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'I always felt I have something I must do in my life': meaning making in the political lives of refugee non-citizens

Bernadette Nadya Jaworsky[a], Radka Klvaňová[b] and Kateřina Sidiropulu Janků[c]

[a]Faculty of Social Studies, Department of Sociology, Masaryk University, Brno, Czechia; [b]Faculty of Business and Economics, Department of Law and Humanities, Mendel University, Brno, Czechia; [c]Institute for Applied Research on Aging, Carinthia University of Applied Sciences, Villach, Austria

ABSTRACT

This article discusses the potential of bringing biographical and cultural sociology together in the analysis of the political lives of refugee non-citizens. Our analysis is based on empirical research conducted in two regions outside the capital areas of Austria and Czechia. The conceptual focus is on modes of political participation and if and how they shift during the migration experience. To explore the political lives of refugee non-citizens, we call upon complementary theories, on alternative forms of (non)citizenship and on the autonomy of migration and asylum as regards agency in the everyday practices of people who cross borders. The findings show that our research participants' political lives tend to remain rather untouched by the migration experience itself.

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Introduction

> I could not be silent, because this is my kind of character. I am a very open person. I would talk; I cannot be silent. I always felt I have something I must do in my life. I must make people around me aware of what is happening. They are not stupid and they must know that it is not real, what they have heard from the media, from the systemic media of the government [Alex].

CONTACT Bernadette Nadya Jaworsky jaworsky@fss.muni.cz Faculty of Social Studies, Department of Sociology, Masaryk University, Brno, Czechia

Alex, a young medical professional from Syria seeking asylum in Austria, reflects on the inner contradictions, notions of self-conception, and narrativised expressions of his political life, speaking to the ways in which he engages the world as a refugee non-citizen.[1] The representation of 'refugees'[2] in the European public sphere oscillates between the figure of the victim and the figure of the threat, or what Chouliaraki and Zaborowski (2017) call 'humanitarian securitization', reflecting the inherent tension between care for the vulnerable 'other' and the protection of 'our people' from the dangerous 'other'. Such a perspective obscures refugee non-citizens as social, political, and historical subjects (ibid.). Our research shifts this perspective by looking at the political lives of refugee non-citizens whose situation creates specific constraints on being politically active, yet many of them find ways to do so. Being involved in an asylum procedure often means that refugees are deprived of voting rights both in the country of origin and in the country of destination. At the same time, it may stimulate new ways of being politically active. By focusing on such ways, we strive to support research on the hybrid/patchwork social agencies of alternative, outgroup members (Alexander 1988) and non-citizens (Johnson 2014), which contributes to repertoires of social action and conceptualizations of understanding political behaviour in the contemporary world.

In this article, we offer a novel approach to understanding the political lives of refugee non-citizens by combining the perspectives of cultural sociology and biographical research. They are complementary because both are based in an interpretative sociological tradition centring on the meaning-making processes of social actors. Using autobiographical narrative interviews, we explore how the migration experience shapes the ways refugee non-citizens participate in public life. A cultural sociological analysis of the narratives conceives of biographies and cultures as meaningful wholes and, at the same time, reveals the internal contradictions and tensions present in one's life (Binder and Kurakin 2019).

Refugee non-citizens often experience significant ruptures in their lives due to radical changes in their living conditions and social relations, as well as their structural position within the broader society. In biographical research, the rupture is considered not only a life event, but also a point for reflection, an incentive to reconstruct the life narrative, so it makes sense as a whole to the one who tells the story. Biographical work is a cultural form of dealing with such ruptures: Biographical work is a way to orient individuals and make them reliable for institutions in a historical social situation when static personal definitions (such as status) or quasinatural phases of a life-cycle are not sufficient for this purpose (Fischer-Rosenthal 2000, 115). We explore how ruptures potentially affect refugee non-citizens´ political lives. To do so, we employ a theoretical framework that bridges newer, alternative forms of (non)citizenship (Isin 2008; Johnson 2014; Nyers 2015) and the concept of

the autonomy of migration (Mezzadra 2011; Papadopoulos, Stephenson, and Tsianos 2008) and asylum (De Genova et al. 2018). We demonstrate a certain stability in the political lives of refugee non-citizens, even after precipitous and traumatic experiences associated with crossing borders and seeking asylum. Our findings speak to the need for detailed cultural-sociological and biographical analyses of the political lives of non-citizens of all types, whether 'migrants', 'refugees', or others who have crossed nation-state borders.

