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STUDIA TERRITORIALIA 1

THE ROLE OF SMALL-SCALE ENTREPRENEURS IN SHAPING THE TURKISH COMMUNITY IN POST-1989 CZECHIA

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Abstract
Following the Velvet Revolution of 1989, Czechia's transition to a market economy created new opportunities for foreign entrepreneurs, attracting a small but significant group of Turkish small-scale entrepreneurs and migrants. While most Turkish entrepreneurs in the post-communist era concentrated on culturally and geographically closer regions to Turkey, some chose to settle in Czechia during the 1990s, establishing businesses in sectors such as textiles, furniture, tourism, and souvenirs. This study examines the role of early entrepreneurs and migrants in shaping the Turkish community in the Czech Republic, analyzing how their experiences reflected and contributed to the country's broader socio-economic transformation. Although the Turkish population remained small, these early actors laid important foundations for subsequent migration flows, particularly after 2010. Their initial success was facilitated by low competition and regulatory flexibility, yet the increasing institutionalization of the market in later years introduced new challenges. Despite these shifts, their local expertise and symbolic capital continue to influence the structure and public perception of the Turkish community. Methodologically, the study is based on qualitative research, drawing on semi-structured interviews with Turkish migrants to analyze their entrepreneurial

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experiences and community dynamics. By focusing on this group, the study contributes to the literature on new migration destinations, underscoring the long-term significance of small-scale Turkish entrepreneurship and migration in post-1989 Czechia.
Keywords: post-communism; transition; migration; small-scale entrepreneurs; Czechia; Turkish diaspora
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Introduction

En route from Prague Airport to the city center, a modest roadside kebab shop marked by the sign "Türk-eli" stands out as a visible marker of the Turkish migrant presence in the urban landscape. At first glance, seeing the word "Turk" on a kebab shop appears entirely unremarkable, as in today's Europe – shaped by the phenomenon of the transnational döner kebab[1] – such establishments are closely associated with Turkish migrants and can be found in nearly every corner of the continent. A curious passerby consulting a dictionary might discover that *eli* means "hand" in Turkish – thus rendering the name as "the hand of the Turk" – a choice that reflects a deliberate and culturally meaningful branding strategy. However, the kebab shop's name reveals a deeper layer of symbolic and contextual significance, as removing the hyphen uncovers the term "Türkeli," which denotes a small district along Turkey's Black Sea coast. The choice of the name *Türkeli* can similarly be interpreted as an attempt to maintain a connection with one's place of origin through everyday commercial practices. However, the narrative cannot be fully understood if cultural referencing is treated as the sole explanatory framework.

Based on interviews conducted for this study, in the 1960s, many people from Turkey – among them numerous families from the district of Türkeli in Sinop – migrated to Germany as guest workers. Over time, one such family established a second-hand furniture business there and, seizing the opportunities that emerged after the 1989 transition, relocated to Czechia to open furniture stores. As these businesses expanded and new branches were established, they facilitated a migration chain that brought many from Türkeli to Czechia for employment. The owner of the Türkeli kebab shop, was among those who migrated in this context, initially to work in the furniture trade. Over time, as the furniture retail sector underwent changes in ownership and structure, some of

[1] Ibrahim Sirkeci, "Transnational Döner Kebab Taking Over the UK," *Transnational Marketing Journal* 4, no. 2 (2016): 143–158, doi: 10.33182/tmj.v4i2.397.

these migrants transitioned into other forms of work. As the kebab shop illustrates, many ultimately established small businesses of their own and built new lives. In this sense, the shop's sign signifies more than just a name; it embodies the broader transformation of the Turkish community in Czechia that began in the wake of the collapse of the communist regime.

The Velvet Revolution of 1989 was a pivotal moment that not only transformed the political system of Czechoslovakia, but also its economic and social structures. This transformation entered a new phase with the independence of the Czech Republic in 1993, turning the post-communist transition process into a subject of extensive social science inquiry at both theoretical and empirical levels. Researchers working on this period have tended to focus on topics such as economic transformation, the adoption of liberal market policies, and the reshaping of migration frameworks. In this context, scholars have analyzed the institutional development of the transition economy and the implementation of market reforms, paying particular attention to privatization strategies. During this period, the state's pro-market economic liberalization policies aimed at improving the investment climate created new opportunities for domestic and international entrepreneurs alike. However, the social consequences of this structural transformation are often treated as a secondary issue in literature, with limited attention given to its effect on individuals, particularly migrant workers, in their everyday lives.

The shifts in the political and economic landscape created new opportunities for mobility, particularly for international entrepreneurs. The shift to a market economy, alongside trade liberalization and capital inflows, has made post-communist countries such as the Czech Republic more attractive to investors.[2] In this environment, small and medium-sized enterprises gained prominence, largely because of the flexible regulatory environment and comparatively lower costs of doing business. This liberalization led foreign entrepreneurs to concentrate mainly in the trade and service sectors,[3] while researchers examined how their activities intersected with evolving migration policy frameworks.[4]

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[2] Gil Eyal, Iván Szelényi, and Eleanor R. Townsley, *Making Capitalism Without Capitalists: Class Formation and Elite Struggles in Post-Communist Central Europe* (London: Verso, 1998).

[3] Sylvie Burianová and Hana Votradovcová, "Czech Republic: Socio-Economic Aspects of Migration," in *Phantom Menace: The Politics and Policies of Migration in Central Europe*, ed. Jacek Kucharczyk and Grigorij Mesežnikov (Bratislava: Institute for Public Affairs, 2018), 82–104.

[4] Dušan Drbohlav, "Immigration and the Czech Republic (with a Special Focus on the Foreign Labor Force)," *International Migration Review* 37, no. 1 (2003): 194–224, doi: 10.1111/j.1747-7379.2003.tb00134.x.

