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Migration and National Identity in Plzeň: What's Brewing at the Heart of Europe?

Godfrey Baldacchino*, Petr Krčál**, Vladimír Naxera**, Nataliya-Mariya Mochernak**, Haris Gekić***, Jennifer Redmond****

Based on desk research, a site visit and 2 interviews with Ukrainian migrants, this paper examines the significance of migration as a Central European phenomenon, even in and around those practices which are deemed to be millenary European traditions. Pilsner Urquell brewery, in Plzeň, Czechia, serves as an ideal research terrain: a capitalist assemblage that brings together individuals at various levels (owners, management, specialised workers, manual labourers) with different identity documentations, statuses and origins, while preparing the traditional Czech beverage. The diversity in status and nationality is linked to the production process as well as to consumption – such as extensive beer tourism as well as alcoholism. In this way, the paper helps to establish the migrant as a constitutive and not an unsavoury derivate persona in contemporary Western society. Behind every glass of beer, there is a shifting vortex of human relations; the actors involved are likely to have different nationality, residency and citizenship statuses, different documents and therefore different rights.

Keywords: Pilsner Urquell brewery, Plzeň, Czechia, national identity, migrant workers, beer

* University of Malta, Malta. Address for correspondence: godfrey.baldacchino@um.edu.mt.
** University of West Bohemia, Czechia.
*** University of Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina.
**** Maynooth University, Ireland.

Introduction

The word ‘migrant’ pits together people whose experiences of migration, both now and in the past, are extremely diverse: slaves and spouses, refugees and retirees, nomads and expats, students and skilled workers, merchants and adventurers, conquerors and job-seekers, rural émigrés and urban escapees… and, soon, (more) climate change/environmental refugees (Miller 2023; Vince 2022). Migration or relocation deals with changes in the place of habitual residence, whether of a permanent or a temporary nature, of a shorter or longer distance and within or across states and administrative borders (Nejašmić 2005). The dynamics of contemporary global migration mean that various societies that traditionally experienced net out-migration have, due to economic shifts of fortune, now become net receivers of migrants (Steiner 2023).

We can identify similar trends in Czechia: although responding to modern demographic and economic shifts, Ravenstein’s ‘laws of migration’, posited in 1885, largely still chime. The primary motivation for migration is economic; the main targets of inward migration are urban and industrial areas; and technological change impacts on the number and skills profile of modern migrants (Ravenstein 1885). The range of opportunities and the conditions of employment offered by high-profile and long-established companies may also affect the number and type of migrants drawn to them, in line with Stouffer’s model of intervening opportunities (1940). For those with specific skills demanded by the labour market; for those having the will, time, resources and disposition to undergo training to secure such skills; or for the unskilled, ready to accept difficult and labour-intensive jobs, Czechia, Plzeň and the flagship Pilsner brewery may have become their final destination of choice, rather than a stop on the way to further migration.

Various contemporary negative connotations and antipathies surround the term ‘migration’. The regimes of illegalisation (de Genova 2002) that surround the practice of migration may be traced to a still-dominant, normative narrative which sees and represents history as a primarily linear story of continuing progress, whereby vagrant nomads, vagabonds and foragers become civilised settlers and householders (Puygrenier 2024). Hence, according to this ideology, to move and to migrate is evolutionarily antecedent in relation to ‘to settle’ and to ‘put down roots’. Such value-laden discourse also suits states who, by definition, are ‘static’ rather than ‘kinetic’ (Sheller 2022) and much prefer to deal with residents who ‘stay put’ (for tax purposes and voting rights, for example), rather than to deal with migrants who can be deemed to threaten and unsettle the national fabric. The 2020 EU Pact on Asylum and Migration offers the most recent set of new rules managing migration and establishing a common asylum system at EU level which, the EU claims, ‘will deliver results while remaining grounded in our European values’ (European Commission 2021); however, such results are hard to discern (Kużelewska and Piekutowska 2021). While freedom of movement is lauded as a key benefit of the European Union project, this is a privilege to be afforded only to those with the correct identity documentation. The rhetoric around the 2020 Pact still proposes migrants as a net risk and security threat rather than a net benefit to EU countries, despite the economic need for migrants due to greying populations and below-replacement birth rates in practically all European states (de Bruycker 2022).

