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Mongolians dreaming their Czech dream: The long wait for visas - no guarantee of success

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Abstract:

The Czech media have recently been reporting on the influx of migrant workers from Mongolia. An article from Ulaanbaatar explains the challenges faced by those seeking work in the Czech Republic.

“It's been six months since I applied for a working visa for the Czech Republic. I had to borrow 1500 euro and pawn my flat. I had no more money to pay the interest, so I lost my flat and I'm still waiting for the visa,” says Undarmaa, a secondary school teacher, describing her misery. The queue outside the Czech embassy in Ulaanbaatar has dozens of Mongolians in it. Their stories have much in common. “I couldn't live on my salary any longer, it had been just enough to pay for the rent and food, but prices have gone up recently. So I answered one of the advertisements in the newspaper as it promised legal work in the Czech Republic for a thousand dollars per month,” says Undarmaa, who is not yet 30, when asked why she decided to try her luck in Europe. She called the phone number she found in an advertisement and had a meeting with a work agency called Realit Ton.

The agency promised legal residence, charging a relatively high fee which is, however, lower than for Japan or the United States. “I've been told I am going to work in a yogurt warehouse with other Mongolian women. The first month is going to be the probation period so I will only earn 650 dollars, then promoting to about 1000 dollars, although you are supposed to work up to fifteen hours a day,” says Undarmaa about the career prospects she has been promised. “I paid the agency 500 euro for the work permit; when the permit was issued, I was allowed to apply for the visa and that cost me another 1000 euro. They promised the visa would come through in two months, but...” says Undarmaa. Tuul, an older man standing right next to her in the queue, nods his head: his is a similar story. Undarmaa managed to pay the interest for four months with her family's support, then she lost her flat. The loan she took out was far too expensive – banks are not willing to grant loans for these purposes, so Undarmaa had to approach a loan shark. But she blames her misery on the Czech embassy – which works too slowly – rather than on the loan shark. Still, she is ready to go to the Czech

Republic: she seems to have no alternative, and hopes that the future will turn out well, allowing her to earn enough money. She does not know that Realit Ton has brought hundreds of Mongolians to the Czech Republic: either the agency charges its hefty fees and stops helping them; or it finds work for them but demands half of the salary in return.

Work agencies: business without control

Work agents in Mongolia mostly recruit from Mongolians who have worked in the Czech Republic. “I worked four years in the Czech Republic, I never had a visa, although my brother did. He is still there and I send people from here to him for various positions. Many companies there need a new workforce,” says Ariunbat, who returned to Mongolia using a false passport. “Officially, you can get work through about twenty agencies, and there are quite a few unofficial agents, too,” he adds. Strictly speaking, only two agencies have the permit to offer work; but even without it, they run no risk of penalty, so most agencies don't worry about it. Therefore, the Mongolian Ministry of Labour's 2007 statistics show that only about a hundred workers left for the Czech Republic through agencies. The Czech Statistical Office, by contrast, says the number of legal migrant workers from Mongolia was over two thousand in 2007. Czech work agencies are obliged to register with the Czech Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs – and about fifteen of them own a permit for Mongolia – but once the permit is granted, no more inspections are made into their activities.

Unlike South Korea and Japan – two other venues popular with Mongolian migrant workers – the Czech Republic, being a member of the European Union, is believed to be a country where laws and human rights are respected. Adverts offering work in the Czech Republic abound in the Mongolian press, promising to provide false passports and visas, education programmes, and various kinds of jobs. “I started thinking about working in the Czech Republic,” says Tuul, who has already worked in South Korea. “I've talked to about five agencies, and each of them promised a salary of about a thousand dollars per month, some even saying I could take my wife and kids with me. They say schools and kindergartens are free, and if I work enough overtime, I won't have to pay for the accommodation,” says Tuul with hope in his voice.

Like many others, Tuul trusted one of the agencies that promise the visa proceedings will only take two to three months. But things were not to be so easy: “The agency first waited for two months until the decision came from the Czech employment office. Once that arrived, it was thrown into the letter-box outside the embassy, and it seems it will take another four months before I am invited to an interview since the notice board says the list of interviewees is full till the end of August.” Tuul doesn't know yet that instead of being interviewed, he is merely going to hand in all the documents required, and that these will be sent to the immigration police. The reply will then take another three to four months. As a result, the entire process will take a minimum of nine months, rather than the two to three months which the agencies promise. “The whole family have made contributions for my journey, so I did not have to pawn my house, but two thirds of those who have applied and are on the waiting list are

expecting debt recovery agents,” says Tuul about the problems faced by those interested in working in the Czech Republic.

The crowds of visa applicants outside the Czech embassy are limited to two days of the week since the applications are only accepted on Tuesdays and Wednesdays, for a mere hour and a half, and following a strict order. Although the number of applicants has doubled in the past two years, the agenda continues to be dealt with by two officials only. In effect, the waiting time is increasing. The embassy is a regular venue for personnel managers sent to Mongolia by their companies to accelerate the visa proceedings for their potential employees: like the visa applicants, the Czech companies are concerned about the lengthy process. If they apply for new workers before this Christmas, the Mongolians are not likely to arrive before next autumn.

The building next door to the Czech embassy is home to the South Korean embassy, and the soldier standing guard outside explains, “We had queues building up a couple of months ago, but more officials were called in, the office hours are longer, and the problem is over. Work visas are issued within weeks, usually within a month.” The same street hosts the Japanese embassy, another common destination for migrant workers, and there is no queue either.

Czech Republic: a wake-up call

Even if the Mongolians are patient, they are not guaranteed a happy time in the Czech Republic. “When we arrived in Prague, we were taken to a dormitory, and we would be taken to different places, working for a couple of days in each of them. We'd been hired to work on construction sites but, in reality, we did a bit of pretty much everything: moving things out of buildings or working in vegetable warehouses, always for the agency. We did not work for any permanent employers, they would only hire us and pay the agency which first gave us only about forty crowns per hour,” says Gansukh who was hired by Realit Ton which uses the name Skif in the Czech Republic. Like other workers, he expected his troubles would be over once the visa was issued. Instead, things grew even worse for him. “They later sent me to Libomyšl to a wood-processing plant, I worked twelve hours a day, and the agency only gave me about five hundred crowns for food. I ran away after two weeks, I couldn't stand it. I have some work in Plzeň now, with no permit but at least I get some money,” says Gansukh. He occupies a small flat in Plzeň, West Czech Republic, with ten colleagues of his. All of them had been in the middle-class back in Mongolia but found it impossible to earn enough for their families. They come from various professions, including an army officer, hairdresser, teacher, bank clerk, and a former university student. Their dream of a better life in the Czech Republic is now shattered.

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Czech Made?

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