This article presents findings from research conducted in 2016 during the 'refugee crisis' in Europe. In 2015 and 2016, the number of people seeking protection in European countries due to the escalation of violent conflicts in Syria and elsewhere in the world increased dramatically and this 'crisis' became a key political topic, occupying a prominent position in news media as well as in everyday conversation in the Euro-Atlantic space. The majority of 'refugees', mainly citizens of Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq, arrived via the Mediterranean Sea and the Western Balkan route, with an estimated 1,406,060 people arriving to European destinations in 2015 and 2016 (UNHCR 2020).[3] Our research was conducted in two different contexts of reception for refugees – the Austrian region of Carinthia and the Czech region of Southern Moravia, two quite contrasting geopolitical contexts. In 2015–2016, Austria was one of the main transit countries for refugees on their way to claim asylum in other European countries, as well as a destination, with a total of 125,375 asylum applications (OECD 2020), the third highest number in relation to population size in the context of EU countries (Simsa 2017). Czechia was predominantly a transit route for refugees and in the same period, only 2,435 asylum applicants were registered (OECD 2020). The significant, and contradictory, differences in the demography and resonance of the 'refugees' arriving in the two countries caught our attention at the time. Our final research design centred on the narrativised expressions of political participation among refugee non-citizens in the context of their everyday lives.

We next elaborate our data creation and methodology. A discussion of the concept of 'political participation' among people who cross borders and related theories follows. To present the findings, we begin by showing some of the complexities in our research participants' asylum-seeking journeys and the multiple ruptures they experienced. Focusing closely on meaning making, especially in three of the biographical narratives, we elaborate how our research participants' political lives remained relatively stable throughout the changes they had endured. To conclude, we reflect on the contributions and limitations that our perspective offers to the study of political participation among non-citizens, and suggest avenues for further research.

Data creation and methodology

We designed our study in order to bring a new perspective on thinking about political participation, in the context of migration to Central Europe in 2015–2016. Firstly, we were informed by an international research methodology that strives to overcome the nation state perspective on researching social phenomena by combining global and local perspectives and a focus on peoples, places and systems (Williams 2015). We also reflected on our own positionality throughout the entire process (Holmes 2020). Despite our differences in conceptual and methodological stances in cultural sociology and biographical research, we agreed on the need to de-objectify the figure of the 'refugee' as it is presented in nationalized and securitized discourses.

Firstly, we combined global and local perspectives on international migration, using demographic resources, media content and policy documents that concerned the migration situation in Czechia and Austria in 2015. We also reflected on our own position in the developing situation, sharing everyday stories from Czechia and Austria across borders, which raised our reflexive sensitivity towards the topic of the research and our position in it. Further, we contacted local institutions (both governmental and non-governmental) involved in migrant integration, conducting interviews with key informants and asking for assistance to locate potential research participants, people who would be interested in public life and were settled to the extent that would allow them to focus on a lengthy interview. Due to ethical sensitivity, we maintained their anonymity, discarding all identifiers at the time of the interview. The interviews took place in carefully chosen localities, at the refugee´s dwelling place, in our private office, or in a publicly accessible and neutral place, like a café. We obtained informed consent and emphasized the possibility to not answer any of our interview questions; our priority was to avoid the risk of (re)traumatization and compromising the trust of our gatekeepers, who had mediated the contact. Beyond linguistic differences (the interviews were conducted in languages other than the research participants' native language), we noted the gender aspects of the research as one of the important elements of positionality (Lokot 2022). Our research team was exclusively female, and we were aware of our limitations in speaking with male participants.

The six autobiographical narrative interviews with men and women from Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria, between their late twenties and late fifties created a rich array of narratives. The interviews consisted of three parts, starting with an open narrative channelled towards the point of becoming interested in public life, followed by a narrative loop of reflecting on the biographical events mentioned in the first part, and finally a thematic part that involved our prompts thematizing the topic of political participation (Wengraf 2001). We analysed all six narratives using thematic narrative

analysis (Schütze 2008; Nurse 2013), supplying the code tree until reaching the point of theoretical saturation. The final code tree consisted of four subcategories, reflecting on biographical events, including (1) the migration experience, ruptures, and identity, (2) the geographical context of life narratives, (3) thematic codes concerning political participation, and (4) a time-related set of codes indicating whether the acts of political participation took place before, during, or after migration.

In our research, we used biographical narratives as a way to access experiences of political agency, combining cultural sociological sensitivity towards meaning making (Alexander and Smith 2003, 2018) with the biographical focus on making sense of one's life story. We chose the biographical method to focus on the process of re-construction of the reflexive life project in the form of narrative (Breckner, Kalekin-Fishman, and Miethe 2000, Chamberlayne et al. 2004). A cultural sociological approach to biographies has been proposed, for example, by Binder and Kurakin, who argue that it is important to take into account the meaning-making structures in biographical research as they 'shape beliefs, aspirations and life choices of actors' (2019: 566) We are particularly inspired by their conception of the biographical narrative as a 'meaningful whole', which has an inner logic that can be subjected to the analytical reconstruction of meaning taking into account contradictions as a normal and productive part of people's lives. We put emphasis on the co-created nature of the biographical narratives that always emerges in a particular interview situation (Holstein and Gubrium 2000). Based on our analysis, we reflect on the question: How does a change in living conditions, both biographical and structural, influence the political lives of refugee non-citizens?