This paper argues that the figure of the migrant needs to be torn away from the mostly unsavoury associations it has become straddled with in this age of securitisation (Bello 2023). Instead, it needs to transcend into a constitutive – and not a derivative – figure of Western society (Nail and Settle 2016). Sorely needed is the privileging of the primacy of social motion instead of the state, with the latter’s implicit territorial fixity, albeit with the outreach that accompanies governmentality (e.g. Jessen and von Eggers 2020). We seek to test this statement by examining the significance of migration as a central phenomenon even in those practices which are deemed to be millenary European traditions.

We have already observed various instances where so-called traditions, for example in food or artisanal production, are undertaken by migrant workers. This happens for various reasons, including a scarcity of labour

supply, conditions of work deemed not attractive enough to and by the locals and the serendipitous presence of savvy immigrant entrepreneurs (Dabić, Vlačić, Paul, Dana, Sahasranamam and Glinka 2020). Craft industries in Paris were already hiring large numbers of immigrants in the late-19th century (Cross 1983: 166). Almost a quarter of all employers in the creative industries in the UK employed non-British workers in 2018 (Bakhshi and Spilsbury 2019). What was then the world's largest single fish-canning factory in Los Angeles, USA, was set up by Martin Bogdanovich, a Yugoslav migrant from the small island of Biševo – now Croatia (Smith 2012) and it was brewery workers from what was then Bohemia who migrated to the US and helped to set up a thriving beer industry there (Orton 2024), just as migrants from Plzeň helped to set up the first British lager brewery in Wrexham in 1882 (Watts 1975: 140).

Rather than focusing on how immigrant families hold on to and repackage the traditions of their former homelands in their adopted new countries, in this paper we illustrate and review how immigrants can and have become deeply ingrained and implicated in the cultures and practices of their new host country, even in a context of right-wing, anti-immigrant discourse.

In order to test and flesh out this hypothesis, we focus our attention on a quintessential European traditional economic and social activity in the very centre of Europe. In this milieu – and in spite of the iconic centrality of beer as a European phenomenon – we postulate that we would find various migrants who – with their efforts and expertise – contribute to make the operation possible. We also hypothesised that we would come across various *types* of migrant, such that (for example) their gender, nationality, as well as legal and economic status and any required documentation to move, settle and work may differ.

We therefore use the case study of a Pilsner brewery as a tool to deconstruct a typically Czech tradition – brewing beer – in the context of the city of Plzeň (also rendered as Pilsen), which is known worldwide as the 'Capital City of Beer' and gave its name to a popular version of this drink, the third most popular in the world after water and tea.

Our focus

Our focus is a brewery in Plzeň, in Czechia (also known as the Czech Republic) – the leading beer-drinking country in the world with 140 litres consumed yearly *per capita* (World Population Review 2024) and which the Czechs themselves refer to as lying at the 'heart of Europe' or *srdce Evropy* (Hall 2003: 109). The town of Plzeň's very name is synonymous with Pilsner and is where the world's first pale lager (now known as Pilsner Urquell) was produced in 1842. The city of Plzeň has been brewing beer at least since it received a charter from King Václav II in 1290. Pilsner Urquell, the brewery whose trademark was registered in 1898 and which is located in the same city centre, now employs around 2250 people – the second-largest private-sector employer in Plzeň, after Škoda – and is responsible for some 20 000 indirect job opportunities. Moreover, the company owns several other popular Czech breweries and trademarks, such as Velkopopovický Kozel, Birell, Gambrinus, Radegast and Proud. These beers are brewed partially in Pilsen, partially in other cities (Marouškova 2014).

