

## Introduction to the Special Issue: Moving Beyond the Narrative of the Migration 'Crisis'

In her State of the Union address delivered in September of 2020, EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen indicated that 'migration is an issue that has been discussed long enough'. She further stated that the migration 'crisis' had caused 'deep divisions' and 'scars [that are] still healing today', calling on member states to 'step up' to the challenges of migration (Ellyat, 2020). We firmly agree with the latter, but we take issue with the idea that anything related to migration has been 'discussed long enough'. The 'deep divisions' and 'scars' caused by what has been dubbed a migration 'crisis' have persisted long beyond the mid-2010s, when the term 'crisis' exploded throughout media worldwide. In fact, we feel that migration remains a crucial issue to discuss among politicians, the public, and scholarly circles alike. To do so productively, however, one may need to step back from the portrayal of migration as a 'crisis' and, rather, explore the underlying processes that contribute to the formation of this portrayal, as well as its real-world implications.

In this special issue, we thus treat the 'crisis' as a socially constructed narrative that has acquired a particular prominence in contemporary debates on migration. In the European context, this narrative has been proliferating, especially since the mid-2010s, when it was used to discursively frame the debates surrounding a rapid increase in immigration flows from the Middle East and North Africa; since then, the situation has been commonly labelled the European migration 'crisis' or the European refugee 'crisis' (Lee & Nerghes, 2018). However, as Bello (2022) reminds us, the crisis narrative is neither new nor unique to the European context. She traces the global proliferation of this narrative to the end of the Cold War and associates it with new trends in nation state responses to migration, particularly its growing securitisation. She argues that a discursive portrayal of human mobility as a threat is integral to the social construction of a 'crisis' that must be 'manage[d] through the activity of both state and non-state actors, who hold a specific cognition of ethnicity and nation that informs a prejudicial narrative of migration' (Bello, 2022, p. 1328). We relate to this argument because we find the emphasis on cognition and prejudice useful in deconstructing the underlying distinctions between 'us' and 'them', which not only help to sustain the narrative of 'crisis' but also represent the key dichotomy in all migration debates.

From the perspective of cultural sociology, which largely informs our approach to migration studies, the distinctions between 'us' and 'them' are not based on any objective, innate characteristics of native-born populations and people crossing borders. Instead, they are socially constructed. They reflect an ongoing process of boundary work that takes place once particular human features,

such as the place of birth, skin colour, religious beliefs, language competences, and even moral values and ways of life, become recognised as important in a given social and political context. This socially ascribed importance transforms them into the basic building blocks of symbolic boundaries, the ‘conceptual distinctions made by social actors to categorize objects, people, practices, and even time and space’, and thus provide ‘tools by which individuals and groups struggle over and come to agree upon definitions of reality’ (Lamont & Molnar, 2002, pp. 168–169). Symbolic boundaries are crucial to the formation of group identities (Barth, 1969), as they are simultaneously capable of producing strong feelings of belonging, as well as Othering, depending on which side of the boundary an individual finds themselves on. In this way, symbolic boundaries enable communities of various scopes and scales—from residents of a particular neighbourhood to citizens of a nation state or even people identifying with transnational bodies such as the European Union—to produce shared collective representations of themselves, as well as Others. We argue that, to understand the growing prominence of the narrative of ‘crisis’ in contemporary migration debates on various levels, we must understand the precise ways in which migration in general and the specific features of people crossing borders in particular are threatening the collective representations of ‘us’ that various communities have created for themselves over the years.

At the same time, even if we recognise the socially constructed nature of the narrative of ‘crisis’, such recognition does not make this narrative less real in terms of its consequences. Narratives are prominent carriers of meanings that are capable of awakening our emotions, shaping our imagination, and informing our understandings of what is going on in the world around us (Frye, 1957). Therefore, once migration becomes narratively portrayed as a ‘crisis’, such a portrayal inevitably impacts the responses to migration on many levels. Indeed, recent studies focus on the implications the discursive portrayal of migration as a ‘crisis’ have for the proliferation of moral panics across societies (Androvičová, 2016), the rise of political populism and far-right movements (Casaglia & Coletti, 2021), an increase in various forms of racism and xenophobia (Jaskulowski, 2019) and the overall polarisation of societies (Ambrosini et al., 2019). In addition to paying attention to the underlying cultural logic behind the production of narratives concerning the migration ‘crisis’, we must thus also study their real-world implications, as present in the responses of various actors—whether laypeople, political representatives, or members of civil society—to migration and people crossing borders.

