered at the Employment Office, she recalled this particular episode when she attempted to change her job:

When I went to register at the Employment Office, I had to fill in a form on what jobs I was interested in or qualified for. I didn't know what to write because I didn't know what my opportunities were yet. The civil servant there then suggested examples like cleaner, housekeeper, and so on. This upset me and I told her "I'm not looking for a cleaning job, I wouldn't be here if I did! I could find that in 30 min by myself, I only cleaned at home!" She then felt uncomfortable and I don't think she really cared what I wrote. I understand that now, but at that moment, it upset me.

Despite a relative improvement in her socioeconomic condition, Ina was still affected by the fall in her social status. Parrenas (2000) introduces in this sense the notion of conflicting class mobility in reference to the increase of economic security as a result of migration combined with a sharp decline in occupational status.

Lena's (3) story, however, points to both a decline in economic security and to deskilling as a result of migration. As mentioned earlier, Lena fled the war in Ukraine. Upon migrating to the Czech Republic, her situation did not improve; she needed to find work urgently, at times illegally, in order to maintain the validity of her visa. She recalled a particularly painful moment while at a job in Prague:

I thought to myself, just look at me – a police officer, washing glasses in a strip bar. The truth was that my ego was so hurt, this was so humiliating. I felt extremely depressed. But I thought, screw it, it doesn't matter, at least I can make some money and my parents won't think I'm a total mess.

This crucial moment led to a strong sense of social immobility and to a negative epiphany about her lack of opportunities in the host country. As a result, she returned to Ukraine and attempted to enrol again in the police force, albeit unsuccessfully, as her story shows in the first part of this chapter. From here, however, her story takes another unexpected turn. After her attempt to return to Ukraine resulted in a traumatising experience when seeking to reintegrate in the police forces, Lena decided to forever give up at her career and come back to Prague, where she found a job as a barista. Working in a café brought upon an unexpected feeling of closure with her past life:

This job has a bit of a symbolic meaning for me. I used to hang out with friends in coffee shops a lot back in Ukraine, some of them were baristas, it's a culture that I am very familiar with. And I'm glad I found this here, I have friends stopping by to work on their laptops, or just to say hi, this is part of my social life.

Finding a job in a comfortable supportive social environment meant that Lena could calmly reconsider her plans and come up with new professional aspirations. While working as a barista, she has been slowly working towards becoming an illustrator. Her brand's Instagram account is gaining followers very quickly and at the time of the interview, Lena was again hopeful about her career.

Anna's (2) story highlights the fact that social status may also work as a motivating factor behind migration, as from her perspective leaving Ukraine was associated with a progression in terms of her social positioning. She was unhappy in her marriage in Ukraine, and after her divorce, she understood that she did not want to continue her life in the small town where she 'was born, raised and worked for 10 years in the same pharmacy'. Indeed, as Mapril (2014) indicates, migration also represents a way of (re)producing an economic position, which often leads to migrants distinguishing themselves from other members of society.

Anna's epiphany evoked her desire to change her social surroundings by moving to the EU. Her migration to the Czech Republic was not incidental, as she explained, 'the entire *Zakarpattia* is here, based on more or less illegal documents'. At the same

time, she explained wanting to distinguish herself from Ukrainian illegal migrants and she wanted to secure for herself a stable legal status:

I understood that I don't like this option, this semi-legal way, I didn't want to live like this. I want to be living here legally. Because otherwise, you are no one here, you won't be able to find any job other than washing dishes or cleaning.

Her desire for change was not only linked to her social surroundings; it also translated in her professional aspirations, which became obvious in another epiphanic experience. After having worked for 2 years in Prague and managing to save some money, she decided she wanted to try and pursue her lifelong dream of becoming a therapist – a decision that profoundly changed her perspective regarding her future:

As soon as I started to take the classes and go to this school, I got the taste of this kind of living, actually doing what you are interested in. I invested a lot of money, but I don't regret it for a second. I am trying to change my social surroundings.