We understand a brewery to be, first, a specific place brought together by particular and shifting relations; referring to a brewery is a simple way of codifying a vast network of processes and relationships which continue to morph and shift through time, not least through the arrivals and departures of human subjects. Second, as an economic unit, a brewery is also a network of specific multi-scalar external and internal relations that holds various elements – human and non-human –meaningfully together, with an organisational purpose to produce, market, sell and distribute beer, while making a profit. Third, it is the convergence of 4 material elements – malt, hops, yeast and water – which go into the production of every Pilsner. Fourth and lastly, we also require that the personae who bring this operation into fruition are considered as third persons for the

purposes of their engagement with the operation. Such a description of a brewery is inspired by and approximates the notion of a (capitalist) *assemblage*, as proposed by Deleuze and Guattari (2008).

The setting

The story behind the creation of Pilsen beer and its development involves the movement and mobilities of both products and people; it serves to show how beer and its culture has relied and thrived on innovations, labour and investments from abroad.

In 1838, the citizens and innkeepers of Plzeň could not take it any more: the dark, top-fermented beer that had, once again, been served to them by the local breweries, was sour and undrinkable. In protest, they reportedly poured 36 barrels into the gutter. They then decided to build a new state-of-the-art brewery and commissioned master brewer Martin Stelzer to look around Europe for a suitable brewer to develop and brew a lager beer in Plzeň, which had become so successful in Bavaria. He may have been rude (Purinton 2016: 59) but, in Josef Groll, a Lower Bavarian from Vilshofen, Stelzer found a master brewer who had the necessary knowledge. Groll also brought bottom-fermenting yeast and its technique with him to Plzeň – up until then, Bavaria was the only territory where this technique was dominant. He also decided to use a light barley malt, which was developed in England using indirect firing. The unusually soft water of Plzeň, in combination with the Saaz hops which were grown nearby, led to the invention of a new style of beer (Alberts 2020). On 5 October 1842, Groll made his first brew using these ingredients. On 11 November, the new Pilsner beer was served for the first time in transparent drinking glasses – which were just beginning to become popular in Europe and which showcased the unusual golden colour of the new type of beer. The people of Plzeň approved. Today, the light lager, with its stimulating bitterness, has established itself as by far the most popular type of beer in the world. It may be based in and named after a Czech city but it was invented by a Bavarian (Ebbinghaus 2017). Incidentally, the name Pilsner Urquell is German for 'Original Pilsner'.

The German connection is important: over the last 2 centuries, Pilsner beer has become one of the most important vehicles for Czech national identity. At this point, it is appropriate to pause and point out 2 details that are crucial in relation to Germany and beer in the context of forming, establishing and strengthening Czech national identity. First of all, it should be noted that beer plays a special role in this process of identity formation, which is deeply rooted in the history and traditions of the country. The Czech Republic is known for its positive attitude towards beer; this stance has its origins in a long brewing tradition. Thus, beer is not just a beverage (ČSPAS 2021); in Czech national mythology, beer, its production and the ways in which it is ritually consumed have become one of the sources of national identity (Wilson 2005). Furthermore, if we accept arguments, such as those by Anderson (1991) or Eriksen (1993, 2008), that national identity is always formed in opposition to 'the other' (on the basis of nationality, ethnicity, language, culture, etc.), we can conclude that some of the basic reference points against which Czech national identity has been formed for a long time are German cultural, value and linguistic influences (Holý 2001; Šubrt and Vinopal 2013).

Pilsner beer's unique colour and flavour spread globally. The Czech people became known and represented throughout the world as beer connoisseurs, innovators and experts, not least by Pilsner Urquell's own marketing efforts. However, without the German influence on Czech beer, developed over many centuries of exchanges across a lengthy borderland, the true Pilsners of today may not have existed and not in their present form. Indeed, many decades of interaction with German speakers and German brewing traditions have been conveniently forgotten and fallen victim to populist and nationalist discourse and sentiment. This is an erasure perpetuated by modern Czech brewers and academia and the rich culture along the borderlands between German and Czech speakers has been rendered invisible (Deur 2023). This erasure is compounded by a state-driven narrative that looks disparagingly and suspiciously at immigrants, who are attributed with a 'dangerous

otherness', in spite of these being essential for the economic survival of the Czech economy, as Burzová (2019: 151) posits:

> *In both official and popular urban discourses, migrant workers in Czechia have been represented as outcasts, criminals, brutes, sexual offenders, alcohol and drug abusers, 'parasites' transmitting dangerous diseases – such as tuberculosis and hepatitis – and polluting urban public spaces. Bulgarian-, Romanian-, Russian- or Ukrainian-speaking people are often perceived as embodying such stereotypical images.*