## **The Czech context**

This special issue allows us to explore the implications of the narrative of ‘crisis’ in the specific context of Czechia, a mid-sized country located in Central Europe, where migration had not figured largely in scholarly, public or political agendas

until the mid-2010s. Due to the history of closed-border regimes during socialism (1948–1989), Czechia, together with other Central European countries, generally saw very low levels of foreign-born residents, as a proportion of their population, in the second half of the twentieth century. Although this trend began to change upon Czechia's entry into the European Union in 2004, which forced the country to open its labour market to the foreign workforce, when the migration 'crisis' unfolded in 2015, foreign state nationals constituted just 5% of the population. Few of the more than one million people who headed to Europe that year had Czechia as a destination, especially because there was little evidence of welcome for those seeking refuge status.

Notwithstanding the lack of any appreciable migration flows, the outpouring of media, political, and public attention to the 'crisis' was phenomenal. In Czechia, a study of online news portals revealed an abundance of qualities such as 'urgency, extraordinariness, overload and insecurity, and attributed these qualities to the figure of an indefinite wave of migrants heading to Europe' (Tkaczyk, 2017). An aptly named piece entitled 'A Refugee Crisis Without Refugees' (Jelínková, 2019) connected media portrayals of this type to policy consequences. The depiction of refugees as a security threat and an administrative burden partially imposed by the European Union served to legitimise anti-refugee policies instituted by the Czech government. Even as the 'crisis' seemed to subside, migration continued to represent a top issue in the 2018 Czech Presidential Election, with the two major candidates presenting themselves as the right person to avert the 'crisis' that they agreed was facing the country in the form of EU refugee quotas and a threat to 'European culture' (Jaworsky, 2021).

The public, in turn, has grown increasingly fearful and wary of people potentially coming to their country from abroad. Indeed, the type of securitisation of migration that is present in the Czech media, whether it is based on a symbolic or real threat, is a crucial predictor of negative attitudes and prejudices towards authorised and unauthorised immigrants and refugees (Murray & Marx, 2013). For example, Tkaczyk (2017, p. 91) cites polls reporting that 'the proportion of Czech respondents who perceived irregular migration as a real and serious security threat doubled from 32% in 2014 to 65% in 2015'. At the height of the mid-2010s 'crisis', almost 90% of Czech respondents perceived refugees as a threat to Europe, while approximately 80% identified refugees as a threat to Czechia specifically (Hanzlová, 2018). Even though Czech public recently turned out to be largely welcoming to Ukrainians fleeing the Russian invasion—56% Czech respondents reported that the country should accept them (Červenka, 2023)—such sentiments have not abated. As this special issue goes to press, refugees are still seen as a 'major' or 'minor' threat to Czechia by 90% of the population (Spurný, 2023).

## Critical engagement with the narrative of the migration 'crisis'

The overarching aim of this special issue is to engage critically with the narrative of the migration 'crisis' and its implications for Czech responses to migration and people crossing borders. We believe this requires an exploration of the dynamics occurring at various spatial and cultural levels, including the local, national, and/or supranational. Furthermore, methodological issues arise when researching the 'crisis' in relation to people crossing borders, such as how to best capture the nuances of the perspectives of the public, the migrants themselves, and other stakeholders. The four articles in the issue take on these considerations in various ways, with each addressing some aspect of the fallout from the emergence of a 'crisis' concerning people who cross borders to live in Czechia.

In 'The legitimacy of European Union migration and asylum policy among the Czech public,' Krotký, Jaworsky, and Kaniok consider the ways in which Czechs perceive and make meaning regarding the supranational policy field and its response to the migration 'crisis', especially in setting refugee quotas to help alleviate pressure on border countries. Using the analytical lens of legitimacy, they unpack the complexities of the relationship between the EU and migration, parsing legitimacy at three levels: input, output, and throughput. What's unique about their study is that they analyse both 'anti-immigrant' and 'pro-immigrant' discourses among the Czech public, in contrast to research that portrays Czechia simply as a xenophobic context. Of course, they acknowledge that some differences of opinion exist, but at the same time, they find that both camps tend to challenge EU legitimacy in the context of the 'crisis', even if for different reasons and along different dimensions. The main implication of their findings is that, even for those who accept the EU as a legitimate actor that absolutely should respond to the migration 'crisis', the EU nevertheless fails to deliver in its handling of migration.

