

CHAPTER 1

**CONTEXTUALIZING POST-1989 MIGRATION
FROM BELARUS, RUSSIA AND UKRAINE
TO THE CZECH REPUBLIC**

The end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the former “Eastern bloc” together with the process of European integration changed dramatically the structural conditions for mobility inside as well as outside of Central and Eastern Europe.

First, there were substantial changes in border regimes. In general, borders became more permeable and everyone from the eastern part of the former Iron Curtain was formally granted a previously non-existing right to obtain a passport and cross borders. In reality, the permeability of borders has been selective and it has shifted continuously with the changing geopolitical landscape of Europe. For example, the border regimes between the Czech Republic and the countries of the former Soviet Union were very liberal in the 1990s as compared to the current situation, without visa regulations and with the possibility to apply for a residence permit on the territory of the Czech Republic. Along with the gradual integration of the Czech Republic into the European Union and the adoption of its regulations, and with changing social and economic conditions in the Czech Republic, especially growing unemployment, the visa regime towards the countries of the former Soviet Union has been introduced. Since 2000, application for a residence permit must be made at the embassies of the Czech Republic outside of its territory (Baršová, Barša 2005: 221–224).

For a large part of the population in Central and Eastern Europe, the transition to a market economy meant significant ruptures in their everyday lives as well as life trajectories. The impact of the political and economic crises accompanying the transition towards a market economy varied significantly across the region. Especially in the 1990s and with varying continuities also throughout the 2000s, many regions of the former Soviet Union, including Russia and Ukraine, and

to a lesser degree also Belarus, were hit heavily and substantial parts of the population plunged into poverty when they lost their jobs or salaries. Most of the countries of the former Soviet Union – with the exception of Belarus – went through the process of the dissolution of the state in the 1990s, experiencing social disorganization and disintegration and a dramatic decrease in the level of social protection against the effects of increasing poverty due to unemployment and low or non-existing wages.

In the Czech Republic, the scope and intensity of the changes were felt less heavily due to less dramatic economic effects of transformation. In 1998, the GDP per capita was 12,197 US dollars in the Czech Republic as compared to 6,318 in Belarus, 6,186 in Russia and 3,130 in Ukraine. In 1998, 92 percent of Ukrainians and 78 percent of Belarusians felt they were not able to buy what they needed with their incomes from primary employment as compared to 42 percent of Czechs (Wallace, Stola 2001: 9). The effects of rising unemployment on the lives of the Czech population were mitigated by relatively stable welfare state protection (Drahokoupil, Myant 2013: 285 – 321). Drahokoupil and Myant have noted a remarkable difference between the countries of Central and Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union with respect to patterns of un/employment. While in Central and Eastern European countries such as the Czech Republic or Slovakia, there were significant drops in employment rates, in the Commonwealth of the Independent States, employment remained high but salaries decreased significantly or were not paid. Due to the low level of social protection for the unemployed in these countries and some degree of social protection from the employers of large companies, workers preferred to stay in employment. Moreover, salaries were often paid through a barter-system – in goods (Drahokoupil, Myant 2013: 290)

Migration became one of the most important strategies for overcoming the effects of the socio-economic transformation from the systems of state-socialist economies to market economies in Central and Eastern Europe that led to dramatic changes in employment and living standards for a majority of the population (Drahokoupil, Myant 2013: 292). Wallace and Stola (2001) have pointed to the remarkable diversity of mobility patterns in the Central and Eastern European region after 1989. Large numbers of people in the region have used their

right to mobility as a means of adapting to social, political and economic changes. Many have decided to seek temporary work abroad in order to escape poverty and provide a better living standard for their families. In response to growing insecurity about the future, many also have relocated permanently to places with safer living prospects. Others have used the newly emergent opportunities for mobility to advance their career prospects, business opportunities or to reunite with their relatives living abroad. Besides circular or long-term migration for work, study or family reasons, large-scale resettlement practices have occurred as a result of the outburst of nationalism in the region when hundreds of thousands of people “returned” to nation states of the same ethnonational affiliation (see, for example, Brubaker 1998).

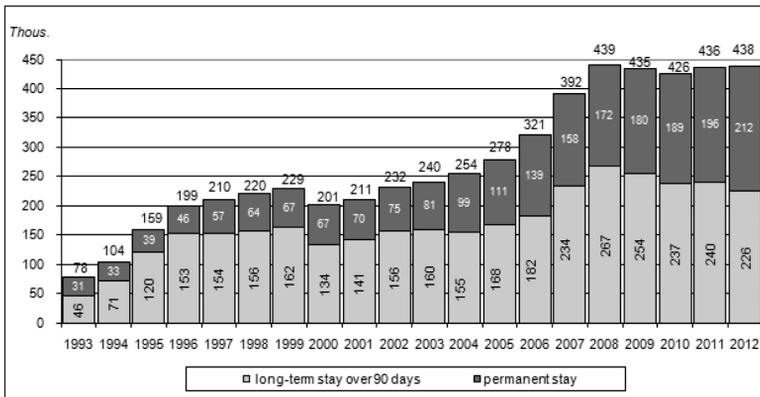
Mobility practices, as well as their scope and intensity, have varied significantly across Central and Eastern Europe. All of these countries became both places that people were leaving in quest for opportunities for working and/or living abroad as well as places of temporary or permanent immigration. The Czech Republic gradually became a country of immigration, with more people moving in than leaving (Drbohlav 2011).