In this context, a study on alcohol consumption by Ukrainian migrants in the Czech Republic concludes that these do not statistically significantly exceed the average alcohol consumption rate of Czech citizens (Urban 2015). From this perspective, it can be concluded that alcohol consumption is often instrumentalised by the media and the political regime as a tool for constructing moral panics (cf. Cohen 1972). Many local politicians – not limited to the right or far right, since the Social Democrats in the city are included – have built their political careers on various statements that denigrate and disparage the migrant workers who sustain their economy. This can be illustrated by the statement of one of the political actors participating in the annual Liberation Festival in Plzeň, a commemoration of the 1945 liberation of the city by US and Belgian troops during the Second World War. He stated that 'the wave of foreign culture flooding into Europe' devalues the legacy of the people who died in the Second World War in the fight for freedom. Here is one form of repetitive political celebration that serves, among other things, to create and reinforce specific political and social narratives (Krčál and Naxera 2019).

Apart from such slurs, various migrant workers in Plzeň face problems related to their economic exploitation, the predatory tactics of job agencies, the lack of career opportunities and the antagonism of local inhabitants. The migrants' resort to alcohol consumption – and especially of cheap, local beer – is attributed as a response to this deep frustration:

> *While the migrant workers significantly contribute to the current unprecedented economic boom in the Czech Republic, their contribution is not acknowledged. In contrast, they face ignorance or even condescension from the inhabitants of the country. Drinking helps to make sense of one's life via relations with others who share the same destiny* (Sosna and Brunclíková 2019: 246–247).

The irony is not missed: the generous resort to the same drink is seen as synonymous with Czech identity amongst local patrons but is attributed to be an expression of frustration and depression resulting from migrant workers being unable to integrate into the same Czech society.

The Pilsner Urquell brewery, rather remarkably, makes just 1 beer – and it remains today in the same location where it was founded, 170-odd years ago. It is also now the only place in the world where its beer is crafted. It is very hard to beat this product's uniqueness, its place attachment and the strict alignment of product to place (Alworth 2020). The brewery itself is, however, no longer locally owned. As from 1999, the brewery belonged to the same owner as MillerCoors: SABMiller, the South African brewers. In 2017, it was bought by Asahi Group Holdings of Japan, the world's 12th largest brewer, which is now the controlling entity (Financier Worldwide Magazine 2017). Pilsner Urquell and 4 other European beer brands – Poland's Tyskie and Lech, Hungary's Dreher and Romania's Ursus – were sold to Asahi so that AB InBev – a Belgian multinational and the largest beer company in the world – could clear monopoly hurdles in acquiring SABMiller, then the world's second-largest beer company. At the time of writing, a South African, a Japanese and a British national sit on Pilsner Urquell's Board of Directors.

Brewery as an inaccessible research terrain

Insights into the more cosmopolitan, current nature of the organisation are not readily self-evident. Attempts to secure appointments with senior management representatives of the brewery in order to find out directly and officially what the background, proportion and distribution of migrant workers was in the brewery itself and in its supply and distribution chains, were twice unsuccessful. Reminders and prompts via email and phone contact were met with no response. We reached out to another Pilsner Urquell representative; however, we were told that, due to a series of internal surveys, unfortunately they could not accommodate us as this would place an unnecessary burden on the staff and reduce their willingness to participate in internal surveys.

Parallel to this, the co-owner of the smaller craft brewery Raven (one of several craft breweries located in Plzeň) was contacted. He describes himself as an economic migrant who started brewing beer in Australia but then came to Czechia, settled in Plzeň and continues brewing beer there. In contrast to the large Pilsner Urquell brewery, he talks about the need to consider the various beer styles that have emerged in different parts of the world. What can be described broadly as beer multiculturalism influences the overall philosophy of Raven, as it tries to innovate and come up with beer products that have never been brewed in the Czech context. Thus, next to a brewery that is based on the fact that it produces the world-famous Pilsner Urquell beer, a small craft brewery trying to 'refresh' the beer market in Czechia can also open and operate by, for example, producing the first Czech sour beer Pilsener Weise (Raven 2024).

