

‘Not Knowing When It’s Going to Happen and What’s Going to Happen’: The Time Politics of Applying for a Residence Permit in the Czech Republic

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Abstract: This study focuses on the time politics involved in applying for a residence permit in the Czech Republic, with a focus on non-European Union (EU) applicants. It examines how governmentality and state superiority are represented and performed within the bureaucratic procedure of the application process. Based on the results, I argue that the application process bureaucracy is tied to time politics – practices that govern others through time. The paper is based on research realised in Brno, the second-largest city in the Czech Republic, and uses qualitative, ethnographic observations and semi-structured interviews with immigrants from non-EU countries who applied for a long-term residence permit. The paper examines time politics within this process, highlighting its unpredictability, disrupted temporal linearity and chrononormativity. In this context, the respondents describe the waiting period as a moment of being *in between* – temporally, spatially and socially. Therefore, I argue that the time politics experienced throughout the application process significantly influences the lives of applicants. The interviews revealed that the applicants were caught in a liminal position with an uncertain ending, exemplified by the impossibility of moving (temporally, spatially and socially) – a feeling often described as *stuckedness*. Consequently, this time politics and the temporal inequality and disadvantages experienced during the process contribute to exclusion from mainstream Czech society and produce structural invisibility.

Keywords: time politics, waiting, chrononormativity, bureaucracy, migration

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Analysis of Time Politics Within the Application Process

Time and its manipulation are among the key symbolic dimensions of political arrangement that can be analysed as time politics. Many applicants experience repetitive procedures with an uncertain ending; moreover, many of them repeatedly go through the process. Although applicants must adhere to obligations and deadlines for submitting documents, the process can be long and complicated, and in some cases, institutions do not fulfil their duties and exceed their own deadlines. This presents obstacles to receiving the residence permit.

Waiting is an inherent part of most bureaucratic procedures, including applying for a residence permit. However, not everybody has the same experience of the process, and not everyone waits for the same duration. The analysis identifies the features of time politics within the process and its possible impacts. It exemplifies how a prolonged bureaucratic procedure can affect life chances and the daily and long-term decision-making of applicants.

Time Politics in the Department of Asylum and Migration Policy: Waiting

When I asked the research participants about DAMP, they suddenly became passionate and started to talk emotionally about their experiences with the office, which, unfortunately, were often negative. They said that people often wait hours for service at DAMP and may not even get to the service window after a full day of waiting; the next day, they have to return and wait again. Since the capacity of the staff does not allow all applicants present to be served each day, the situation becomes very frustrating for both sides. This frustration, in turn, causes behaviour that appears impolite to applicants. Joel reported about his experience at the immigration office that there were

a lot of people. They open the place at 7:00 [a.m.]. We came at like 6:40 a.m., and there was a queue already of like 40 people in front of us.

Below, Stasi describes how the waits in and functioning of the institution have changed in recent years:

It wasn't like that before, but the last two or three years, it's been hell. I won't say that even before people didn't spend the whole day there, but at least you didn't have to come there at 8:00 a.m. I used to go in the afternoon, in the days when the office hours were until 5:00 [p.m.], because I didn't want to wake up so early, and I always got a turn. But now, I have had to go back, go home and come back there the next day. (...) Then the next day when I arrived, I ended up on a different floor, different window, for a different kind of residence, like a half an hour before the end of the office hours. And I had arrived at 8:22 [a.m.].

Waiting for an entire day was not the only issue Stasi described. She further highlighted the difficulties of not knowing when her turn might be. Consequently, the applicants lose control over their time – Stasi does not know how many people are in front of her, so she cannot leave the building and come later. This also shows the unpredictability of the institution's organisation if the applications can be managed at a different office than planned. They cannot do or plan any other activities or structure their days. Thus, the time produced by the institution clashes with the applicants' social and productive/active time. In this regard, Auyero (2012) used the term 'tempography of domination', referring to how the dominated perceive waiting and temporality. For immigrants and other unprivileged groups, the experience of endless waiting is therefore an encounter with this strategy of domination.

The rhythm of bureaucratic practices and their consequences were further exemplified by Radana, who faced difficulties in getting her residence permit confirmed. She applied for a residence permit based on a 'reunion with a family member', so her application was linked to her husband's previous resident permit application. She had been waiting for the decision for more than a year and still not received an answer. The situation affected not only her but also her family and, especially, her child's future. Here, she describes her application process and DAMP:

They will tell you that they will call you within three months because your papers will be examined in three months and that they will give you the answer. So, the first three months were over, then the second three months, then four were over. And then I gave birth, and then I had a baby. And this baby is now ten months old, and she does not have anything. (...) Every time I go there [DAMP], they say, 'We don't have an issue with you, all your papers are fine,' or 'all your husband's papers are fine. You are waiting for an answer for your husband, and your husband is waiting for...I don't know why'. So, my husband is waiting for literally no reason, and we are waiting for him.