Although the effects of the transition process on regional development have been widely discussed,[5] it has been emphasized that studies on the social integration processes of entrepreneurs within this development trajectory remain limited. Alongside economic restructuring, changes in migration policy have also emerged as a focal point in scholarly discussions. While the transformation of the Czech Republic from a "transit country" to a "destination for migrants" in the 1990s has been well documented, the socio-cultural aspects of migrant experiences are often overlooked. Although migration policies have evolved within the framework of alignment with the European Union, the process has been characterized by a notable degree of ambiguity and selectivity. In conclusion, literature on the post-1989 transformation in the Czech Republic has largely focused on macro-structural changes, while the micro-level agency of migrants, their interactions with local communities and their everyday practices have largely been overlooked. This has led to an understanding of the period that is predominantly based on economic indicators. However, migrants' spatial settlement practices and micro-level social contributions are important for comprehending the post-communist transformation.

One of the key concepts underpinning this study is entrepreneurship, a significant dimension of migrants' micro-level contributions, defined as the process of mobilizing economic resources into production through novel combinations and the innovative exploitation of market opportunities.[6] Entrepreneurs are typically categorized by the scale of their operations as small, medium, or large-scale actors. Small-scale entrepreneurs, in particular, are characterized by operating with limited capital in local markets, organizing within flexible structures, and standing out with their capacity for rapid adaptation.[7] Following Czechia's transition to a market economy after 1989, entrepreneurial activity in the early years was primarily driven by individual initiative and informal networks, reflecting a pragmatic and experience-based nature.[8] Although some large-scale investors

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[5] Josef Bernard, Věra Patočková, and Tomáš Kostelecký, "Islands of Innovation in the Czech Republic: The International Labour Market of Highly Skilled Workers and Brain Gain Policies," in *Networking Regionalised Innovative Labour Markets*, ed. Ulrich Hilpert and Helen Lawton Smith (London: Routledge, 2012), 136–159.

[6] Joseph A. Schumpeter, *The Theory of Economic Development: An Inquiry into Profits, Capital, Credit, Interest, and the Business Cycle* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1983; originally published 1934); Scott Shane and Sankaran Venkataraman, "The Promise of Entrepreneurship as a Field of Research," *Academy of Management Review* 25, no. 1 (2000): 217–226.

[7] David J. Storey, *Understanding the Small Business Sector* (London: Routledge, 1994).

[8] David Smallbone and Friederike Welter, "The Distinctiveness of Entrepreneurship in Transition Economies," *Small Business Economics* 16, no. 4 (2001): 249–262, doi: 10.1023/A:1011159216578.

entered the country during this transitional period, the overall entrepreneurial landscape was predominantly shaped by small and medium-sized investors.[9] Large capital groups primarily operated in institutional sectors such as industry, finance, and infrastructure. Meanwhile, small and medium-sized entrepreneurs were more inclined toward areas requiring lower entry costs, including trade, hospitality, restaurants, food services, and other service-oriented sectors. These investors were typically organized as individual actors, family-run businesses, or migration-based micro-enterprise networks. The simplified regulatory framework, low-cost market structure, and limited competition of the post-communist period created favorable conditions for these groups. Moreover, the structural gap left by the state's withdrawal from the economy enabled small-scale entrepreneurs to swiftly establish a presence in local markets.[10] In 1990s Czechia, despite the presence of large-scale investors, the entrepreneurial landscape was primarily shaped by small and medium-sized actors. This environment opened new pathways not only for domestic and Western capital but also for entrepreneurs from countries with no prior historical or cultural ties to Czechia. Among them, Turkish entrepreneurs – though small in scale – played a notable role in navigating the post-communist economic space.

This study focuses on how early Turkish entrepreneurs adapted to these structural openings, which sectors they entered, and how they engaged in processes of local integration. The central aim is to examine their role in the formation of the Turkish community in Czechia after 1989. Drawing on qualitative data and historical analysis, the study explores how these pioneers operated not only as economic agents, but also as cultural intermediaries and community-builders. In doing so, it contributes to both migration scholarship and the literature on transition economies by bringing micro-level agency into dialogue with macro-structural transformation. It is important to underline that the term "Turkish entrepreneur" alone does not sufficiently capture the complexity of the actors under study in the Czech context. In this research, the category of "entrepreneur" is closely intertwined with that of "migrant," reflecting overlapping experiences of mobility, adaptation, and community-building. This conceptual distinction is not merely semantic, but carries analytical weight, particularly

[9] David Smallbone and Friederike Welter, "Entrepreneurship and the Role of Government in Post-Socialist Economies: Some Institutional Challenges," *Historical Social Research / Historische Sozialforschung* 35, no. 2 (2010): 320–333, doi: 10.12759/hsr.35.2010.2.320-333.

[10] Iván Szelényi, "Social Inequalities in State Socialist Redistributive Economies," *International Journal of Comparative Sociology* 19, no. 1–2 (1978): 63–87; Smallbone and Welter, "The Distinctiveness of Entrepreneurship in Transition Economies," 249–262.

in understanding the dual role these individuals play in both economic and socio-cultural domains. The choice to use both "entrepreneur" and "migrant" as analytical categories, along with its implications for the research design, will be discussed in the following methodology section.

Beyond its economic implications, this study also engages with the literature on diaspora and spatial theory, which explores how migrants reproduce belonging and identity through everyday spatial and entrepreneurial practices. The symbolic and material dimensions of the "Türkeli" kebab shop – its name, location, and social embeddedness – reflect the interplay between *memory*, *mobility*, and *place-making*, a relationship widely discussed in diaspora scholarship.[11] Building on the notion of *diaspora space* and the relational understanding of place,[12] this paper views entrepreneurial activity as a spatial performance through which migrants inscribe their histories, aspirations, and collective identities onto the post-socialist urban landscape. Through this lens, the kebab shop ceases to be a mere site of commerce; it becomes a micro-space where embodied memories and social imaginaries intersect, giving form to a new geography of diaspora.

Within this broader framework, the article underscores the pivotal role of the first-generation Turkish entrepreneurs who arrived in the early 1990s, whose small-scale initiatives formed the earliest nuclei of what would later evolve into a Turkish community in Czechia. These pioneers – often operating through informal networks and flexible structures – acted as cultural intermediaries and spatial anchors, transforming the post-communist urban environment into a site of diasporic sociality. Their activities demonstrate how migrant agency contributes to the social reconstruction of transition economies by linking economic adaptation with community formation and place-based identity production.