Thus, we find in Plzeň a landscape that helps us to seriously critique beer production and consumption as a cornerstone of Czech national identity. In the capital city of beer, 2 breweries have been identified. One, Pilsner Urquell, is considered to be a reification of traditional Czech beer. This brewery's technologies have come from Bohemian/German expertise; it currently belongs to a Japanese corporation and the production and other activities that enable its beer to be brewed and distributed are undertaken by members of many nationalities and ethnicities, some of whom are migrants. The second brewery is also commercially successful and through which a new Czech tradition is being developed by an economic migrant from Sydney, Australia.

Our original plan to juxtapose a large and a small brewery in the context of the transformation of one of the foundations of Czech national identity due to foreign influences had to be laid aside, given the institutional unwillingness of both breweries to collaborate. If we follow Laura Nader's (1972: 292–293) argument that we should follow the 'bottom up' and 'top down' paths in field research inside institutions, the 'top down' path remained unavailable in our case. However, the 'bottom up' route, oriented towards non-managerial staff, was somewhat within reach; we were able to make contact with a couple of migrant employees who agreed to answer a series of questions.

In order to at least partially access the terrain, during a joint meeting we did take the Original Beer Experience tour (see below) at Pilsner Urquell in November 2023, during which we came across a few non-Czech employees. However, no interviews as such were undertaken; and it would not have been ethical to do so impulsively anyway. This also means that any insights into various *types* of migrant, including their gender, nationality and legal and economic status, were simply not available.

Some insights were indirectly forthcoming from some creative internet searches. For example, jobs advertised for 'Pilsner Urquell: The Original Beer Experience' – a tour which 'tells the brand story using the latest technology to entertain, educate and inspire people through all their senses' – does identify additional languages (apart from Czech and English) as an 'advantage' (Pilsner Experience 2024).

Pilsner Urquell as a 'mirror of Czech values'

On the one hand, we are thus left with the institution of the brewery closed to field research. On the other hand, however, we can still turn the optics around and reflect briefly on whether the Pilsner Urquell brewery can be seen as a mirror reflecting Czech values and attitudes. As mentioned above, beer (and its brewing, distribution and consumption) is one of the sources of Czech national identity. If this is the case, this tradition (or its carrier) must be responsive and have the ability to adapt and react to the social value system (Hobsbawm and Ranger 2012). This reflective capacity of brewing, as a Czech tradition and one of the sources of Czech identity, can be illustrated by the Pilsner Urquell brewery's response to the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine. Immediately after the start of the Russian aggression and the ensuing refugee movement into Czechia, the brewery declared that it was ready to provide jobs for some of the refugees fleeing the war. The brewery took on similar actor-like attributes when it stopped exporting Pilsner Urquell beer to Russia almost immediately after the 2022 Russian aggression began. The brewery also affirmed its condemnation of Russia's aggression against Ukraine by cancelling its official partnership with the Czech Olympic Committee (as a sub-component of the International Olympic Committee) when the IOC approved Russia's participation in the 2024 Olympic Games. Such positions and actions on the part of Pilsner Urquell reinforce the role of beer in Czech identity, since they are compatible with the opinions and positions adopted by a majority in Czech society – and most of the political spectrum – towards Russian aggression.