Conceptual focus

Political participation has been conceptualized in so many different ways that it risks becoming the 'study of everything' (van Deth 2001). Further, there is often a lack of conceptual clarity about the difference between 'political participation' and 'civic engagement'. An inclusive definition may nevertheless be desirable to help capture the full range of ways in which individuals actually engage in politically oriented activities. Ekman and Amnå (2012) offer a typology that distinguishes between 'manifest' and 'latent' forms of participation. They define manifest political behaviour as rational, goal-oriented actions 'directed towards influencing governmental decisions and political outcomes' (ibid., 289). Latent or 'pre-political' participation includes activities that might be understood as civic engagement. While we appreciate that Ekman and Amnå's typology offers a wide range of participation, we wish to move beyond the binary of manifest/active vs. latent/passive engagement.

This comprehensive conception allows us to explore the nuanced meanings of 'participation' within our findings.

Much of the research on the political participation of people who cross borders focuses on associational involvement or collective action such as protest, using one of four models: the social capital model, the group consciousness model, the civic voluntarism model, and the mobilization model (see Giugni and Grasso 2020 for a study that tests the empirical validity of such models). Another promising strand of scholarship utilizes the lens of 'transnationalism', widely cited as 'the processes by which immigrants forge and sustain multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement' (Basch, Schiller, and Blanc-Szanton 1994, 6). The field of political transnationalism includes a variety of activities such as electoral participation (either as voters or as candidates), membership in political associations, parties or campaigns, lobbying the authorities of one country to influence its policies towards another, and nation building itself (Østergaard-Nielsen 2003). A seminal article by Al-Ali, Black, and Koser (2001) looks at the political transnationalism of refugees in particular. They make a distinction important to our findings: there is a qualitative difference between 'individuals' capacities – or abilities – to participate, and their desire – or willingness – to participate' (ibid., 626). Refugee non-citizens may have tremendous desire to effect change but feel as if they are limited in their capacity to do so.

Although the literature we have cited above offers some important insights, two theoretical perspectives stand out as particularly compelling for our study: newer, alternative understandings of (non)citizenship (Isin 2008; Johnson 2014; Nyers 2015; Tyler and Marciniak 2013), and scholarship on the 'autonomy' of migration and asylum (De Genova et al. 2018; Mezzadra 2011; Papadopoulos, Stephenson, and Tsianos 2008). They are sometimes presented as existing in conflict with each other (McNevin 2013), but other authors highlight that they can be complementary (Nyers 2015).

The autonomy of migration perspective sees the cross-border movement of people as an act of creative agency, which exceeds the efforts to restrict it through border management or surveillance and control. However, it is not that 'migrants' or 'refugees' are simply free and sovereign actors; indeed, it is crucial to avoid a romanticized notion of autonomy or freedom of movement as a 'purely subversive or emancipatory act' (De Genova et al. 2018, 241; cf. Mezzadra 2011). Instead, people who cross borders are subject to structural constraints as much as any other type of social actor. As Nyers (2015, 29) points out, the 'emphasis on practice and contestation means that the autonomy of migration approach refuses to frame migration within either the discourse of victimage (migrants are powerless) or security (migrants are dangerous)'. Our research participants find themselves in either or both positions during their migration journey. In describing what they call the

'autonomy of asylum', De Genova et al. (2018, 250) break down a similar binary; it is 'an autonomy from the normative and regulatory frames through which international protection is adjudicated and implemented and, secondarily, an autonomy from the discourse of humanitarianism, which tends to dominate the debate about the politics of asylum'. In a slightly different formulation, McNevin (2013) stresses the spaces in-between. Stressing that 'migration is the result of agency as much as force', she proposes 'ambivalence' as a foundation for theorizing the struggles of 'irregular migrants'. We feel that ambivalence is an appropriate conceptual lens through which to examine the political lives of our research participants.