In an analysis also targeted at the policy field, this time at the national level, Kotýnková Krotká draws our attention to migrants themselves and their everyday experiences of the 'crisis'. In her contribution, "'Not knowing When It's Going to Happen and What's Going to Happen": Time Politics in Applying for a Residence Permit in Czech Republic', she reveals the nuances of 'time politics', the practices that govern others through time. Studying the process of applying for a residence permit among non-EU nationals in the city of Brno, she finds that the time politics involved in the application process's lengthy waiting periods significantly affects applicants' lives. The applicants describe the waiting period as a time of being *in between*. In fact, they are situated in a liminal position with a seemingly uncertain ending, as exemplified by the impossibility of moving (temporally, spatially, and socially)—a sentiment Kotýnková Krotká describes as *stuckedness*. This liminality and uncertainty bring the migration 'crisis' to the level of everyday routines. It is as if the applicants are frozen in a bureaucratic morass, unable to travel or offer sufficient credentials for living in Czechia. This policy environment is just one of the consequences of the 'long-term securitisation of migration and the formally restrictive administrative approach, which

was further reinforced during the so-called 2015–2016 migration crisis’ (Stojanov et al., 2022, p. 11). Ultimately, the temporal inequality and disadvantages experienced during the application process ‘contribute to exclusion from mainstream Czech society and produce structural invisibility’.

Gómez del Tronco’s contribution, ‘Searching for the “Muslims” in Czech Islamophobia and the Effects of Intergroup Contact in Challenging a “Fear of the Unknown”’, brings together and compares the perspectives of Muslims and non-Muslims in Czechia. Although the article does not directly invoke the topic of migration, this topic nevertheless arises when non-Muslim Czechs inevitably associate Muslimness with immigrants who are racialised because of their perceived Arabness, Middle Easternness and non-Whiteness. The non-Muslim participants also invoke the European refugee ‘crisis’, problems of integration among Muslims in Western Europe, their potential jihadism, and their desire to force their norms upon others. Moreover, these highly contentious ideas are juxtaposed with the fragility of Czechia in the face of migration. In the analysis, Gómez del Tronco carefully differentiates between actual Muslims and Muslims as a meaning-infused and ideologically loaded category. What is also novel about his study is that it moves beyond the tropes often imagined in narratives of the migration/refugee ‘crisis’ to elaborate mechanisms of intergroup contact that may ultimately contribute to relieving tensions: subgrouping, positive stereotyping, reduced perceived intergroup threat and anxiety, and re-humanisation.

In the final article of the issue, Rapoš Božič, Synek Rétiová and Klvaňová likewise complexify the prevailing depictions of Czechia during the migration ‘crisis’ as a wholly anti-immigrant, anti-Muslim space. In ‘“We Have Always Been like This”: The Local Embeddedness of Migration Attitudes’, they consider the ways in which city context in two Czech locales shapes attitudes among residents towards migration and the presence of people with a migratory background in their city. By adopting a cultural-sociological approach that uses theories of cultural armatures, cultural repertoires, and symbolic boundaries, they reveal the emergence of imagined communities of ‘Locals’ and ‘Others’. However, there are nuances and sub-groups among the ‘Others’, which are arranged hierarchically based on residents’ processes of meaning-making. The authors carefully reconstruct these meanings and find two prevailing cultural repertoires, *local cosmopolitanism* in Teplice and *Czech nativism* in Vyšší Brod. These repertoires, in turn, inform patterns of boundary work regarding residents with a migratory background, as well as their positioning in *local hierarchies of otherness*. The main message of the article contributes to the ‘local turn’ in migration studies, with an important twist. As Rapoš Božič et al. assert, ‘to understand the role of local context in the formation of migration attitudes, it is not sufficient to study only the characteristics of cities; how these characteristics are made meaningful by the people who live in them should also be considered.’

Beyond critical engagement with the narrative of ‘crisis’ in the Czech context, all four articles also offer valuable methodological contributions. While

the bulk of the research on Czech responses to migration has, thus far, utilised mostly quantitative methods, such as surveys, the four articles in this special issue all adopt a qualitative methodological stance, employing methods such as ethnographic observation, interviewing and in-depth interpretive analysis. We applaud the impetus of the authors, in this special issue, to complement existing research by utilising alternative methodological approaches and, in doing so, bringing novel interpretations and understandings. We believe that it is only through the combination of differing approaches, whether they are theoretical, methodological, or ideological, that we may continue to unravel the complexities the issue of migration brings to contemporary societies.

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