Foreign hands in Czechia

The official number of foreign employees in Czechia reached 823,900 in December 2023 – a third of whom were from Ukraine – with Slovaks following closely. This amounts to almost one fifth of the labour force. Like most European countries, Czechia's native-born population is ageing, the number of senior citizens is rising and those of working age are decreasing, leading to a keen demand for foreign labour (ČTK 2024). Additionally, there was a growing number of situations where Czech nationals, supported by a generous social-welfare system, were less eager to apply for or assume physically demanding jobs, possibly accompanied by minimum wages (Matušková and Rousová 2012). Meanwhile, the city of Plzeň (population: 185,000), Czechia's fourth city by population (after Prague, Brno and Ostrava) has become, thanks to its location and industrial infrastructure, one of the Czech localities the most attractive to foreign investors dealing mainly with export-oriented production, including beer. Plzeň has experienced a high influx of foreign workers, mainly from Eastern Europe and Asia, who filled the offered job positions. The largest source countries for such foreign workers have been Ukraine (especially since 2022), Slovakia, Moldova, Cuba, Mongolia and Vietnam – and, more recently, India, the Philippines and Nepal. There have been Vietnamese and Cuban workers, both male and female, engaged with Pilsner Urquell since the 1960s and 1970s (Bortlová-Vondráková and Szente-Varga 2021: 303). Labour-shortage issues are not new to the town and the factory. This latter itself could therefore be posited as a 'core' in the 'core–periphery' model for understanding migration, meaning that 'migrants are drawn from areas that are peripheral in terms of resources, development, services or opportunities and attracted towards central or core areas which have these' (Redmond 2018: 39). This often involves a 'push' from rural areas in the country or beyond which are lacking in economic opportunities and a 'pull' towards more urban and industrial areas such as Plzeň.

In the broader context of Czechia, there are 2 recent, significant migrations, often framed in media and political discourse by the securitisation narrative as a crisis and correlating with both Hirschman's 'loyalty-voice-exit' polarity hypothesis, framing how individuals react to personal circumstances (Hirschman 1970) and with Akenson's definition of forced migration (Akenson 1996). A movement of migrants from the Middle East and

North Africa, peaking in 2015, was instrumentalised by political actors, despite the fact that Czechia was then primarily a transit country. In contrast, the second and more recent influx of refugees from Ukraine caused by the 2022 Russian invasion had a significant impact on the socio-political and demographic reality of Czechia. Data used by the Ministry of the Interior suggest that there are around 300,000–400,000 Ukrainian refugees in Czechia (MVČR 2024). Since the country has a native-born population of just over 10.5 million people, we can state that, in *per capita* terms, it is one of the countries that has received the most refugees. Plzeň and its region have gradually absorbed around 10 per cent of the total number of Ukrainian refugees. The above-characterised time intervals associated with the increased number of immigrants heading to Czechia significantly influenced the socio-political discourse and led to a clear dichotomisation between deserving and undeserving immigrants. In the context of the expansion of the foreign labour force in Czechia, the narrative concerning (*de facto* minimal) migrants from Islamic states has persevered in a much livelier spirit; these persons have been securitised, demonised and even dehumanised (cf. Naxera and Krčál 2018). In contrast, more than 50 per cent of adult Czechs support accepting and helping Ukrainian refugees – down from 70 per cent at the start of the invasion in 2022 but still significant (STEM 2024).

Let us revisit the issue of brewing beer in Plzeň and the influence of migrants in this task. The city burghers were especially insistent that the chosen craftsman, the Bavarian Josef Groll, would brew in such a way that he 'would not have to entrust his barley and malt to foreign hands'. These instructions come from their 1839 formal, written request, a document which is still preserved (beerculture.org 2024). Yet, 'foreign hands' are all over Pilsner Urquell. Such foreign hands come in many guises: founding expertise and technologies, management, specialised workers, manual labourers and current owners and directors.

A general antipathy towards immigrants is prevalent in Czechia and Plzeň (e.g. Drbohlav and Janurová 2019): local politicians have constructed the dominant cognitive frameworks on migrants and refugees, aligning these groups to radical Islam and threats to Czech national security (Strapáčová and Hloušek 2018). This stance obliges large companies there (like Pilsner Urquell) to not disclose any information about the migrant component of their labour force – lest, for example, it erodes their domestic market share and the (huge nationalist-related) power of their brand. Why potentially alienate Czech nationalist beer-drinkers and gift their custom to competitors? Such an explanation would explain their strategic reticence towards granting us an interview or providing us with workforce data.

Interviews with migrant workers

Through our contacts among locally based NGOs, we reached 2 migrants – 1 female, 1 male – who worked at the Plzeň brewery. In individual interviews, we asked these respondents several questions about their work at the brewery – mainly how they came to work there and how the brewery management treats migrants. These interviews are merely indicative but they still provide several insights into the internal structures of the brewery as one of the two largest employers in the city of Plzeň.