We accept the basic premises of the autonomy of migration literature, especially the emphasis on practice and contestation. Furthermore, we assert it does not have to be in conflict with theories of citizenship (see also Nyers 2015), especially when coupled with Isin's (2008, 39) idea of 'acts of citizenship' and the stress on their processual nature:

> Acts of citizenship are those acts through which citizens, strangers, outsiders and aliens emerge not as beings already defined but as beings acting and reacting with others. [. . .] We define acts of citizenship as those acts that transform forms (orientations, strategies, technologies) and modes (citizens, strangers, outsiders, aliens) of being political by bringing into being new actors as activist citizens (claimants of rights and responsibilities) through creating new sites and scales of struggle.

The final piece of our theoretical framework concerns privileging the narratives of non-citizens. We follow Johnson's (2014, 1) view on 'the non-citizen as central, a transgressive and disruptive figure in world politics who challenges the ways in which we understand political subjectivity'. A considerable body of literature focuses on the citizenship-related or political activities of unauthorized or 'irregular' migrants (e.g. Bachelet 2018; McNevin 2013; Johnson 2014; Rygiel 2011; Tyler and Marciniak 2013). Following Johnson's (2014), we feel the condition of 'irregularity' can be usefully extended to non-citizens of all types, not just the quintessential 'illegal migrant' envisioned as a transgressor by those who advocate migration control measures. One of Johnson's main objectives is posited as follows:

> By prioritizing migrant narrative in the study of non-citizenship and the global politics of migration, and by understanding irregular migrants as actors in the practices and structures of global migration, an engagement with the daily lives and politics of irregularity emerges. This allows us to interpret a political agency for the irregular migrant that is potentially powerful and transformative at the level of the everyday and the momentary. Such an understanding reconfigures our conceptualization of irregularity as active and transformative rather than as abject and excluded. (Johnson 2014, 3)

It is precisely this objective of transformation and granting political agency and voice that animates our broader goals in casting light on the political lives of refugee non-citizens.

In the following analytical sections, we look at the narrative meaning-making processes of the non-citizens we interviewed, highlighting their political lives that have emerged.

On meaning making in refugees´ political lives

> Because it was not [official] residency, it was only like animal life – to feed, to wake, to sleep – nothing [Alex].

Alex's quote speaks about his decision to cross borders illegally from Qatar, where he had found temporary refugee after fleeing Syria. He perceives his stay in Qatar as 'animal life', reduced to satisfying his physical needs – a state of being stripped of an agentic, political life. He is thus narrativising ruptures and transitions, from his political life in Syria, through his 'animal life' in Qatar, where he did not have official residency and lived in a state of limbo, to a new political life that he sought by embarking again on a journey towards asylum. Tyler and Marciniak (2013, 154) argue that 'citizenship is historically contingent and subject to disruption, rupture, and transformation'. This example reflects the experiences expressed among our research participants in their biographical narratives; we find diverse forms of narrative ruptures and transformations and the strategies they used to bridge them. Typically, the ruptures associated with war are described as a sudden external interference, an outer force that can neither be predicted nor controlled by an individual.

> For us, it was like a joke, because for me it was, like . . . living a normal life, no one was fighting with anyone, and sometimes we were making jokes about Iraq, how they are fighting with each other and how it will never happen here in Syria. (. . .) But then suddenly, and . . . I cannot define actually who's . . . "them", because I think, in public, no one, no, really, was really supporting the war in Syria [Zeina].

The stories of seeking asylum often presented the most traumatizing moments in the narratives. The narrators seemed to be experiencing some of the most stressful and liminal situations of their lives on the eve of finding refuge. These moments (embanking in Greece or the last truck route from the Balkans to Austria) are narrated in great detail, like terrifying, slow-motion film scenes.

Unlike general life chances or possibilities to live a safe and ordinary life, the dramatic life events among the refugee non-citizens we spoke with seemed to not disturb their self-conception as political beings. Our findings

indicate that they demonstrate a certain level of consistency between their life philosophy and general worldview and their mode of being involved in public life. Sometimes the narrators even put it into words – being a political person seems to be treated more as a character quality, question of 'moral taste', not opportunities and structural chances. In this section, we describe in contextualized detail how political life evolves and is expressed under the changing and challenging circumstances.

'I want to serve people': Zarak´s transnationally operative political self

Zarak, a man in his late fifties, fled Afghanistan after the Taliban regime displaced him from his job and he felt his life and the lives of his family members were under threat. His life-story narrative is strongly interconnected with the change of the political regime in Afghanistan. As a well-educated young man coming from the family of a teacher, he had the opportunity to study at a university in Czechoslovakia in the 1980s, which earned him a prestigious position in a state office (ministry) back in Afghanistan that he held also after the shift from a socialist to a democratic regime in Afghanistan in the 1990s. His once-valuable experience from abroad suddenly became a burden, however, after the Taliban came into power:

> And it was the change, the revolution and such things, it was about the Islamic state, these things, they were counting on us like … people who were educated, foreigners of main socialistic states, so they … didn't trust us. And for this, for us in the work, it was like suppression. They didn't want us, you know? Even though we were educated [Zarak].