The question of social mobility is thus one that strongly preoccupies migrants in the host country, even in cases where professional aspirations were not a central motivating factor for migration. Downward mobility is often accompanied by moments of disillusionment, disappointment, and doubt over the prospect of reaching previously set goals. When Alvaro fled Venezuela due to his involvement in student protests, he was hoping to be able to continue studying and working as a biologist, especially having obtained Spanish citizenship. Faced with the realities of the labour market in the Czech Republic, however, he had to readjust his plans:

Because I graduated in my country, I wanted to continue working in science here, I'm a biologist. I was looking for something here, maybe in the public sector, I thought it was possible since I'm a EU citizen. But for key positions in biology in the public sector here, you need to be Czech. In the private sector, there weren't many positions for scientists. I realised that although I studied science for seven years, that doesn't matter if you don't have an actual job in science. I started working in a kitchen, and then another one, then as a waiter.

The inability to find work in his field led to a reconsideration of priorities, with financial security overtaking whatever goals he had previously set for himself. As he had put it, 'if you don't work, you don't eat'. While supporting himself financially by working in restaurant kitchens or as a waiter, Alvaro did manage to eventually enrol in a PhD program that brought him closer to his field of interest. The choices he made upon being confronted with the realities of the Czech labour market highlights Alvaro's capacity to adapt and adjust his life trajectory while not entirely giving up on his aspirations.

In other cases, moments of disillusionment about following a path of self-fulfilment resulted in abandoning professional aspirations altogether. Victor (1) is a migrant from Colombia who studied architecture in Paris. However, the high living costs there did not allow him to pursue a career in his field. He hoped that if he moved to the Czech Republic, the possibility of becoming an architect would be more attainable. He first worked in a call centre, then in IT, before he finally

managed to find a job opportunity in an architecture studio. The turning point, however, came when the studio made him a final offer with a salary well below what he expected he would be making. When he was faced with the same financial insecurity that he was hoping he had escaped, he began to believe that his dream is out of reach:

I am getting older, I couldn't settle for offers like that. Even with that little money to offer, that job in architecture was very difficult to find, so I don't think I'll get another opportunity anytime soon. I understood that I needed to move on.

He now works in IT in a multinational company.

The subjective accounts presented above point to the fact that questions of positioning in terms of social status and professional prestige or ambition are often at the centre of epiphanic moments experienced in life trajectories of migrants coming to the Czech Republic. At the same time, these life changing realisations are situation-based: their impact differs in dependence on participants' life circumstances. They can have a generative effect, as in the cases of Anna, who became determined to pursue a career as a therapist after 'getting the taste of actually doing what [she] liked', or Lena, whose job as a barista helped her to find a socio-cultural environment where she felt like she belonged and gave her the comfort and the confidence to rebuild a vision for her future. For others, however, the experienced epiphanies in relation to their socioeconomic positioning had a rather withdrawing effect. Confronted with the realities of the Czech labour market – and with the field of architecture specifically – Victor decided it was time to move on from his dream career and choose a profession that was financially secure. In Ina's case, the sudden understanding about the socioeconomic security the Czech Republic could offer her and her family made her reconsider her priorities and the importance she gave to the social status she enjoyed back in Moldova. At the same time, despite the gained security, the downwards mobility she experienced never ceased to worry her and she still had a hard time accepting it.

This highlights an important aspect in relation to experienced epiphanies that change one's perspective on their current situation as well as their future: while these realisations are crucial and typically followed by life-changing decisions, they are situation-based and their permanent character is not guaranteed. When Alvaro understood that even after 7 years of studying biology he would not be able to find a job in the field, he decided there was little chance for him to pursue his dream career and that he should tone down his ambitions, focusing instead on his financial stability. This disillusionment, however, did not have permanent lasting effects. After a year, he looked into a PhD programme and decided that if he could not work in biology, he might at least try to continue his studies in the field. As in Ina's case, there are certain elements that 'survive' epiphanic, life-changing moments and resurface in the post-epiphanic life trajectory. This could be considered an indicator of agency in professional aspirations in some cases and vulnerability in the face of social positioning in others.