Due to the closed nature of the brewery as a research field and the impossibility of using the snowballing effect, we were restricted to these 2 interviews. The data obtained are supported by the experience of the Czech co-authors of this paper who have been working with refugees from Ukraine over the long term. The narrative structure is therefore suitably generalisable and transferable to the general level. The main aim of the interviews was to obtain data that would allow us to highlight and reinforce the arguments we have presented above. As such, our approach is not based on the assumptions of ethnographic research nor, due to the impossibility of penetrating the research terrain described above, do we aspire to such a goal. Rather, we seek to ground the argument we present in the real experience of Ukrainian immigrants which, as we argue above, is generalisable in combination with our knowledge of the setting. This generalisability of the data can be further supported by

the fact that experiences in the employee–employer and immigrant–employer approach should be shared. This is particularly evident in the dichotomisation between long-term foreign workers and the different treatment of war refugees (who are forced to work through an employment agency).

Initially, the respondents did not want to talk to us at all. Despite the promise of clear anonymisation, they were afraid of potential sanctions from the employer/state apparatus. This is perhaps a key reason why we have not been able to widen the network of respondents. However, both respondents confirmed that a large number of migrants work in the brewery in various positions, most of them manual labourers. To increase the likelihood of penetrating the field, we used a fieldworker who is in contact with us and who is, herself, a war refugee who assists other refugees in her fieldwork. This allowed us to at least partially overcome barriers and recruit 2 respondents. The interviews took place during the spring of 2024 and were based on the principles of structured interviews, with the basic format and content drawn up by members of the research team.

First, both interviewees pointed out and confirmed that the brewery employs many foreigners.

R1: It seems that everybody works here. Vietnamese, Slovaks, Hungarians. There are a lot of Ukrainians.
R2: There are a lot of Ukrainians and then there are Moldovans, Romanians and Hungarians.

Given that the brewery does not provide any information on the proportion of migrants (or foreigners in general) whom it employs, this finding is very helpful for the purposes of our research. As already mentioned, after the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, the brewery offered employment to a large number of Ukrainian refugees, which is consistent with why a large proportion of employees are Ukrainian migrants. The Ukrainian diaspora currently has the most significant representation in Czechia. In the Plzeň region, they make up two-thirds of all migrants (63.9 per cent), followed by Slovaks, Vietnamese, Bulgarians and Romanians (ČSÚ 2022).

Second, although the brewery has offered many jobs to refugees, it only employs them indirectly. Both our respondents are Ukrainians: one is a refugee who came to Plzeň after the start of the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, while the other has lived in Plzeň for several years. They both work at the brewery through an agency. According to the interviewees, the brewery management does not employ migrants or refugees directly until and unless they reach a certain level of Czech language proficiency (specifically C1).

R1: Almost all of them work through an agency. Only those who have been here for a long time work directly.
R2: I asked several times if I could work directly. I was always told that I didn't have enough knowledge of the Czech language.

It is unclear whether language proficiency or length and type of stay in the country is relevant to the brewery. It is possible that employing migrants who are not permanent residents is risky for the company because they are not sure how long the migrants plan or are able to stay in Czechia. Instead, working with an agency offers the employer an easier way to get a steady labour supply. Czechia provides several types of residence permit that allow migrants to work. The most common type of residence for employment purposes is the employee card, which allows third-country nationals to legally stay and work in Czechia for more than 3 months (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Czechia 2025). The validity period of the employment card can be a maximum of 2 years and is usually based on the duration of the employment relationship. The cardholder must report changes in employers or job positions to the Ministry of the Interior and, if the job is lost by the cardholder, he or she must report for a new job within 60 days or the employment card will expire (FRS 2022). Free access to the labour market also allows for a long-term residence permit for family cohabitation. The validity of this type of residence is linked to the document's validity of the family member with whom the

applicant wishes to live in Czechia but only up to 2 years. Various other types of residence allow migrants to work, subject to certain conditions. There is also a permanent residence permit; this provides foreigners with the greatest range of rights. A foreigner can apply for this only after fulfilling the condition of continuous residence in the territory for 5 years. The validity of the residence permit is not limited in time and only the validity of the physical card is extended after 10 years (MVČR 2021). Thus, it is clear that, if a foreigner possesses a permanent residence permit, his or her role as an employee will also be demonstrably stronger. The application for permanent residence also includes an examination of Czech language skills. However, this is only at the A2 level, which does not meet the brewery's requirements.