By focusing on this largely unexplored group within Czech post-socialist migration studies, the study addresses a significant gap in both the empirical and conceptual understanding of the subject. It argues that the processes of entrepreneurship, adaptation and community formation should not be viewed as distinct areas, but as interconnected dynamics that reshape migrant identities and urban

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[11] James Clifford, "Diasporas," *Cultural Anthropology* 9, no. 3 (1994): 302–338; Avtar Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities* (London: Routledge, 1996); Steven Vertovec, "Conceiving and Researching Transnationalism," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 22, no. 2 (1999): 447–462, doi: 10.1080/014198799329558.

[12] Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora*. See also Doreen Massey, *Space, Place, and Gender* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994); Nina Glick Schiller and Ayşe Çağlar, eds., *Locating Migration: Rescaling Cities and Migrants* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011).

landscapes. In doing so, the paper contributes to an interdisciplinary dialogue between migration studies, diaspora studies, and post-communist transformation studies. It reveals how everyday entrepreneurial spaces become laboratories for reimagining belonging and locality in post-1989 Central Europe.

Methodology

In this study, the concept of "community" does not imply a monolithic or fully homogenized entity but refers to a network of social relations, shared symbolic markers (such as the "Türkeli" connection), and emerging collective memory. Although much of the existing literature on Turks in Czechia has focused on historical processes and inter-state relations,[13] research on the community itself – particularly the segment that has gradually emerged since 1989 – remains scarce. Among the limited studies, those by Tungul and Uysal et al. are notable for their focus on the contemporary Turkish population in the country: Tungul examines whether this group can be defined as a diaspora, while Uysal analyzes Turkish migration by periodizing it and exploring the associated economic, cultural, and social transformations.[14] While these works provide valuable insights, the broader academic literature on the Turkish community in Czechia remains underdeveloped. This study therefore seeks, first, to contribute to the scholarship on migration and emerging communities by examining the socio-economic transformation in Czechia after 1989, and second – and more centrally – to investigate the experiences of the first Turkish migrants and entrepreneurs who played a formative role in establishing the foundations of this community.

The first Turks to arrive in Czechia in the early 1990s were mainly small-scale entrepreneurs, often accompanied by migrant workers engaged in the same informal economic networks. Although few in number, most identified themselves as "entrepreneurs," reflecting the flexible and opportunity-driven ethos of the post-Cold War economy. Here, the term "small-scale entrepreneur" is used broadly to include both formal business owners and migrant workers involved in entrepreneurial practices. By the 2000s, diversification of activities showed

[13] Ali Öncü, "İki Savaş Arası Dönemde Türkiye-Çekoslovakya İlişkilerine Genel Bir Bakış," *Akademik İncelemeler Dergisi* 9, no. 2 (2014): 159–181, doi: 10.17550/aid.14407.

[14] Lucie Tungul, "The Turkish Community in the Czech Republic: A Diaspora in the Making?" *Politics in Central Europe* 16, no. 2 (2020): 499–523, doi: 10.2478/pce-2020-0025; Ahmet Uysal, Hasan İçen, and Kaan Kapan, "Periods of Turkish Migration in the Czech Republic: A Diachronic Perspective on the Turkish Community," *Ege Coğrafya Dergisi* 34, no. 1 (2025): 125–140, doi: 10.51800/ecd.1652991.

that entrepreneurship had become not only an economic role but also a form of social and cultural belonging, blurring the distinction between "entrepreneur" and "migrant."

This study employs a qualitative research design, using semi-structured in-depth interviews with 24 Turkish migrants who arrived in Czechia during the 1990s. Conducted throughout 2024, these interviews adopted a meaning-centered approach to capture participants' migration experiences, business practices, community relations, and identity perceptions. Participants were recruited primarily through snowball sampling, utilizing initial entry points within the established business owners in Prague and Brno to reach a diverse range of actors. Prior to each interview, informed consent was obtained, ensuring the anonymity and confidentiality of the participants. Data were thematically coded, with attention to underlying meaning structures, recurring themes, and variations across participants, such as differing entrepreneurial trajectories and sectoral shifts in the 2000s. While these accounts illuminate evolving strategies and the fluidity between entrepreneurship and migrant identity, their retrospective nature introduces limitations, including selective memory, nostalgia, and reinterpretation.[15] As Thompson notes, oral testimonies reflect not only past realities but also present-day reconstructions,[16] meaning that early years – often remembered as a "golden era" – may be idealized and structural challenges understated. These narrative dynamics are therefore treated not merely as methodological constraints but as insights into the construction of collective memory within the Turkish community in Czechia.[17]

General Overview of the Turkish Community in Czechia

In recent years, the Turkish population in Czechia has grown steadily, reaching approximately 5,668 individuals by 2024.[18] This figure places the community 21st among all foreign national groups in the country. Primarily concentrated in major urban centers such as Prague and Brno, the community is composed

[15] Alessandro Portelli, "What Makes Oral History Different," in *The Oral History Reader*, ed. Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (London: Routledge, 2002), 77–88.

[16] Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past: Oral History*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 124–129.

[17] Anna Green, "Individual Remembering and 'Collective Memory': Theoretical Presuppositions and Contemporary Debates," *Oral History* 32, no. 2 (2004): 35–44.

[18] Czech Statistical Office (CZSO), *Foreigners in the Czech Republic: Statistical Yearbook 2024* (Prague: Czech Statistical Office, 2024), https://csu.gov.cz/produkty/statistical-yearbook-of-the-czech-republic-2024.

largely of young adults between the ages of 20 and 30. Of the total population, 3,958 are men and 1,710 are women. While 1,241 individuals possess permanent residence permits, the remaining 4,427 reside under temporary or other legal statuses. This distribution reflects a migrant group still in the process of long-term settlement. Demographic data indicate a steady increase in the Turkish population in Czechia over the past three decades – rising from 223 individuals in 1993, to 520 in 2004, 1,664 in 2015, and reaching 5,668 by 2024. Although the absolute numbers remain modest, the upward trajectory is noteworthy and points to a gradual yet sustained growth pattern. Despite this trend, the Turkish community continues to represent a relatively small segment within Czechia's broader migrant population. The Turkish migration experience in Czechia thus calls for a nuanced, layered analysis, best pursued by dividing the post-1989 period into three analytically distinct phases,[19] each characterized by specific configurations of migration motivations, policy contexts, and patterns of community formation.

