



December 2009

“My agency had an agreement with the embassy, and so we didn’t have to wait in the line.”
An Interview with Ariunaa, a Mongolian seeking work in the Czech Republic.

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Abstract:

Ariunaa (30 years old) came from the Northwest of Mongolia to seek a job in the Czech Republic in 2007. The interview illustrates the situation at the Czech Embassy in Ulaanbaatar at the time when Ariunaa was leaving Mongolia (2007), and focuses on the role of the agencies providing assistance with obtaining a visa and finding work.

Ariunaa has a 10-year old daughter in Mongolia, and although she got used to living in the Czech Republic, she is certain that she will return to her motherland.

Why did you decide to leave Mongolia and move to the Czech Republic?

I wanted to leave Mongolia and in the case of the Czech Republic it was only a matter of chance. I sent my application to numerous embassies and the Czech one was first to answer.

A trip to such a distant country with a completely different cultural background requires a lot of courage. What did you find attractive about the Czech Republic? What were your sources of information?

My friends and family told me about Mongolians who left for the Czech Republic and worked there in manufactories – usually producing shoes and stirring wheels. The very first mention came from my neighbour whose daughter worked here also in a shoe manufactory. I was still studying at that time, but I decided to go to the Czech Republic too, once I finish my studies. So I started to look up specific information on the internet, details about geography, the local culture, language and capital. I also tried to find out under what financial conditions do Mongolians work in the Czech Republic. From the information I had available it seemed to me that most people earn enough only for a convenient life in the Czech, but if they want to save some money it becomes a problem. Then I saw an advertisement in the newspaper for an

agency which I contacted and consequently also started to cooperate with. I was told that if I don't work in a manufactory, but for instance in a hotel instead, and if I work overtime, I will certainly earn much more. So I chose this agency as it was here that I saw a chance of finding a better job and earning a more sufficient salary.

Did you know which visa to apply for?

No, I had no idea. All I knew was that I was going to get a visa which would be valid for a year, and which could then be prolonged. All was taken care of by the agency. I just filled in the application, gave the agency my passport, my birth certificate, four photographs and in three months' time I received a work permit. After the following three months I was given a one-year visa, and after two months I left for the Czech Republic. So the whole process took eight months. Now I have a work permit for two years.

What was the situation like at the embassy at the time when you were applying for a visa to the Czech Republic?

There was a long line, but I didn't have to wait. My agency had an agreement with the embassy. We were waiting in a car, and when the representatives of my agency got a phone call to come in, we cut the line and went straight in. All the people around us were really aggressive and hateful, they had no idea what was happening. Our representatives told us that everything is alright, that all was organized exactly this way.¹

Did anyone assist you with the visa application?

I gave all my documents to the agency, and in three months I was told to come and pick up my visa. They also provided me with all the necessary translation.

Did you have to pass a personal interview?

No, nothing like that happened.

Did you know, at least roughly, how much were the visa and your trip to the Czech Republic going to cost you?

I didn't really know. I paid the agency \$1500 in total, out of which \$500 was supposed to cover a work permit, another \$500 was a fee connected to the visa, and the last \$500 fell on a handling fee to the agency. This cost included also travel expenses for my trip to Prague. When I came in 2007, I arrived with other 14 Mongolians. They too had jobs secured by an agency, but they paid only \$700, which covered the cost of their visas and work permits, but

¹ Author's note: The Mongolian interpreter adds a surprised comment on the situation, as it is by far not a standard procedure. She herself had to spend a night at the Czech Embassy in Ulaanbaatar waiting in a line under very unpleasant conditions.

meant working in a factory or a state enterprise. They also had to pay the travel expenses themselves.

What were your feelings when you arrived to the Czech Republic?

When I got off the train at the Main Station in Prague in April 2007, I was just scared, because there were so many homeless people around. Then I spent a month at home as I had no job, the same way as the other three women whom I shared the flat with. The accommodation was provided for by my agency. My friends and family were worried and kept calling me, suggesting to run away, because we all thought that I must have been kidnapped and that the mafia would sell me somewhere abroad.

What did you do in such a situation?