Zarak's political life and the acts of citizenship (Isin 2008) he engages in are strongly interconnected with education and expertise, and using them for the sake of the common good in the spirit of working for/serving people. Zarak's arrival to Czechia in 2000 thus brought another challenge to his life, as he could not find a job in his profession that would earn enough money to provide for his family – his wife and three children. Therefore, he opened a small grocery shop in Southern Moravia. Being able to provide for his family economically and not depending on state support (by paying taxes and not being what he calls an 'economic parasite') as well as endowing his children with a good education so that they can 'serve people' is an important part of his self-conception that runs as a thread throughout his narrative anchored in the gendered experience of migrant men (Hibbins et al. 2009): 'It is a glory for me that I raise the kids well, as we came [here] to work for people – to serve people' [Zarak].

Although Zarak did not arrive in the context of the 2015–16 'refugee crisis', his 'refugee' experience was re-activated at this time through various acts of citizenship he performed. He was frequently invited by NGOs to participate in

public discussions about migration, Islam, terrorism, or his experience of being a 'refugee' in Czechia. He also experienced an increase in anti-Islam and anti-migrant sentiments in Czech society. He recalled how he received a text message from a man who used to deliver potatoes to his shop, while watching the news about the Charlie Hebdo attack in Paris in 2015:

> And we were home in the evening and I was watching television and it was really sad. Why did they do that? So many people died and still I am . . . I was so nervous about that . . . Suddenly, the telephone buzzed, I had some news there. (. . .) "If you are a Muslim, I won't deliver any potatoes to you anymore". What? If you are a Muslim? If you are a Muslim, I won't deliver any potatoes to you anymore? Is that possible? I was wondering – what does that mean? (. . .) Well, I have . . . I have figured it out now. From the same situation I saw on television, that what happened there [in Paris], and here this, and that is politics. That doesn't belong to Islam at all. Politics is politics. I replied to him: "Excuse me, I thought you have potatoes in stock. I didn't know you have potatoes in your head" [Zarak].

In this passage, we see how Zarak fights back against the anti-Muslim rhetoric with a sense of humour, focusing on the fact that it is not acceptable to treat each other disrespectfully as human beings, regardless of one's faith, which he places in stark contrast to 'politics'. Respect for all humans is indeed a strong part of his political self-understanding.

Zarak's case offers a long-term perspective on the formation of the political self in relation to the migration experience. Although he occasionally follows the news in Czechia (for example, before the elections that he now participates in as a Czech citizen), his main geographical area of interest for political events is Asia (not only Afghanistan but also Japan and Korea, or the Middle East), where he follows news on a daily basis. This focus relates both to his language abilities and his cultural background. He follows Persian-language news and feels that he can more fully understand the political discussion in Asia than in Europe. He regrets his limited Czech-language skills as he would perhaps like to participate more actively in political life in Czechia; more active involvement in politics was part of his political life in Afghanistan, where he was a member of a democratic party.

Zarak's political life thus operates transnationally. Being closely involved in political discussions has been an important part of his political self and both the language and cultural competences drive his participation in the region of origin. At the same time, he also strives to orient himself with the political sphere in Czechia, offering his knowledge of the region of origin in public discussions and thus mediating between different geopolitical contexts. Ultimately, he desires to help others because of his deep regard for all of humanity, perhaps interconnected with his educational socialization into socialist internationalism:

> I like people. No matter who they are, what their skin is, no matter what their native language is, without it, what is their opinion. I like humanity (as any person in the world). And I value humanity. And ... That is one [wish]. The second one is that I would like everyone to live at peace, at rest, so that we would know the rights of everyone. I am terribly against weapons. Where there is even one bullet produced, I am against this [Zarak].

Zarak's mode of political participation and his acts of citizenship are anchored in the forced migration experience. They are not disrupted by migration but rather shaped by it – integrating different geopolitical localities and his positioning towards their respective imagined communities. Moreover, his political self-understanding is strongly gendered, as he is expecting himself to be a breadwinner without any hesitation, stressing work for common good, self-reliance and the public responsibility for care work. The gendered character of political life is also strongly involved in the biographical narrative of Azizah, which we discuss in the next section.

'You can say it freely, because this is your opinion': Azizah´s journey across the globe and towards her political self

Azizah is a young woman, from an Iraqi family of numerous children, boys and girls. In a two-minute outline of her life story out of a two-hour interview, she summarizes precisely the main features that are relevant to her political life: an emphasis on her talent in the humanities, her university studies, her work with NGOs focused on women's rights, and helping children. Azizah´s decision to leave Iraq was strictly interconnected with her self-perception as a public figure, someone who helps others and changes her country for the better, despite all the obstacles, and even threats to her life.