The first phase of Turkish migration to Czechia (1989–2004), often referred to as the pioneer period, was shaped primarily by small and medium-sized entrepreneurs who capitalized on the regulatory and institutional gaps of the post-communist transition. Though few in number, they established early ventures in trade, hospitality, and services, laying the groundwork for subsequent migration waves and community formation. The second phase (2004–2016), coinciding with Czechia's EU accession, saw a diversification of the migrant profile as entrepreneurs were joined by skilled professionals and labor migrants, shifting the community toward a more complex and multidimensional structure. The third phase (2016–present) has been marked by structural transformation, with rising numbers of both highly skilled migrants and service-sector labor, particularly in the food industry. The prominence of the döner kebab trade during this period has enhanced the community's economic visibility and served as a cultural marker in urban spaces, especially in Prague and Brno.

This tripartite framework underscores that Turkish migration should be viewed not merely as an economic process but as a dynamic phenomenon shaped by cultural affiliations, agency, and collective memory. Focusing on the first phase is particularly significant, as it unfolded amid the transition from communism to a liberal market economy – an environment of institutional gaps, flexible opportunities, and low competition. Medium-scale entrepreneurs' early initiatives were more than individual ventures; they constituted a foundational

[19] Uysal, İçen, and Kapan, "Periods of Turkish Migration," 128.

moment in establishing a Turkish presence in Czechia, later remembered as a formative period that influenced the social and spatial orientations of subsequent migrants. Examining this early phase offers insights into both the local dynamics of post-communist transformation and the emergence of diasporic formations in the Czech context.

"*Golden Years*": Unexplored Opportunities Far from Turkey

The disintegration of the Eastern Bloc and the collapse of communist regimes in 1989 led to a significant shift in Turkey – not only in the realm of foreign policy but also in public and political discourse. During this period, the notion of a "Turkish world stretching from the Adriatic to the Great Wall of China"[20] gained increasing prominence in media and political rhetoric. Regions such as Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, and the Turkic-speaking parts of Asia were collectively reimagined as components of a broader "historical and cultural hinterland" to which Turkey was believed to have deep-rooted civilizational ties. This discursive reorientation reflected a renewed interest in formerly peripheral geographies within Turkey's post-Cold War geopolitical imagination.[21] In Turkish public discourse, representations of this new era were largely shaped by themes such as "opening doors," "reuniting with kin," and "a historical longing for reunion."[22] These motifs reflected a romanticized sense of renewal that resonated not only in public policy but also in the narratives of entrepreneurial actors.[23] In the aftermath of the Cold War, the initial contacts established between Turkey and the former communist countries were primarily driven by economic motivations. These emerging relationships were not limited to formal political engagements but also unfolded through direct interactions between populations and increasing exchanges within newly liberalized markets.

The post-Cold War period generated a two-directional pattern of spatial mobility in Turkey's relationship with its post-communist neighbors. From

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[20] Mustafa Aydın, "Determinants of Turkish Foreign Policy: Historical Framework and Traditional Inputs," in *Seventy-Five Years of the Turkish Republic*, ed. Sylvia Kedourie (London: Routledge, 2013), 152–186.

[21] Arif Akbaş, "Post-Sovyet Dönemde Rusya ve Yeni Orta Doğu Politikaları," *Orta Doğu ve Orta Asya-Kafkaslar Araştırma ve Uygulama Merkezi Dergisi* 3, no. 2 (2023): 1–17.

[22] Ziya Öniş and Şuhnaz Yılmaz, "Between Europeanization and Euro-Asianism: Foreign Policy Activism in Turkey during the AKP Era," *Turkish Studies* 10, no. 1 (2009): 7–24, doi: 10.1080/14683840802648562.

[23] Mustafa Kutlay, "Economy as the 'Practical Hand' of 'New Turkish Foreign Policy': A Political Economy Explanation," *Insight Turkey* 13, no. 1 (2011): 67–88.

one direction, individuals from former Soviet republics – particularly Russia, Ukraine, and Georgia – began arriving in Turkey as part of the so-called "suitcase trade." This informal economic activity led to the emergence of new commercial zones, commonly referred to as "Russian markets," notably in Istanbul's Laleli, a centrally located, wholesale-oriented textile district catering to short-term migrant traders, as well as in various towns along the Black Sea coast. These particular spots and their periphery where such economic activities take place have become not only centers of commerce but also important sites of cultural contact and everyday social interaction. On the other side of this dynamic, Turkish entrepreneurs have gradually deepened their presence in post-communist regions, particularly through growing engagement in sectors such as retail, textiles, tourism, and food. The outward orientation of Turkish entrepreneurs in this period was shaped not only by market opportunities, but also by factors rooted in geography and history. Investment decisions were often influenced by linguistic and cultural familiarity, shared historical legacies, and the practical advantages of geographic proximity. As a result, regions such as Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, and Central Asia – areas with strong historical and cultural ties to Turkey – became preferred destinations for Turkish business initiatives. This pattern of expansion reflects a strategic logic that blends economic interests with social, cultural, and emotional affinities, highlighting the multilayered nature of entrepreneurial decision-making in transnational contexts.[24]

Czechoslovakia represents a notable exception to this general trend of Turkish entrepreneurs favoring countries with historical or geographical proximity to Turkey. While historical, cultural, and migratory ties were indeed limited compared to other regions, they were not entirely absent. In the 1920s and 1930s, for example, a small number of Turkish students studied in the country. Moreover, economic relations were maintained during the socialist period; trade statistics indicate existing, albeit modest, commercial exchanges, suggesting that Czechoslovakia was not a completely unknown market to Turkish economic actors. Nevertheless, the primary surge of Turkish entrepreneurs in the early 1990s was driven less by these historical footnotes and more by the structural conditions