The aim of this chapter is to outline the context of immigration from Belarus, Ukraine and Russia to the Czech Republic. I first discuss briefly post-1989 immigration to the Czech Republic and its perception in the political and broader public sphere. Next, I turn to a discussion of the formation of mainstream research on migration in the Czech context as one of the ways to describe how international migration has been perceived in Czechia. I depart from the observation of Bommers and Thränhardt (2010), who note a close connection between the ways international migration has been approached by the nation state and scientific research agendas and frameworks. I also briefly depict the research conducted to date among immigrants from Belarus, Russia and Ukraine. The final part of the chapter is devoted to the context of emigration of the migrants from these three countries. I describe it using examples of the migration trajectories of some of the participants in my research.

THE CZECH REPUBLIC AS AN IMMIGRATION COUNTRY?

In 1993, the newly established Czech Republic had a population of 10.3 million with 78,000 registered foreign residents (CSO 2014). Being until then predominantly a space of emigration, the country experienced rapid growth in its foreign population. While in 1993, there were 78,000 registered foreigners in the Czech Republic, their number rose rapidly, reaching 199,000 in 1996. By 2012, it had more than doubled to 438,000 migrants (CSO 2012) (see Figure 1). The rapid growth of immigration led Drbohlav (2011) to label the Czech Republic the “migratory Goliath of Central and Eastern Europe”, as the proportion of immigrants has been the highest in the region of the former Eastern bloc. The status of the Czech Republic as an immigration country refers, however, to the growing trend of immigration and not to the attitude of the Czech state towards immigration.

Figure 1 Number of foreigners in the Czech Republic between 1993 and 2012 by type of residence



Source: CSO 2012

The Czech Republic became a target country for migrants coming predominantly from countries with historical political links to the Czech Republic/Czechoslovakia, most of them being also neighboring countries or countries in the region of Central and Eastern Europe. The top five countries of origin of the migrants in the Czech Republic have been Ukraine, Slovakia, Vietnam, Russia and Poland.

Čaněk has argued that the remarkable growth in immigration to the Czech Republic is the result of its integration into global labor markets in the 1990s. Towards the end of the 1990s, this process was reinforced by state policies focused on attracting foreign direct investments that brought many multinational companies to the Czech Republic, creating a demand for both skilled and especially, cheap unskilled labor (Čaněk 2014).⁶ A large part of the migrant population in the Czech Republic works in low-skilled positions, especially in the manufacturing and construction industries, where jobs are characterized by insecure working conditions and a low level of prestige. At the same time, there has been a considerable proportion of self-employed immigrants, especially in the field of trade and retail. A substantial number of migrants are also employed in highly skilled jobs in the primary labor market (Rákoczyová, Trbola 2009). Previous research has suggested that the country of origin of the migrants probably functions as one of the most important qualifications for the distribution of positions on the Czech labor market with “Western immigrants” occupying more qualified jobs in the primary labor market and “Eastern immigrants” having a higher probability of acquiring low-skilled jobs in the secondary labor market (Grygar, Čaněk, Černík 2006).

In addition, the changing geopolitical landscape in Central and Eastern Europe since the 1990s has significantly influenced not only mobility patterns in the region but also the character of the Czech Republic as a context of reception for immigrants. While during the 1990s and until 2004, the Czech Republic was located on the borders of the European Union countries Germany and Austria, since 2004, the Czech Republic has joined the European Union and subsequently, the Schengen zone of free movement in 2007. The inclusion of the Czech Republic into the European Union has increased its attractiveness as a destination country but at the same time, it has become more difficult for people outside of the European Union, especially non-Western migrants, to get in. The Eastern enlargement process has reinforced the division within Central and Eastern Europe with

⁶ Besides labor migration, before 2004, when the Czech Republic entered the European Union, there was a considerable influx of asylum seekers, predominantly from the former Soviet Union, seeking more secure lives in the Czech Republic or elsewhere in Western Europe (see, for example, Szczepaniková 2008).

respect to mobility. While Slovak and Polish immigrants to the Czech Republic have become privileged citizens of European Union countries, the citizens of Belarus, Russia and Ukraine became third-country nationals with more complicated access to visas and residence permits and greater vulnerability to changes in immigration policies.

The perception of immigration in the Czech Republic has changed since 1989. Until the late 1990s, migration to the Czech Republic was considered a temporary phenomenon and the Czech Republic was seen as a transit country for migration to Western Europe. Only transit and unauthorized migration was an issue for Czech authorities as a part of state's changing political position after the fall of the Iron Curtain and on its way to the European Union. Although immigration was growing at that time, it remained at the edge of attention for the Czech administration and the public until the end of the 1990s. Towards the end of the decade, immigration attracted public and political attention in the context of the economic recession and rising unemployment, and migrants became associated with criminal and illegal activities, garnering considerable attention from the media (Čaněk, Čížinský 2011: 331- 332).

