

## EU ENLARGEMENT AND AU PAIRING IN THE UNITED KINGDOM: *The experiences and migratory strategies of Slovak au pairs*

### Abstract

This article draws upon ethnographic fieldwork on Slovak au pairs in the United Kingdom during 2004 and 2005. Connecting the macro level of regulations (i.e. immigration rules regarding au pairs, the visa regime and access to the labour market) with the micro level of relationships within host households, I examine the migration experiences of Slovak au pairs during the time of EU enlargement. I argue that the abolishment of the UK visas and unlimited access to the UK labour market affected the working conditions of au pairs and enabled Slovak citizens to make au pairing part of larger migration projects. The experience of au pairs demonstrates that when considering the role of migration status in the experience of paid domestic workers, we have to consider the wider context of being a migrant, not merely the particular visa regime.

### Keywords

Au pair • EU enlargement • migration to the United Kingdom • immigration status • paid domestic work

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### Introduction

Drawing upon ethnographic fieldwork on the experience of Slovak au pairs living and working in London in 2004 and 2005, I examine the effects of EU enlargement on au pair migration and experiences. Numerous researchers have emphasised the intersection of gender, class, immigration status and ethnicity as central to the asymmetric power relations in paid domestic work (e.g. Andall 2003; Anderson 2000; Bott 2005; Durin 2015; Henshall Momsen 1999; Lundström 2012; Lutz 2011; Näre 2011, 2013a; Olakivi 2013; Parreñas 2001; Rollins 1985; Romero 1992; Widding Isaksen 2010). Paid domestic work tends globally to be undertaken by migrants (Ehrenreich & Hochschild 2003; Näre 2013b; Näre & Wrede 2013), and the particular immigration status is amongst the key factors determining the working conditions of migrant domestic workers (Anderson 2000, 2013; Anderson & Shutes 2014). Focusing on au pair visas and visas for domestic workers, Bridget Anderson argued that through policies on immigration, ideas about nationhood, the family and work are reproduced (Anderson 2014). Immigration controls and practices help to produce 'workers with a certain type of relation to the labour market, and residents with certain types of relations to citizens and social institutions' (Anderson 2009: 407).

This article draws on above mentioned analyses. Connecting the macro level of international agreements and national regulations with the micro level of working and personal relationships, I demonstrate how changing immigration status affects au pairs as paid domestic

workers. At the same time, I examine how a specific group of migrants who are not formally workers but whose migration is formalised and organised by specific sets of regulations and institutions experienced EU enlargement. I will pay particular attention to au pairs' perspectives on their stays and the ways in which they negotiated complex notions of work, cultural exchange, family integration and migration under a specific (and changing) migration regime (Lutz 2008).

After the accession of 10 new countries to the European Union (EU) on 1 May 2004, only Ireland, Sweden and the United Kingdom granted citizens of the A8<sup>1</sup> countries free access to the labour market immediately upon EU enlargement. The A8 nationals could enter the country and stay and work there without any restrictions (if employed, they had to register in the 'Worker Registration Scheme'). This made the United Kingdom one of the most popular destinations for Slovak migrants (Bahna 2011). An increase in the number of Slovak and Czech migrants following EU enlargement has brought a huge change to the social lives of Slovak au pairs living in London. Owing to their lack of fluency in English and feelings of loneliness within host family households, au pairs usually preferred the company of other migrants from Slovakia or the Czech Republic to the company of British people or other migrants (Búriková & Miller 2010). With increasing numbers of Czechs and Slovaks working there (Bahna 2011), the number of Czechoslovak pubs, clubs, restaurants and religious services, as well as the availability of regional food and Czech and Slovak magazines, also increased. As a consequence, au pairs often spent most of their time with other Czechs and Slovaks

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and less time discovering the United Kingdom outside of the comfort of their own national community (Búriková & Miller 2010).