8.4.3 Coping with Hostility and Discrimination: Resignation, Ignorance, Refusal or Resistance

Some people think I'm coming from Russia. One woman heard my accent and called me a communist! Maria, 45

This section explores how experiences related to social relations structured on one's identity, nationality, or language can act as turning points in life trajectories of migrants in the Czech Republic. As already indicated, among migrant groups in the country, there is a high predominance of economic migrants from eastern Europe, which we reflected in the sample of participants for biographical interviews.

In the stories related by participants from Ukraine, Moldova, and Russia, xenophobic racism reproduced at a macro-societal level and imprinted at a meso-level in a workplace or during meetings with public administration officials was a recurrent theme. Fox et al. (2012) studied the experiences of eastern Europeans in the United Kingdom and established that the mechanism of cultural differences operating as a criterion for exclusion is present in multiple environments. It can be reproduced by the media or at the institutional level, it can also strongly impact social relations at a micro-individual level in the workplace, in the communication between migrants and authorities or between migrants themselves. As a general rule, in the British context, eastern Europe refers to Romania, Poland, or Hungary. From the perspective of the Czech Republic, the border moves further east, referring to the countries outside the European Union. The mechanism of exclusion as experienced by migrants themselves remains, however, rather similar, manifesting itself through discrimination in the housing and the labour markets, as well as in everyday interactions. Maria (13), a woman from Ukraine living in the Czech Republic for almost two decades, explained that she still experiences some forms of discrimination:

There is still discrimination here, I notice it in the shops, when I speak to authorities, in the hospital where I gave birth to my daughter, people often react negatively when they hear my Czech. Some people think I'm coming from Russia. One woman heard my accent and called me a communist!

Indeed, it has been already established that while some forms of discrimination may be experienced in explicitly racial terms or language, while other forms of lacking in human capital may also act as driving factors behind discrimination (Stevens et al., 2012; Kempny, 2011). An analysis of subjective accounts of these experiences uncovers strong impacts that feelings of being discriminated against can have on migrants' social relations and their perspective on life in the host society. When Lena (3) was working night shifts in a warehouse in Prague, she was constantly confronted with hostile attitudes, from both management and her all-male co-workers.

I was really young compared to them, and the only girl working there, sometimes I needed help carrying heavier stuff. Whenever I asked someone to help, the reaction was so bad. They had a problem with how I spoke. I heard them talking behind her back very often. Can you imagine, grown men bad mouthing a 26-year-old girl. For me, that was nonsense. At one moment, I couldn't stand this talking behind my back, and I told the manager in a half Czech,

half Ukrainian what I thought about it. They actually apologised afterwards, but I still wanted to leave. I didn't leave with a scandal, I calmly told them why I left and explained how they behaved like bastards.

In her new job as a barista, a job that she was happy with, Lena again went through a similarly frustrating experience, this time, with a customer:

"When you come to the Czech Republic, learn to speak the language properly," she said to me. She still comes by, sits in between two tables, and comments on how my Czech is gradually improving. It's so frustrating. Some people, when they hear I'm from Ukraine, their reaction is "well, thank God you're not from Russia!" That's such a weird thing to say.

This time, however, Lena's reaction was different; she understood the importance of learning to tune out such attitudes and not let this affect her job or the plans and ambitions she has for her future, for her own sake: 'Now, I see that I should just ignore these kinds of remarks, or better, laugh at them.' Prompted by a sequence of two similar experiences that acted as turning points, Lena's epiphany consists in the understanding that she doesn't have to fix or escape a hostile environment but that she can gradually learn to ignore it and focus on her own plans.

A similar story was related by Daniel (11), a migrant from Moldova who worked at a printing factory. For him, the ambiguous nature of identity and how a shifting context influenced the way he was perceived by his co-workers were illuminated by a particular situation at work, which constituted a turning point in his understanding of how he was regarded:

There was a certain fear and hostility towards foreigners. I saw that kind of attitude towards me, and it wasn't particularly pleasant. But at some point, the management decided to hire some convicts through a social program. They were wearing grey t-shirts, and I happened to be wearing one as well. And then, one of the Czech co-workers noticed me and suggested I change my t-shirt to an orange one so that I would be more like them. I stopped being the foreigner – that place was then taken by the convicts.