[24] Deniz Yükseker, "Business Relations into/from Gendered Social Relations: Exchange in the Transnational Suitcase Trade Market of Laleli," *New Perspectives on Turkey* 27 (2002): 77–106, doi: 10.1017/S0896634600003812; H. Deniz Yükseker, *Laleli-Moskova Mekiği: Kayıtdışı Ticaret ve Cinsiyet İlişkileri* (İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2003); Murat Kırcı, *Türkiye'deki Bavul Ticareti: Gelişmeler ve Yeni Alternatifler* (Master's thesis, Marmara University, 2007); Deniz Yükseker, "Türkiye Toplumunu Birarada Tutan Nedir? Toplumsal Tutkal Olarak Borç ve Borçluluk," *Toplum ve Bilim* 117 (2010): 6–18.

of the time – namely, the country's rapid transition to a liberal market economy after 1989, its relatively low level of competition, and its more affordable business environment compared to Western Europe. These factors combined to create a window of opportunity that appealed to early movers seeking untapped markets.

The motivations of Turkish migrant entrepreneurs who arrived in the Czech Republic after 1989 were shaped by a variety of factors, including the search for new economic opportunities, the influence of social networks, an interest in emerging markets, and, for some, a sense of adventure associated with settling in an unfamiliar environment. Although the Czech Republic was relatively unknown in Turkey, this initial disadvantage was, for some entrepreneurs, perceived as an indication of untapped opportunities. One interviewee remarks, "Everyone in Turkey was going to Azerbaijan or Russia; I wanted to try somewhere different."[25] Another participant similarly observes, "No one in Turkey knew much about the Czech Republic, so I saw a gap in the market."[26] In addition to individual motivations, social networks played a crucial role in shaping patterns of migration. Many of the early Turkish entrepreneurs who settled in the Czech Republic were already acquainted with one another in Turkey, often through business ties, family relations, or community-based connections.[27] Expressions like "I came first, then I invited my friend"[28] highlight how migration spread relationally, reinforcing both informational flows and a shared sense of confidence among newcomers.

Another important factor influencing migration to the Czech Republic – closely linked to both emerging opportunities and social networks – was marriage to local partners. Especially from the mid-1990s onward, such transnational marriages played a significant role in facilitating long-term settlement in the country.

Narratives provided by participants regarding the 1990s tend to construct an idealized representation of the period. Participants frequently refer to the 1990s

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[25] A textile trader (worked in Laleli, Istanbul, migrated to Czechia in 1993), interview with author, Prague, May 3, 2024.

[26] A textile trader (worked in the Grand Bazaar in Istanbul, migrated to Czechia in 1994), interview with author, Prague, March 22, 2024.

[27] Steven J. Gold and Ivan Light, "Ethnic Economies and Social Policy," in *Research in Social Movements, Conflicts and Change*, ed. Patrick G. Coy (Bingley, UK: Emerald Group Publishing, 2000), 165–191, doi: 10.1016/S0163-786X(00)80039-7.

[28] A furniture trader (from Sinop, migrated to Czechia in 1997), interview with author, Prague, April 12, 2024.

using expressions such as "golden years"[29] "time of opportunity"[30] and "lack of competition"[31] reflecting a period perceived as rich in opportunity and low in regulation. These accounts align with what has been described as a "structural advantage" in immigrant economies.[32] As one participant recalled, "People couldn't find anything in the market, so I brought products from Turkey – and they sold out immediately."[33] Informal practices were common, as illustrates by statements like, "No one asked about taxes," or "I asked for a license, and they said there was no such system," echoing findings on post-socialist informality.[34]

Building on these conditions, the first wave of Turkish migrant entrepreneurs in the Czech Republic during the 1990s primarily invested in sectors such as textiles, souvenirs, furniture, jewelry, tourism, and, to a lesser extent, entertainment (including casinos). These sectoral choices were closely linked both to Turkey's industrial strengths and to the market gaps that emerged in the Czech Republic during its post-socialist transition. In particular, the prominence of the textile sector was driven by Turkey's well-established production infrastructure and its export-oriented experience, which had expanded significantly since the 1980s. During this period, Turkey became a key player in textile exports to Eastern Europe,[35] and Turkish entrepreneurs sought to capitalize on this advantage in newly accessible markets like the Czech Republic. Many Turkish entrepreneurs sourced goods from Istanbul's Laleli district, becoming known as "Laleli merchants," who specialized in shuttle trade and flexible wholesale practices geared toward post-communist markets. Laleli's rise as a regional trade hub after

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[29] A souvenir trader (worked in Laleli, Istanbul, migrated to Czechia in 1997), interview with author, Prague, April 12, 2024.

[30] A tour guide (worked in Antalya, migrated to Czechia in 1990), interview with author, Prague, July 5, 2024.

[31] A textile trader (worked in Laleli, Istanbul, migrated to Czechia in 1994), interview with author, Prague, March 18, 2024.

[32] Alejandro Portes and Min Zhou, "The New Second Generation: Segmented Assimilation and Its Variants," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 530, no. 1 (1993): 74–96.

[33] A textile trader (worked in Laleli, Istanbul, migrated to Czechia in 1997), interview with author, Prague, May 17, 2024.

[34] David Smallbone and Friederike Welter, "The Role of Government in SME Development in Transition Economies," *International Small Business Journal* 19, no. 4 (2001): 63–77, 10.1177/0266242601194004.

[35] Gary Gereffi, "International Trade and Industrial Upgrading in the Apparel Commodity Chain," *Journal of International Economics* 48, no. 1 (1999): 37–70, doi: 10.1016/S0022-1996(98)00075-0; Ziya Öniş and Fikret Şenses, *Turkey and the Global Economy: Neo-Liberal Restructuring and Integration in the Post-Crisis Era* (London: Routledge, 2009); Nebahat Tokatlı, "Globalisation and the Changing Clothing Industry in Turkey," *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space* 35, no. 11 (2003): 1877–1894.