The length and difficulty of the process are based on the complexity and difficulty of the application itself as well as the institution's capacities and the abilities of its staff. In this case, Radana and her husband's applications were intertwined without apparent denouement, which made the situation irresolvable. This shows how unclear institutional procedures express power over applicants by prolonging waiting and keeping them in an uncertain position with limited life possibilities.

Rini described another example of institutional rhythm and practices below, pointing out the need to 'wait actively':

Within that three months, we also had to, like, actively ask them, because sometimes if it takes a long time for them to process the application or, maybe, sometimes they forgot or, just, you know, maybe they already have it, but they haven't sent a letter to my house... They say, 'Oh, yes. It is in process'. But then, like, in that time, if you feel you are waiting too long, we have to keep asking them if they are still working on that or not.

This procedure forces applicants to be active, accept the role of patients and 'play the game' of the bureaucratic apparatus. 'The game' involves certain rules that must be followed to be successful, which in this case means obtaining the residence permit. On the one hand, the role of an applicant is to follow these rules – to be active and patient at the same time and overcome plausible complications during which they may feel powerless and frustrated. This period, as noted by the respondents, can be understood both as hopeful and frustrating. On the other hand, the role of the institution (which represents the state's policy toward im- migrants) is to demand that the rules be followed – to express its superiority and domination through several procedural steps and, subsequently, prolonged waiting for the decision. Immigrants are required to patiently comply with changing and often ambiguous bureaucratic requirements. As Auyero (2012) describes in the context of underprivileged people, they know that if they want to acquire the needed 'aid', they have to show that they are worth it by waiting patiently.

Applicants are often aware that they can reduce their waiting time at the institution, as Stasi says. However, they are often in situations that do not allow them to plan that far ahead. Moreover, they reported troubles with the registration system.

You can also make an appointment ahead of time, but very few people actually do it. Hardly anyone is so responsible as to have everything under control to know at least a month and a half ahead that he will go there. It is not possible to get an appointment sooner usually. (...) Anyway, you feel guilty every time you wait there the whole day in a queue because you couldn't think ahead enough, like, a month before, to get the appointment. Somebody actually does it, but that's not me, definitely. So, I just feel guilty about myself and in front of my boss when I must take the day off because of it. I hate this feeling. But I don't think it's my fault. But I still feel it like that.

Stasi articulating her guilt at having to wait at DAMP to apply or prolong her residence permit exemplifies the tempography of domination. The institution's failure to be more flexible, increase its number of windows to serve more people per day or make any other kind of improvement illustrates the relationship between the state's institutions (and migrant policy) and immigrants. It represents an unwillingness to change the structural aspects that create situations in which applicants experience socio-temporal inequality. The creation of feelings of guilt for their situation can be associated with victim blame, which has already been studied in diverse spheres of social life. Since Western societies are built on liberalism, which upholds the notion of individual rights and responsibilities and, especially, the belief that humans are responsible for their own situation, there is a much smaller focus on structural explanations of aspects that foster this (Wright, 1993).

Another aspect of the bureaucratisation of the immigration process and governmentality is the shifting of responsibility from employees onto the imagined Other. Here, Radana describes her experience dealing with DAMP officers:

Every time they open my file, they say, 'Yeah, it is a complete file, you have every piece, and everything is here, and they will call you'. The thing is, I don't know who *they* are. It is always *they* will call you, not us...So, we ended up with the words 'we don't know', and now, if you don't know – it is my life you are talking about (...) and I am suffering from that. All my life is on hold for this. (...) It is me who lost a vacation. It is me who lost the stuff. And I am sure that if this employee lost his vacation, he would find someone to talk to, and he would fix that issue because it is not normal for that to be the answer: I don't know – that is not normal. There must be someone who knows. And this person is either not working or either not hearing or just ignoring his work.

The impossibility of finding out who '*they* are', who has responsibility or to whom applicants can complain, recalls what Arendt (1970) described in reference to the depersonification of modern bureaucratic states. She pointed out that 'in a fully developed bureaucracy there is nobody left with whom one can argue, to whom one can present grievances, on whom the pressures of power can be exerted' (Arendt, 1970, p. 81). In other words, government employees are doing their jobs while, at the same time, being alienated from the consequences of their actions. Individuals are processed as administrative subjects of the state. Meanwhile, the potential lack of expertise or insufficient number of employees managing these permits within the bureaucracy process can have a fatal impact on the lives of immigrants and present obstacles to receiving a residence permit. On the one hand, applicants should be patiently waiting for the decision, and on the other hand, they are expected to be flexible, to act quickly while responding to documents received from DAMP. This shows that 'power makes context stick, and bureaucracies are the preeminent technology of power in the contemporary world' (Heyman, 1995, p. 262). Therefore, the everyday practices and interactions of (non)citizens and institutions are the meeting points between the structure of the state apparatus, governmentality and personal experience. This power of the state performed via institutional bureaucracy teaches newcomers to adopt a 'client role' – to learn to be 'patients of the state' (Auyero, 2012).