The language Daniel spoke and his nationality constituted a dividing line that was eventually weakened as a result of the apparition of a stronger identifier, which reorganised the group of co-workers. In this moment, Daniel reflected on the trivial nature of otherness, which made it easier for him to diminish its importance.

In other stories, the withdrawing effect of epiphanies resulting from hostile attitudes because of one's nationality prevailed. Vasilij's (8) experience is illustrative. He is a migrant worker from Ukraine who had recently lost his job and had to pick up a low-paid position through a recruitment agency to keep his working visa. At the same time, he was not able to afford a place to stay by himself, so he was sharing an apartment with several other workers assigned by the agency. Furthermore, he was systematically confronted with a hostile work environment:

I think this is often the case when it comes to workers from Ukraine. No matter the situation, the Czechs must always be right! At a previous job, I was verbally abused by a Czech co-worker, and this was one of the reasons I left the factory.

In Vasilij's experience, in situations of conflict, critiques against Ukrainian workers most often boil down to their language skills: 'I was often being accused of not understanding what I'm being told, even though I understood perfectly!' He was

comparing his experience with the time he was working in Italy. In his words, he never experienced discriminatory attitudes there:

There was the same attitude towards Italian workers as towards Ukrainians, even though I spoke the language very badly. In Italy, if there was a difference, or discrimination, then it was expressed in the wages we were paid. There is a difference in wages in Czech Republic as well, but that's because I prefer to work through a recruitment agency. I will always be treated here differently; I will never feel here at home.

Having recently lost his job and being forced to work through a recruitment agency again, Vasilij understood that there was no point in planning a future in the Czech Republic: 'I feel like I am being looked down upon, especially in Prague. . . I shall move back to Ukraine very soon'. The increased insecurity that came with having lost a stable job led to reflection on the possibility of his circumstances never improving ultimately contributed to his decision to start planning a future back in Ukraine.

This withdrawing effect was also present in the experiences narrated by Ion (5), a migrant worker from Moldova:

To tell you the truth, I travelled a lot, I worked in Europe before, in Spain, in Georgia, in the Baltics, there's really a big difference between my experience there and here. In Georgia, for example, I was met with a much more friendly and warmer attitude, people there are extraordinarily friendly with you. They really make you feel at home, even if they don't know you. In the Czech Republic, they are a bit colder. . . I'm thinking maybe it's because there are many foreigners here, which leads to many problems, so they tend to keep their distance from you. No matter how friendly and genuine you are, you're still being kept at a distance.

The crucial moment that made Ion understand how he is perceived and what his behaviour should be from now on came when he tried to show initiative at work and share some of his expertise:

The Czech management really doesn't handle suggestions well, even if I have more experience in some aspects. My wife had the same experience. We decided then that it is better to not say anything at all, if it's so badly received by our supervisors. They probably thought that look, "foreigners are coming over and are giving us lessons," they wouldn't have any of that.

Despite the fact that this was not an issue he considered a problem in countries he had worked in before, Ion understood that in the Czech Republic, his nationality or mother tongue can structure his social relations. He even reflected on possible explanations:

I think that the older generation believes that we're caring some Soviet heritage, that we're representing the "Soviet man" and I'd like them to know that I have nothing to do with the Soviet Union, in fact we, as a nation and as a family, we suffered just as much, but it's really difficult to get rid of the stigma.

Ion has also made another important observation:

I've also noticed that the attitude towards Moldovans is more positive when compared to Ukrainians. I speak well Ukrainian, so with my colleagues from there I spoke Ukrainian. I don't have a problem with that. And after a month or so, a Czech co-worker came over with a

map he found lying around and asked me, “Ion, are you from Ukraine?” and I explained to him where I’m from and pointed to Moldova, and I could see his attitude changing. And then after a while he says, “oh Moldova, you have amazing wine there! You should bring some over!”.