R2: I understand that, if you have permanent residency, they will take you anywhere. It seems to me that refugees are treated with distrust.

Finally, we asked about the respondents' overall connection to their employment at the brewery and whether they had experienced any form of discrimination from management.

R1: They don't pay badly. The work is hard. I load barrels into trucks all day. We get a nice bonus once a quarter. The management treats us normally. I wouldn't say there's a great team here but it's manageable. We get a lot of temps, so there's a lot of turnover.
R2: The work is not easy and not really for women, but it pays well. The Czechs who work in the brewery don't like us much and the Ukrainians who have lived here for a long time hate us even more. But there is no discrimination from the brewery, although it is strange that I cannot work directly.

In other words, both respondents were particularly satisfied with the financial compensation for their work, although they described it as difficult. They agreed that they did not experience discrimination from the brewery and referred such practices to specific individuals rather than to the management or to the brewery as a whole.

Conclusion

Based on the example of the Pilsner Urquell brewery in Plzeň, Czechia, the migrant is, indeed, a central political figure of our time as well as a key economic actor, following centuries of tradition in global migration patterns. Immigrants have become deeply ingrained in the culture and practices of both town and country. We were unable to get the brewery to co-operate directly with us and we can understand the reasons for this. In any case – and thanks to contacts with local non-governmental organisations – we successfully conducted 2 interviews with migrants working in the brewery and learned about the importance of identity documentation in Pilsen, especially employee cards and residence permits.

If we place the relationship between migration, Plzeň and beer-brewing (as something that forms one of the central tenets of Czech identity) on a more general level, we can point to the fact that, according to the statistical modelling of socio-demographic data, the Plzeň region is expected to absorb over 111,000 migrants in the future. Migration is the main factor of population growth in the region (ČSÚ 2020). In the context of Central European countries, Czechia ranks among the countries with the largest positive balance of refugee and migrant inflows *per capita* (Migrationonline.cz 2024). Czechia has thus become what Ravenstein (1885) called a country of 'absorption', as the demographic boost in its population now comes from inward migration rather than natural increase. Ravenstein's theories to explain and categorise the great global movement of people in the late-19th century can still be used to explain the contemporary manifestation of this millenary phenomenon.

It remains to be seen whether his supposition that people often migrate in a 'step-by-step' fashion will apply to Czechia in the future: will it be the final destination for migrants or just a step on their way to Western Europe?

Beer is a constant in many respects. It has been a regular tradition for most of European history, going back centuries. It is a product 'at the heart of Europe' and branded as part of the national identities of various European countries, including Czechia (Hall 2005). If any culture in the world qualifies as a beer-drinking culture, it is the Czechs (Hall 2003: 119).

The recipes of proven and established beer brews have not changed over time. The 4 basic ingredients in its formula are stubbornly immutable. Yet, behind every glass of beer, there is a shifting vortex of relations that brings together investors, entrepreneurs, master brewers, managers, workers and distributors. In the context of the 21st century, these are also likely to have different nationality, residency and citizenship statuses, different documents and therefore different rights. That a prime symbol of Czech national culture (Pils lager beer) – which is place-branded and locally embedded (in Pilsen, its only base of production) and depends incontrovertibly on the input of non-Czech skills, technologies, workers and investors – may appear as a contradiction in principle and nationalist ideology but it is certainly not so in practice. This has been the idea behind this paper: beer can and does 'explain the world' (Swinnen and Briski 2017).

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ORCID IDs

Godfrey Baldacchino https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7994-1767
Petr Krčál https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5707-5375
Vladimír Naxera https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5945-7193
Nataliya-Mariya Mochernak https://orcid.org/0009-0003-1965-8208
Haris Gekić https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7055-6608
Jennifer Redmond https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6819-5623

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