> So, I was thinking deeply, if I would be killed – because in Iraq, when we were raised up, it´s OK to not be afraid of death, because we have a lot of war, so we are ready to die. (...) But the question occurred to me, when they [an American female activist and her translator] were killed, if I would die, everything would be gone. So, no matter how hard I had worked, they will say I was not a good woman. I was a translator, I was working with Americans, so I'm not a polite woman, so I deserved to be killed. So, I decided to leave Iraq, for my reputation, and do something outside [the country] [Azizah].

The cross-sectional topic of Azizah's entire narrative is one of gender differences, unequal social conditions for women and male power domination. Interestingly enough, it does not always have a negative connotation. For example, Azizah mentions her father, as a loving and supportive figure, working against existing social stereotypes, but still having decisive power over the life of girls in the family.

> Life in Iraq for women was not supportive, but my father was very supportive to us, helping me and my sisters to become well educated. The three of us were talented in writing, drawing, and also, we were smart.(. . .) Since we were kids, he supported us strongly, because families in Iraq are big, and they can't allow for supporting women, but my father said that we should continue in education, we should show our talents as much as we can [Azizah].

Azizah mentions diverse situations in her daily life in which male domination, and even abuse, had been present, but she appears a strong, assertive, and cautious woman. Her personality and supportive family background presaged her later engagement in women's rights activism. Azizah´s interpretation of her ending up as one of the leading activist figures in the region was that she was a woman of strong and independent opinion, although it also seemed like the women's rights agenda crossed her life pathway as a coincidence; she was not actively pursuing a career in this field.

> I was leaving [the university facility], and on my way I found my other friend (. . .). She told me (. . .) there is some group of women, and they'd like to have more women, she was working as a coordinator with them. (. . .) she said you will develop your English, (. . .). And at that time, we did not have something called women´s rights in Iraq. (. . .) So, they wanted to publish among the other cities the idea of human rights and focus more on women´s rights [Azizah].

Later in life, Azizah also helped children, co-establishing an NGO during her migration path. The expression of free will and nurturing the best out of human and intellectual potential are the leading features of Azizah´s political life. When reflecting what had changed after moving to Austria, she emphasized:

> We can plan, we are not afraid of planning, because normally in Jordan you cannot plan anything, in Iraq you cannot plan anything. (. . .) Also, if we say something, we are not afraid of saying it, because before, we always we had to be careful, not to be targeted by some people. Now you can say it freely, because this is your opinion [Azizah].

At the time of our interview, Azizah had started to study at a university in Austria, while taking care of her sibling who had migrated with her, and trying to reunite with their father. Freedom of speech and the possibility to be in charge of one´s own life trajectory seem to be strong aspects of Azizah´s political life, interlinked with the social conditions she experienced as a young woman.

'I'm not interested in politics at all': Zeina's claim for the right to a 'normal' life

Azizah directly interlinks her very personal choices and acts of citizenship with their wider social meaning, and this is a key feature in her political life.

Nevertheless, not all the interviewees we spoke to were similarly habituated into the position of a public figure, a bearer of values in the public interest. For example, Zeina, a middle-aged teacher from Syria, now living in Southern Moravia, embodied contrasting and remarkably consistent acts of citizenship, in what we might call distancing oneself from 'being political':

> *I was also wondering, to what extent you are interested, or not, in issues, surrounding what is happening in public life, (. . .) for example, in politics.*
>
> Actually. . . Actually, I´m not interested in politics at all.
>
> Right.
>
> Not at all. And I don´t like, really, to go with any . . . how to say . . . group of people. Because I really like to live just a safe life, a normal life. That´s all. I don´t have something really to fight for. Just I would fight for my daughter, that´s all. (Laughter) And to be, like a normal human being, have some sense and mind, not to fight [Zeina].

But it is more complex than simply saying that Zeina is apolitical. Even though she says, 'Actually, I'm not interested in politics at all', she does advocate for her daughter. For example, she asked the teacher at her daughter's school not to tell anyone they are Syrian because her daughter had been bullied in her previous school and called a 'terrorist'. Although Zeina expressed many opinions about the political situation and the war in her homeland throughout our interview, she also stressed her non-interest in political life. Back in Syria, she just had a 'good' and 'normal' life with her husband and daughter, much better than the survival mode they have reluctantly adopted in Czechia. That was why she could not understand why any 'normal people' would want to change the regime. She would never have left Syria if she did not fear the consequences of war for the psychological well-being of her daughter. As Zeina clarifies, with a certain kind of amusement, her political life in Syria was merely formal, as demanded by the political authorities, such as attending demonstrations to support the government organized by the school where she worked or compulsory voting in presidential elections whose winner was already known in advance. Zeina's involvement in political debates and her expressions of attitudes towards the political situation in Syria seemed much more like something that was impossible to avoid due to being a Syrian citizen and her embeddedness in particular social relations with other Syrians, rather than reflecting an active interest in the events.