This is an important point because in the cases of other participants, interactions that were structured by an imagined hierarchy between migrants from specific countries led to important understandings of how status can be negotiated and a higher social status, as a consequence, could be claimed. Ina (6), a Moldovan national, had a similar experience to that narrated by Ion when she worked at a large factory with other migrant workers, many from Ukraine. Like many Moldovans, Ina is fluent both in Russian and Romanian, and often offered to translate for Ukrainians, Moldovans, and Romanians working at the factory. As she explained, this is when she ‘stood out’ among other migrant workers and became convinced of the importance to stress out that she is from Moldova, which is different from Ukraine or Russia:

Sometimes, like at the doctor’s, they would listen to me and then ask, “Are you from Ukraine?” But I would proudly answer, “I’m not from Ukraine, I’m from Moldova!” Because I know for a fact that they like Moldovans here; they say they’re hard-working and friendly. Czechs don’t say bad things about Moldovans, and so I’m proud that I come from there.

Understanding the mechanism of how stigma and prejudice can influence the impression they leave, Ina and some other interviewed migrants attempted to control their identifiers. They recalled similar situations in which they acted reflexively and showed critical capacities when reading the context that they faced. This highlights the fact that a categorisation of migrants into either victims or agents free of constraint should be avoided (Squire, 2017; Amelina, 2020).

Social relations structured by one’s nationality or mother tongue can have a strong impact on how migrants in the Czech Republic perceive their host society and themselves. The effects of these epiphanic experiences can vary. They can cognitively constrain from pursuing opportunities, as was the case of Vasilij, or they can be instrumentalised by migrants such as Ina, who quickly learnt about the stigma and the performative effects that various eastern European identities can carry. To a varying degree, discriminatory mechanisms should therefore be highlighted as an obstacle to integration on the labour market.

8.5 Concluding Remarks

In each individual story, labour market integration was determined by a confluence of life circumstances and personal aspirations as well as institutional and structural barriers. On a general level, one can locate shared aspects that generated turning points in the life trajectories of MRAs. These may include economic hardship, material and social insecurity, or safety and life-threatening circumstances. A closer look, however, reveals the unique ways in which migrants and refugees navigate

situations of insecurity, experience constraints differently, adjust their life trajectories accordingly, and make use of structural opportunities. When analysing the factors that led to the crucial moment in which the decision to leave was taken as shown in Table 8.2, it becomes obvious that the nature of these turning points varies across experiences and is not specific to the category of refugees or economic migrants. These moments of transformation can be sudden and straightforward, prompted by an unpredictable tragedy or they can accelerate decisions triggered by negative experiences accumulated over time.

The question of social mobility and socio-economic status was one that strongly preoccupied many of the interviewed participants. Faced with laws that prevent migrant workers from accessing jobs other than those assigned to them through the issued work visa, some participants spoke about experiencing deskilling that marked them profoundly and left them disillusioned with their future in the Czech Republic. Despite a relative economic improvement that some experienced, the negative transformations in social status led to strong negative epiphanic moments, a phenomenon that Parrenas (2000) describes as conflicting class mobility.

At the same time, these life-changing realisations are situation-based, their impact differing depending on participants' life circumstances. While these epiphanic moments are crucial and typically followed by life-changing decisions, they are context-based and their permanent character is not guaranteed. For some participants, there were certain elements that 'survived' epiphanic, life-changing moments and resurfaced in the post-epiphanic life trajectory. This could be considered an indicator of agency in professional aspirations in some cases and vulnerability in the face of social positioning in others.

Another important aspect that resurfaced in the analysed micro perspectives concerned social relations structured by one's nationality or mother tongue. In some of the analysed life trajectories, social interactions structured by experiences of discrimination had a strong transformative impact on how migrants perceived themselves and those around them. While in some cases these experiences cognitively constrained them from pursuing job opportunities, others managed to adapt to the performative effect of stigma and manipulate its effects.

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