I knew that there were also other people in the Czech Republic who could help Mongolians with finding work, but I was bound by my agency. I was still hoping everything would turn out fine in the end and that I would get a job. There was no representative of the agency here in the Czech Republic at the time. They warned us though, prior to my departure, that we would be unemployed for the first two weeks in Prague and told us to bring some extra money. I had \$300, which was enough even for the accommodation. I did not know anyone here and I was all alone. I had an acquaintance about whom I knew that he also worked here, but I didn't have any contact with him. The agency manager was still in Mongolia, and every week there were about 15 more migrants coming to the Czech Republic seeking for work. The manager came after a month and I was finally employed. I started to work in Nowaco in Kralupy nad Vltavou.

Do you still work in Nowaco even now, or did you manage to find a better job, based on the promises of your agency?

I worked in Nowaco from May 2007 to September 2008. Then I was told that my visa cannot be prolonged any further and so I decided to change my agency. I chose a Slovak one, here in the Czech Republic, for whom I started to work and where I also had a better salary. None the less, not even they could extend my visa and so I went back to my former agency. I eventually managed to have my visa prolonged thanks to a Ukrainian company. Since May 2009, I have been working in a sweetshop through my Mongolian agency, where I prepare the custom made orders.

Did you know what the minimal wage in the Czech Republic was prior to your departure?

Yes, I knew it was about \$400. This is obviously much more than in Mongolia, where I earned \$100 per month on the average.

Did the reality meet your expectations about your income here?

Yes, it did. Even though my salary now depends on the amount of working hours in a week, and I sometimes work seven days and sometimes less, I do make enough money. Even my sister decided to join me here and she used the very same agency. Together we have managed to save enough money to buy a small piece of land in Mongolia, a very simple house and a car.

Have you yourself experienced any effect of the financial crisis in relation to your job?

When I worked for the Slovakian agency, we experienced the crisis all. Our initial salary was eighty crowns per hour, but then our wages began to decrease, first to seventy crowns, then to sixty etc. At the time, I worked in a factory producing yogurts. There were plenty of Mongolians when I started, but most of them were gradually being released. We were told that Mongolians are soon not to be employed at all, for the company is interested solely in labour force from the European Union. I was eventually also told that there is simply not enough work and so I went back to my Mongolian agency. The crisis is practically imperceptible in the sweetshop, because food production is very stable and people need it constantly. We also cooperate with Slovakia, where the demands are also high, and so there should hopefully be no limitation in production.

Do you know what the current situation of Mongolians is in the Czech Republic?

I think that there are only a few Mongolians staying here now. I was also unemployed for two months recently. Sure, there is the option of short term part time jobs, but most Mongolians wish to return back to our country or to continue in migration further west, to Austria, Germany, or for instance Sweden. There is not much potential for us in the Czech Republic anymore.

How do you yourself feel in the Czech Republic?

I got used to living here; after all I have been here for two years now. When I visited Mongolia for a holiday last year, I only realised how much I actually got accustomed to the Czech Republic. For example, I kept looking for a schedule at the bus stop, and I could not possibly understand how can we not have one. But still, I do not want to stay here. Life here is alright, but I have my family in Mongolia, and Mongolia is my home country, and that is much more than money can buy! So I definitely want to return back. I have acquired many useful skills here which I wish to use in Mongolia upon my return.

Finally I would like to ask how do you perceive the mutual relations between the Czechs and Mongolians?

That's hard to say. Some Czechs think that we are bad people. They can't tell a Mongolian from a Vietnamese and regard all Asians as one people. An example, I was walking down the street yesterday and there were some drunkards yelling at me to go away and stop stealing your food. On the other hand, there are also positive reactions. When I was in a store the other day, a random man came up to me and told me that Mongolians are very skilled people and called us the Children of Genghis Khan. It was just wonderful! But I do admit that some Mongolians here don't behave their best either. Such as when someone starts burning the Czech flag...This is how misunderstandings come to existence.

Thank you for the interview.

The respondent does not wish to publish her full name.



The article was created within the "Migration Politics in Crisis" project of the Multicultural Center Prague and with the support of the Open Society Fund in Prague.

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