Indeed, her political life could be characterized as distancing herself from 'politics' as such. She actively did not read and watch the news, which was traumatizing for her, and she eschewed talk of politics with other Syrians in Czechia, whom Zeina actively avoided because as she said ' . . . most of them here, they are supporting either free army or government. But, for me, I´m not supporting this, so . . . Just leave me alone'. Moreover, she suspected some of

the small community of Syrians in Czechia could be reporting on her to the Syrian embassy, which could threaten her relatives who still live in Syria. At the same time, it was clear from our interview that this agenda of avoidance was difficult to follow in everyday life, while embedded in the networks of relatives and friends tied to Syria, as well as among Czechs who saw her as a Syrian migrant associated with certain ideas about her life, homeland, and motivations for migration that she had to constantly contradict and clarify. Throughout the interview, she complained several times about facing accusations of coming to Czechia just to take social benefits from Czechs or countering stereotypes of Muslim terrorists: 'Who gave you the right to say that I´m a terrorist? I am a runaway from terrorists; I came to seek asylum'! Moreover, Zeina faced strong specific cultural requirements regarding consumption, which influenced her, and her daughter´s, integration potential: 'if we are to eat pork and drink alcohol or not'.

Zeina was in fact involved in politics but not through her own will. In a certain sense, she was forced into certain forms of political participation, not only in the homeland but also in exile, where, although she was freed from the political obligations of the Syrian regime, she could not avoid taking a political stance she preferred not to express.

In sum, Zeina's political self could be characterized by the fact that she does not want to have anything in common with 'politics' but she cannot avoid it, pointing towards the ambiguities in the political life and tensions she must cope with, for example, by avoiding other compatriots or hiding their national origin. Her political self revolves around claims for a 'normal' life disrupted by the war in Syria as well as by finding herself in a position of a refugee non-citizen in Czechia. This may be a significant form of political participation in the conditions of structural emergency that 'refugees' often face. For people coming from countries with obligatory political participation and sanctions for non-compliance, distancing from 'politics' can be also a survival strategy adopted in the home country and reproduced in exile. This finding is important with respect to the various forms of political participation described in the literature, warranting closer scrutiny in future research.

'When I was in damascus, I didn't read a lot, because, you know, you live in the news, so you don't have to read the news': on reading news as acts of citizenship

Reading the newspaper was one of the politically relevant activities that resonated throughout all the interviews we conducted. As Zilal, a Syrian woman who, at the time of our interview, studied in English at a university in Czechia, points out, reading the newspaper may serve as a means of connecting to everyday reality; therefore, in Damascus, she did not feel the

need to do so – she in fact 'lived in the news'. She does not read the newspaper in Czechia due to the language barrier, also a reason mentioned above by Zarak.

Azfaar, a family-oriented, young Afghan man living in Austria, always sought a way of integrating himself usefully and meaningfully. He follows the newspaper in greater depth, as his language competence allows him to do so, and he is engaging in critical dialog with the society he lives in now:

> I read *Kleine Zeitung* and also [the local monthly paper] and two more. I read, but I cannot read the whole story. Only very shortly.

And what are you searching for?

> I always read what is happening in [the city I live in]. Unfortunately, it is always in the newspaper that "the foreigner did this or that". Always the foreigner. The foreigner did this to a woman. But nevertheless, I want to know what is happening in my city. It is my city [Azfaar].

For Azfaar, acts of citizenship include assiduously following the news in 'his' city, and hoping to hear something different from 'the foreigner did this' when it comes to inappropriate or criminal behaviour. This desire follows through from his political life in his origin country. In contrast, Zilal does not follow the news, a carryover from her life in Syria, where, as she states, 'you live in the news'. This contrast points to the often-ambivalent nature of political participation among refugee non-citizens (McNevin 2013).