1990 significantly shaped their commercial approach abroad. As one participant noted, "Everything we learned in Laleli, we brought here. Back then, Prague felt like Laleli's rural outpost."[36] Others were referred to as "Kapalıçarşı merchants," drawing on the Grand Bazaar's longstanding traditions of negotiation, customer engagement, and informal transnational trade. Together, these commercial cultures played a formative role in shaping early Turkish entrepreneurship in the Czech Republic.

The majority of Turkish entrepreneurs and migrants who settled in the Czech Republic after 1989 were engaged in the textile sector, which evolved along two distinct trajectories. The first was composed of small-scale actors who informally imported textile products from Turkey and sold them in open-air markets, relying heavily on personal networks rather than formal business structures. As one participant recalled, "We brought the goods in suitcases, contacted other Turks, and rented a market stall."[37] These entrepreneurs operated with limited capital and adopted fast-turnover trade strategies, supported by migrant networks and kinship-based ties. The second trajectory involved Turkey-based textile brands that entered the Czech market through direct investment or franchising arrangements, with the goal of establishing long-term commercial presence and brand recognition. Entrepreneurs from industrial hubs such as Istanbul and Bursa opened shops or showrooms, exemplified by one respondent's comment: "If these products are sold in Turkish stores, then it made sense to open one here too."[38] While the first group prioritized flexibility and short-term gains, the second focused on institutionalization, sustainability, and market integration. Despite these differences, both models strategically utilized Turkey's textile production strengths and responded to the structural opportunities presented by the Czech Republic's post-socialist transition.

In addition to the textile trade, Turkish entrepreneurial activity in the Czech Republic during the 1990s also expanded into the souvenir trade, which developed in response to location-specific opportunities and the dynamics of Prague's urban tourism economy. Although less dominant than textiles, the souvenir sector became a significant area of engagement, particularly in Prague's historic districts, where around twenty Turkish-owned shops operated

[36] A souvenir trader (worked in Laleli, Istanbul, migrated to Czechia in 1997), interview with author, Prague, April 12, 2024.

[37] A textile trader (worked in Laleli, Istanbul, migrated to Czechia in 1999), interview with author, Brno, June 20, 2024.

[38] A textile trader (worked in Istanbul, migrated to Czechia in 2001), interview with author, Prague, April 18, 2024.

at its peak.[39] Over time, however, the proliferation of global retail chains and the consolidation of local businesses led to a substantial decline, with only a handful of these shops remaining. As one entrepreneur remarked, "Back then, there was one of us on every street. Now it's all chain stores. The few who are left are holding on out of nostalgia."[40] The gold and jewelry sector, while involving fewer entrepreneurs, was viewed as a prestigious niche within the Turkish business community. One Turkey-based company played a particularly prominent role in sustaining this sector, representing a rare example of commercial continuity in a highly competitive environment.

In the 1990s, tourism emerged as another area of Turkish entrepreneurial activity in the Czech Republic. Turkish-owned travel agencies operated with a dual focus: providing services to visitors from Turkey and organizing tours to Turkey for the local Turkish community. These businesses leveraged Turkey's tourism infrastructure while tapping into Czechia's growing market. However, the 1997 economic crisis, declining demand, and legal uncertainties led many agencies to close. As one entrepreneur recalls, "At first, things were going well – we had plenty of customers and the business was growing. But when the crisis hit, everything collapsed. We were already working with limited capital, so we couldn't survive."[41] Despite these challenges, tourism offered many newcomers, especially those with language skills, a temporary source of income and a means of early integration. Although most of these ventures were short-lived, they played a key role in migrants' initial economic adaptation. Additionally, following the closure of casinos in Turkey in 1998, two Turkish-owned casinos relocated to the Czech Republic, bringing with them workers who formed a small but distinct occupational group within the Turkish community.

Among the sectors in which Turkish migrants engaged economically in the Czech Republic, the furniture industry stands out as a particularly distinctive and relatively overlooked area. In contrast to the more prevalent entrepreneurial patterns in trade, textiles, and services, this sector reflects unique dynamics shaped not only by capital intensity and business models but also by migration trajectories, the organization of social networks, and labor strategies. One notable example is ASKO, a company founded by a family who migrated from Sinop,

[39] A souvenir trader (worked in İzmir, migrated to Czechia in 2001), interview with author, Prague, April, 21, 2024.

[40] A furniture trader (from Sinop, migrated to Czechia in 1998), interview with author, Prague, May 7, 2024.

[41] A travel agency owner (from Ankara, migrated to Czechia in 1993), interview with author, Prague, May 10, 2024.

Turkey to Germany in the 1960s and later identified a market opportunity in post-1989 Czechia. Opening its first store in Prague's Bílá labuť shopping center in 1991, the company rapidly expanded during the 1990s, establishing branches in cities such as Brno, Zlín, Plzeň, and Hradec Králové, eventually operating seven outlets by 2004. Beyond individual success, this trajectory exemplifies how diaspora capital and transnational mobility can be transformed into formal, growth-oriented enterprise. What further distinguishes this case is its reliance on place-based migration chains: as the business expanded, numerous individuals from the founder's hometown, Türkeli (Sinop), migrated to work in its branches. This concentrated form of migration – widely recognized in the literature as place-based chain migration[42] – was structured through kinship and hometown ties, as evidenced by shared surnames among employees and interview statements such as, "Most of those who came to work here are my relatives; one of us came first, and the rest followed."[43] This case demonstrates that Turkish entrepreneurship in Czechia is not solely characterized by individual economic agency, but also by community-based structures that generate employment, foster social reproduction, and shape spatial settlement. Ultimately, it illustrates how transnational migration networks can underpin sectoral success, and how furniture manufacturing has served as a distinctive avenue for the integration of migrant labor into the formal economy.