In the context of adaptation of migration legislation to the requirements of the European Union, as well as growing immigration, the Czech administration has begun to develop immigration policies as well as policies for the integration of immigrants, recognizing the fact that immigration had become a permanent phenomenon (Baršová, Barša 2005). Kušniráková and Čížinský (2011) have observed a shift over time in Czech migration policies, from a liberal-circular to a more restrictive-integration approach. Comparing the 1990s and the first decade of the new millennium, border crossing and residency have become increasingly more difficult to achieve, but the state has begun to support the integration of immigrants, albeit only to a limited extent and with a focus on long-term residents. A temporary and circular logic has persisted, as the state has actively encouraged migrants to leave during times of economic decline. Moreover, there has been a tendency to encourage the immigration and integration of high-skilled migrants and their families and to prefer circularity for low-skilled migrants (Kušniráková, Čížinský 2011).

Immigration to the Czech Republic has not become one of the most important political topics, as has been the case in many Western

European countries such as France or the Netherlands. The Ministry of Interior of the Czech Republic, which has been the major player in the field of the politics of migration, has strived to deal with migration predominantly as an apolitical, technical issue, emphasizing a security point of view on migration (Čaněk 2013; Kušniráková, Čížinský 2011). Immigration has been a marginal topic for a majority of the political parties and their attitudes towards immigration have not been divided by the right-left orientation. Only recently has there been a trend towards greater politicization of immigration to Czechia. In the last parliamentary elections in 2013, a newly emerged populist political party *Úsvit přímé demokracie* (The Dawn of Direct Democracy) brought a discourse about “maladjusted immigrants” into the political debate. But as Čaněk has rightly pointed out, it has not been very intelligible in the Czech context, where the term “maladjusted” has been linked to social groups such as the unemployed, the Roma, the poor and the homeless, while immigrants are associated with work rather than unemployment (Čaněk 2013). At the same time, the images of burning suburbs in Western European countries and the discourse on the “failure of multiculturalism” and “failed integration” dominating political as well as academic discussions on immigration to Western Europe (Alexander 2013) have been invoked in the public debate on immigration to Czechia⁷.

Public opinion polls have repeatedly shown that immigration has predominantly been perceived negatively by Czechs, who have connected immigration with an increase in criminality, unemployment of the native population and health risks. Despite the significant contribution of migrants to the country’s economy, the Czech population has expressed rather low support for the employment of foreigners in the Czech Republic and immigration has been seen predominantly as a threat. Further, Czechs have not supported the permanent settlement of immigrants and the state’s expenditures on their integration. These surveys have also shown that the majority of Czechs has rejected the idea of multiculturalism, instead favoring the assimilation of immigrants (Leontiyeva 2009; CVVM 2013a; CVVM 2013b). According to the surveys, immigrants are expected to speak Czech and to have

⁷ A recent example is a TV debate with the title: “Shall we accept thousands of refugees from Muslim countries?” (Czech TV, 2014).

a job as the most important preconditions in order not to be perceived as foreigners by the overwhelming majority of Czechs. Having the same skin color has been considered the least important from the list of characteristics of “good” immigrants, yet it has been perceived as important by more than one third of the Czech public (CVVM 2013c).

Immigrants coming to the Czech Republic have encountered a rather ethnonationally homogeneous population, although this tends to vary slightly depending on the region and the city. In 2001, the vast majority (94%) of the inhabitants of Czechia declared Czech (90%), Moravian (4%) or Silesian (0.1%) nationality, which is an unmarked non-minority ethnicity with Czech as the mother tongue. The largest ethnonational minorities were Slovak, Roma, Polish, Ukrainian and Vietnamese (CSO 2003). Historically, the share of ethnonational groups other than Czechs inhabiting the Czech lands was much larger, with Germans accounting for one third of the population of the Czech lands in the Czechoslovak “First” Republic (1918–1939) that was formed after the World War I and the dissolution of the multiethnic Austro-Hungarian Empire. Besides the Czechs and Slovaks forming the Czechoslovak nation, prewar Czechoslovakia was inhabited by large ethnonational groups of Germans, Hungarians, Transcarpathian Ukrainians (*Rusíni*) and Poles, who held the status of national minorities. After World War II, Germans and some Hungarians were displaced as national enemies and Czechoslovakia was constructed as a state of a Slavic nation of Czechs and Slovaks (Hanzlová 2004), which came to an end through the dissolution of Czechoslovakia in 1993 and the formation of the Czech Republic.

THE CONTEXT OF RECEPTION FOR IMMIGRANTS IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC: SCRUTINIZING MIGRATION RESEARCH

The conception of the Czech nation has been based on an ethno-cultural rather than a civic-territorial model of the nation, with an emphasis on shared descent and native culture (Holý 2010: 58). Unlike the national narratives of immigration countries such as the United States, Canada or Australia, immigration has not been a part of the Czech national narrative with established meanings and a firm place