Discussion and conclusion

In 2015–2016, close to 1.5 million people sought refuge in European countries (UNHCR 2020). This massive movement of people was not just one of the biggest humanitarian catastrophes of our times, influencing political developments in Europe. It also fostered an enormous impulse for social, demographic and environmental studies of migration and refuge. Our intention in joining this body of research is to look closely at the nuances of refugee non-citizens' political lives and how they might have changed (or not) due to the migration experience. In order to better understand the political lives of refugee non-citizens, we have analysed six biographical interviews from a cultural sociological perspective, focusing on the meaning-making underlying participation in public life. We also assessed the stability of their political lives in the face of the migration experience. Our findings are articulated through the multifaceted analytical descriptions of refugee non-citizen biographies, focused on their potential agency in the face of structural constraints on political participation and how they realize their acts of citizenship (Isin 2008).

Despite these dramatic life changes and significant shifts in opportunities for engaging in political life, the biographical narratives of our research participants reveal a strong tendency to reconcile one's 'pre-migratory' and 'post-migratory' political life – what does shift are the ways it is expressed in terms of the activities in which refugee non-citizens engage. We have framed our analysis with the complementary bodies of literature on newer, alternative forms of (non)citizenship (Isin 2008; Johnson 2014; Nyers 2015), and scholarship on the 'autonomy' of migration and asylum (De Genova et al. 2018; Mezzadra 2011; Papadopoulos, Stephenson, and Tsianos 2008). Following Nyers (2015, 23), what we find is 'a kind of migrant citizenship "from below", one that is attentive to the practices and political enactments of migrants'. Further, 'Acts of citizenship emphasize the contingencies, ambiguities, and contestations of citizenship, as opposed to the certainties, assuredness, and formalities of legal approaches to citizenship' (ibid., 33; cf. McNevin 2013). It is such a perspective that we find highly appropriate for nuancing the political lives of refugee non-citizens. In Azizah's case, life as a public figure in the origin and transit countries hasn't yet carried over to the destination; nevertheless, her everyday practices highlight autonomy and freedom, to speak her mind and take charge of her life and also to help her sister. In contrast, for Zeina, even though she strives and desires to be non-active politically, the everyday acts of citizenship in which she exercises her creative agency point to the existence of a developed, albeit reluctant, political life.

We also contribute to the literature on transnational political participation (Al-Ali, Black, and Koser 2001) by showing how the perception of conduct oriented towards public matters in various cross-border contexts can be an integral part of narrating one´s life story. Zarak´s transnationally operative political self, in which he continues to be politically active in both his origin country and his destination, is narrated through his everyday acts of citizenship. Part of these narrative negotiations reflect on the inner and outer conflicts that appear in a given migration story. In a way, becoming a 'refugee' involves also the preservation of one´s political attitude/life philosophy that suddenly becomes problematic due to political changes in the homeland, and finding a safe setting in which one can express oneself publicly without danger of persecution. This can be part of the explanation concerning why the political lives of refugee non-citizens remain stable despite the rupture of forced migration.

Finally, and no less importantly than our findings on the political lives of refugee non-citizens, we wish to highlight that the realization and negotiation of researcher positionality is not one-time or straightforward process. It emerges gradually, based on the research journey and the development of personal experiences; it may change and bring contradictions within the research team (Kapinga, Huizinga, and Shaker 2022). In our case, we have

not only reflected on the possible power-relation aspects of our research conduct with regard to research participants; we also discussed our allegiances towards different conceptual and theoretical backgrounds, as well as the possible synergies in using biographical approach and analytical tools of cultural sociology. In this respect, the realization of positionality continues even after analysis and publication, always open to further consideration and negotiation.

To conclude, we wish to point to several directions for future research on the political lives of refugee non-citizens. Firstly, our research is anchored in two rather contrasting geopolitical contexts. Whereas Austria, as one of the main transit countries, was massively affected by the 2015–2016 'refugee crisis', Czechia was much less welcoming, and accepted only a few refugees. We chose a region outside the capital area in each country, in order to equalize the living and structural conditions of the interviewees. We have not found any robust association with social conditions in the destinations and the political lives of refugee non-citizens. This relationship nevertheless deserves further investigation, utilizing a larger sample and closer scrutiny of the many contexts in which refugee non-citizen narratives are situated. We consider this an interdisciplinary niche that could be better filled, in order to properly understand the cultural and structural backgrounds of the refugees. Likewise, an intersectional approach that examines not only gender but also class and the ethno-cultural background of the narrators would enrich the analytical potential for exploring the diverse forms of contemporary political participation.

Notes

1. We wish to encompass refugees under the broader term 'non-citizen', which may include many types of border crossers (cf. Johnson 2014).
2. We wish to avoid the slipperiness of labelling people who cross borders; we therefore use often-problematic labels such as 'migrants' and 'refugees' in quotation marks (Rapoš Božič, Klvaňová, and Jaworsky 2022; cf. Hamlin 2021).
3. The vast majority of international refugee movements occurred within the African continent or from Syria to neighbouring countries during this period (United Nations 2016).

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