As a result, the sectoral orientations of the first generation of Turkish entrepreneurs in the Czech Republic were shaped by a combination of Turkey's established economic strengths and the structural voids present in the post-socialist Czech market. Their entrepreneurial trajectories emerged at the intersection of individual competencies – such as risk-taking, network-building, and the ability to identify market opportunities – and broader structural facilitators, including simplified regulatory frameworks, openness to foreign investment, and low levels of domestic competition. Yet, by the early 2000s, increasing market saturation, intensified competition, and evolving consumer preferences began to challenge these early advantages, prompting some entrepreneurs to withdraw from the sectors in which they had initially flourished. This evolution illustrates that migrant entrepreneurship extends beyond mere economic activity; it constitutes

[42] John S. MacDonald and Leatrice D. MacDonald, "Chain Migration, Ethnic Neighborhood Formation, and Social Networks," *The Milbank Memorial Fund Quarterly* 42, no. 1 (1964): 82–97; Caroline B. Brettell and James F. Hollifield, eds., *Migration Theory: Talking Across Disciplines*, 3rd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2015).

[43] A furniture store employee at ASCO (worked in Sinop, migrated to Czechia in 1995), interview with author, Prague, November 3, 2024.

a complex process shaped by social adaptation, spatial positioning, and cultural brokerage within the host society.

"*Challenging Years*": Turkish Migrants' Struggles for Adaptation in Czechia

The 1990s, often described by Turkish migrant entrepreneurs in the Czech Republic as a "golden era" characterized by abundant opportunities and an unsaturated market, came to an end with the country's accession to the European Union in 2004 and the subsequent intensification of global competition. One entrepreneur reflects on the transition: "In the 2000s, things changed. Back in the day, whatever you brought would sell – but now it's different; you can't take a single step without making careful calculations."[44] This statement captures the evolving regulatory landscape, as EU membership introduced stricter standards in trade, taxation, work permits, and consumer protection. These reforms posed particular difficulties for entrepreneurs who had built their businesses through informal practices and individual initiative. Many of those who had once relied on courage and adaptability were now compelled to navigate institutional procedures and professional frameworks. As another participant noted, "We didn't even know what an accountant was – now we're submitting paperwork every month."[45]

Early Turkish entrepreneurs in the Czech Republic thrived in an unsaturated market, generating high profits quickly. This success fostered a false sense of security regarding the permanence of their prosperity. One participant described this outlook: "At first, business was great... [and] we thought it would always be that way... The easy days were over."[46] However, most entrepreneurs spent their earnings on personal needs rather than long-term investments, which prevented the growth of sustainable economic assets. Today, many early actors reflect on this period as a "missed opportunity" and regard the lack of institutionalization as a historical loss for the Turkish community.

During this period, the textile sector – once a key domain for Turkish entrepreneurs in the 1990s due to the prevalence of Laleli-style trade – was particularly

[44] A textile trader (worked in Bursa, migrated to Czechia in 1996), interview with author, Brno, June 20, 2024.

[45] A textile trader (worked in İstanbul, migrated to Czechia in 1998), interview with author, Prague, July 22, 2024.

[46] A textile trader (worked in İstanbul, migrated to Czechia in 1996), interview with author, Prague, May 18, 2024.

affected by market shifts, including the entry of global brands, changing consumer habits, and the growing dominance of low-cost Chinese products. This shift led many Turkish entrepreneurs to redirect their efforts toward areas such as restaurants, fast food. As one participant puts it, "We used to sell T-shirts at the market – now we sell kebabs. Times have changed."[47] This transition also marked the beginning of noticeable socioeconomic differentiation within the Turkish community. While those able to institutionalize their businesses managed to continue, others closed their shops or moved into different sectors. As a result, new class distinctions and divergent experiences began to emerge within the community.

Entrepreneurs and migrants experienced not only economic transformations but also a profound shift in terms of social perception and identity. Among the Turkish migrants who arrived in Czechia during the 1990s, the notion of being a "migrant" remained largely absent from both personal narratives and public discourse. Instead, individuals commonly referred to themselves as "entrepreneurs," "investors," or "traders," framing their relocation as a rational choice in pursuit of opportunity. As one participant put it: "We didn't come here as migrants – we came to invest. We never saw ourselves that way."[48] These narratives reflect an understanding of migration as a movement based on economic capital, while the label "migrant" was often associated with need, vulnerability, and lower social status. This perception was shaped in part by the socio-economic context of the period. In the 1990s, Czech society was itself undergoing an economic transition, and much of the local population faced significant hardship. In this setting, Turkish entrepreneurs – due to their relative economic success – were often perceived as "foreign but prosperous." However, this framing began to shift fundamentally in the latter half of the 2000s. Following the Czech Republic's accession to the European Union in 2004, rising living standards and the increasing visibility of Western European norms led to a redefinition of national identity. As Czechs rearticulated their own sense of belonging, external groups such as the Turkish community were also repositioned within the social landscape.

Migration thus became associated not only with economic difference but with cultural otherness. One participant summarized the shift: "Back then, just being here was an advantage – now they ask more about where you come from.

[47] A textile trader (worked in Bursa, migrated to Czechia in 1996), interview with author, Brno, June 20, 2024.

[48] A souvenir trader (worked in Laleli, Istanbul, migrated to Czechia in 1997), interview with author, Prague, April 12, 2024.

Being Turkish now means being a migrant."[49] Another observed: "We used to feel like we were the same. Now it's like – you're Turkish. A line has been drawn between us."[50] This transformation reveals how migrant status becomes a socially reproduced form of "otherness," embedded in everyday interactions. By the 2010s, the self-assured entrepreneurial figure that had defined the Turkish community in the 1990s had largely given way to a more visibly migrant identity. This transformation was shaped by broader societal and economic changes in both Turkey and Czechia, prompting new forms of identity-making and debates around belonging within the community. Migration, in this sense, was no longer simply about geographic relocation – it became a status that was socially redefined over time, reflecting changing perceptions and structural conditions. This evolving context also reshaped the position of the Turkish community within Czech society.

