



Forced travelling through time - back to servitude

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Abstract:

It is a huge mistake to assume that two Slavic nations have almost the same mentality. Despite the fact that I come from Ukraine, in the Czech Republic I sometimes feel as an alien from a different galaxy. In both languages we have words that sound alike but have different meanings. In both cultures the concepts of decency and polite behaviour differ. It is very confusing.

If we add very frequent bad attitude of the Czech society towards minorities from former Soviet Union we come to the conclusion that being migrant in the Czech Republic is not that easy. Not to mention that Czech migration laws can be compared to the Swiss cheese - not because of their quality but because of the high number of holes.

So, everybody paves his own path to the dream job in the Czech Republic. I would like to point out one specific phenomenon that can be seen in the groups of the season workers from the former Soviet Union (specifically from western Ukraine, Moldova and Kyrgyzstan). It is so called “**client system**” which in its functioning resembles medieval personal relations between nobility and its servants.

Nobility and its subjects

A “**client**” is an officially fully authorized representative who arranges all the necessities connected with the stay and work in the Czech Republic – usually, he provides accommodation and protection. In return, he receives a certain share from the monthly income of his “servant”. It is always a personal relationship based on the informal oral agreement which means that the worker is at mercy of his client. If the worker wants to end this relationship he risks the loss of work and sometimes also of his resident status. In this way the worker gets to the state of subordination. Due to the Czech migration laws it is really complicated for seasonal workers to get another job without the clients „help“. Thus, the client system represents a symbiosis of illegal practice and an attempt to fill in the holes in the legislation.

“I have a decent client”

To better understand the problem I asked a woman who has experience with the client system a few questions.

“There are almost no decent people among the clients, but I was lucky. I found the one who is nice to me and I have been working for him for 7 years now. I am very happy with him,” answered Natalie from the western Ukraine. She immediately added memories of her first experience.

“I ran away from my first client, my friend helped me. The client paid only 38 CZK per hour (he took almost 60 percent from my salary). He threatened me with the loss of job if I’d complain, and also he said he would beat me if I do not obey. He is a bad and indecent person. I heard that he is still doing his job.”

Natalie refused to give me her full name, because she is still afraid of her former client. Despite seven years that have passed since then. To the question why she came to the Czech Republic she answered:

“With my husband we were on holiday in Czechoslovakia, we really liked it there. Then, after a serious and long illness, he died – I felt very, very bad because of it, I lost him and then my job. My friend suggested changing everything, starting a new life and going to the Czech Republic for a job. I agreed and I survived thanks to it.”

Natalie also described why she worked for a client:

“I did not decide this, I had no choice. The work visa that permits to work without any mediator is almost impossible to get. I do not know anyone around me who would get it. Everything is much quicker and easier with the client; he arranges all the papers and looks for jobs. I get a higher salary than those who work for a normal employer. This might be because mine does not pay taxes to the state... But I do not know exactly how this works. And I am not interested in it.”

My last question was if she plans to leave her client and start working on her own sometime in the future:

“No! Why would I do that? I receive higher salary, I have a job – if I leave to look for a job on my own nobody will employ me. Due to my accent and my nationality. My client always protects me, even if I need to borrow some money, he helps me. We know each other for a long time and I trust him. I never had any problems with him.”

This article is one of the migrants’ contributions to the project Migration to the Centre and was created with the cooperation of the People in Need.

The article has been written with support of the Europe for Citizens Programme of the European Union and the International Visegrad Fund. The article reflects the views only of the author, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.



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