In conclusion, the period between 2004 and 2016 marked a phase of restructuring and adaptation for Turkish entrepreneurs. In contrast to the earlier "golden era," success in this later period required not only entrepreneurial drive but also new competencies such as regulatory compliance, professional management, and strategic planning. For the first-generation migrants, this was also the moment when a conscious sense of "being a migrant" began to emerge – accompanied by a gradual institutionalization of entrepreneurial practices.

Understanding the historical development of the Turkish community in the Czech Republic requires more than examining demographic growth or recent migration trends. Rather, it demands a multilayered analysis grounded in the experiences of the entrepreneurial and migrant actors who arrived in the 1990s and formed the foundational layer of this community. These early arrivals were not only economic agents but also the first to engage with the country's language, bureaucratic structures, and social dynamics. In this sense, they can be regarded as the "pioneer generation" of the Turkish community in Czechia. These early pioneers initially positioned themselves as "entrepreneurs" or "investors," rather than identifying with the label of "migrant." This self-perception was largely shaped by their relatively high level of material prosperity and the fact that, in the early 1990s, Czech society itself was still undergoing an economic transition. The institutional transformation brought about by European Union accession and the intensification of market competition in the

[49] A textile trader (from İzmir, migrated to Czechia in 2000), interview with author, Prague, May 20, 2024.

[50] A furniture trader (from Sinop, migrated to Czechia in 1997), interview with author, Prague, April 12, 2024.

2000s gradually altered the social status of these entrepreneurs. Consequently, the identity of the "Turkish entrepreneur" increasingly evolved into that of a more visibly "migrant entrepreneur."

Although this early cohort of entrepreneurs achieved notable economic success, their limited engagement with long-term institutional planning has contributed to a prevailing sense of missed opportunity within the community. The initial period of rapid profit generation was rarely accompanied by efforts toward formalization, strategic investment, or business sustainability. As a result, the absence of structural consolidation has come to be viewed – both individually and collectively – as a formative yet cautionary experience for the broader Turkish migrant community in the Czech Republic. At the same time, the role of the first generation remains highly influential within the contemporary Turkish community in the Czech Republic. Newcomers, particularly in navigating bureaucratic procedures, establishing businesses, and achieving social integration, continue to draw on the experiences and guidance of these early actors. The pioneering role attributed to this group is not limited to informal support mechanisms; it also contributes to the institutionalization of intergenerational solidarity within the migrant community.

In conclusion, this study proposes a multi-layered approach to understanding the Turkish community in the Czech Republic – one that moves beyond current demographic trends to incorporate historical, sociological, and cultural continuities. The entrepreneurial and migrant cohort that arrived in the 1990s not only generated economic capital but also laid the foundations for the community's institutional memory, diasporic identity, and intergenerational transitions. On the micro-level, entrepreneurs responded to these structural shifts by diversifying their strategies – some pivoted from textile retail to the food sector (kebab shops), while others formalized their businesses to comply with EU regulations, moving away from the informal practices of the 1990s.

Conclusion

While Turkish entrepreneurs in Czechia capitalized on early post-socialist market gaps for rapid entry, their organizational patterns stood in sharp contrast to the local Vietnamese community. Unlike the Vietnamese model, which relied on tight-knit ethnic enclaves and collective solidarity to dominate open-air markets, Turkish entrepreneurship was characterized by loose, individualistic networks and localized chain migration (exemplified by the Türkeli-Sinop link). Operating primarily as "lone agents" rather than a cohesive collective, Turkish

entrepreneurs faced the pressure to formalize and institutionalize only as the regulatory framework of the market consolidated.

This study contributes to broader theoretical debates on migration, diaspora, and post-socialist transformation. The findings reveal that small-scale entrepreneurship in post-communist settings functions not merely as an economic adaptation strategy but as a spatial, cultural, and relational practice through which migrants negotiate belonging and visibility. Turkish entrepreneurs in Czechia exemplify how migrants, through everyday economic and spatial engagement, actively produce what Avtar Brah terms *diaspora space* – a dynamic arena where mobility, memory, and identity intersect and are continuously redefined.[51] Within this space, commerce becomes more than a livelihood; it is a mode of emplacement, a means of asserting presence, and a process of transforming unfamiliar post-socialist urban environments into familiar social landscapes.

This perspective challenges the macro-institutional orientation of much of the transition-economy literature, which has traditionally emphasized formal economic restructuring, privatization, and state policy. By foregrounding the micro-level agency of migrant entrepreneurs, the study reveals how everyday practices – such as naming, local networking, or adapting to shifting regulations – play a constitutive role in the social reconstruction of post-communist modernity. Migrant entrepreneurship, therefore, emerges as both an outcome and a driver of structural change, linking the intimate scale of individual adaptation with the broader processes of market liberalization and urban transformation.

The Turkish experience in Czechia further demonstrates that post-communist transformation was not merely a top-down institutional transition imposed by global economic logics but also a bottom-up reconfiguration shaped through migrant participation, resilience, and creativity. The agency of early Turkish entrepreneurs – who operated as cultural mediators, community builders, and local innovators – shows that migrants are not passive recipients of transformation but active co-authors of new social and economic orders. Their entrepreneurial spaces thus function as laboratories of diasporic life, where the boundaries between host society and migrant community are constantly renegotiated through economic and spatial interaction.

By bridging the insights of migration, diaspora, and post-socialist transformation studies, this paper advances a more integrative framework for understanding how entrepreneurship, mobility, and place intersect to generate new

[51] Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora*.

forms of belonging and urban life in post-1989 Central Europe. In highlighting the pioneering role of Turkish entrepreneurs as both economic and cultural actors, the study expands existing migration scholarship to include the spatial and historical contingencies of the post-socialist context. It also adds a diachronic dimension to diaspora studies by showing how community formation unfolds not only through transnational connectivity but also through local, place-based practices that materialize in urban everyday life. Ultimately, the analysis demonstrates that small-scale entrepreneurship in post-communist societies is a powerful lens through which to understand the interdependence of structural change and migrant agency – an intersection that continues to shape the evolving map of Central European modernity.