EU enlargement neither affected the regulations governing au pair stays directly or the definition of who could become an au pair nor affected au pairs' rights and duties. Nevertheless, I will argue that unrestricted movement to the United Kingdom without visa requirements and unlimited access to the UK labour market affected the dynamics of au pair exchange and au pairs' perspectives on the UK culture and society in a broader sense. In particular, the weakening of regulations made au pairs more similar to other paid domestic workers and less to participants of cultural exchange. Free access to the labour market enabled au pairs who had limited power to negotiate their working and living conditions to leave their host families without endangering their permission to stay in the country.

Looking closer at the conditions of EU enlargement enables me, first, to illustrate in detail how migration policies and immigrations status affected au pairs as paid domestic workers. Second, such an examination will reveal the consequences of EU enlargement for a specific group of migrants usually omitted in the studies of labour migration (Burrell 2010; Favell 2008; Favell & Hansen 2002; Wallace 2002; Wiesböck 2013). Third, such an account can contribute to our understanding of how the au pair institution develops over time (see also Búriková & Miller 2010; Busch 2015; Cox 2006; Cox 2015; Liarou 2015; Newcombe 2004).

## Research methods and participants

The ethnographic research for this study was carried out with Slovak au pairs living in the London area. Research methods included participant observation, in-depth interviews with 50 au pairs and the photo documentation of 19 rooms inhabited by au pairs.

Since the fieldwork began in October 2004 and took 12 months, I had a chance to meet both au pairs who had started their stays before and after the accession of Slovakia to the European Union, as well as to follow the paths they chose after their au pairing had finished. Specifically, 20 participants in the research entered the United Kingdom after EU enlargement in either 2004 or 2005. Fourteen participants came in 2004 before enlargement; thus, they could both anticipate and take advantage of free movement and access to the labour market after a few months. Twelve interviewees arrived before 2004. Four interviewees came after EU enlargement, but they had been au pairs in the United Kingdom previously. Most of the au pair interviewees had come to London for a period of six months to one year. They were from 18–31 years old. Only five of them were men. Approximately half of them came from urban areas, and the other half from rural areas. The interviewed au pairs were of both working- and middle-class backgrounds. Their occupations before their au pair stays were very diverse, from factory workers to young academics. Three interviewees had discontinued their university studies; 10 were university graduates, of whom 5 had embarked on PhD studies. Others had finished secondary education. Their motivations for working as au pairs also varied and included economic, educational, personal and cultural reasons (see also Sekeráková Búriková 2014; cf. Cox & Busch 2016; Geserick 2016; Tkach 2013). Most of the interviewees were not fluent in English. Although learning the language figured as an important motivation for becoming an au pair in interviews, only 27 au pairs actually attended language schools.

Within a pilot study that I undertook before the fieldwork in the United Kingdom, I interviewed nine au pair returnees who had

finished their au pair stays before EU enlargement. I also collected letters written either by au pairs or to au pairs during their au pair stays. The letters written to parents, partners and friends belonged to five persons who had finished their stays before EU enlargement and two persons who had started their au pair stays afterwards.

I still continue to keep in contact with 14 of the participants in my research, following their migration (or post migration) trajectories.

## Migration policies and the regulation of au pair stays

As non-citizens, au pairs depend on specific regulatory frameworks with respect to entering a state (Williams & Baláž 2004: 1817); through particular immigration policies, states set rules and create markets in child care (Anderson 2007; Yodanis and Lauer 2005). During the time of my fieldwork in 2004–2005, *Immigration Directorates' Instructions* (Immigration Directorates' Instructions 2004a) defined the requirements for au pair stays in the United Kingdom. Official guidelines produce particular types of workers, conditions and relationships (Anderson 2014). Importantly, *Immigration Directorates' Instructions* (2004a) excluded au pairs from both categories of worker and student.<sup>2</sup> Au pair mobility was designated as a temporary cultural exchange: au pairs were expected to have the opportunity to learn the local language and attend language schools, and their stays in the country were not supposed to be longer than two years. Thus, in the British context, au pairs were young foreigners who stayed with British families in order to learn English and acquire a better knowledge of the country and its culture. During the time of my research, au pairs had to live with their hosts 'as part of the family' (Immigration Directorates' Instructions 2004a, chapter 4, section 1) and the host families were bound to treat them as equals. Au pairs were 'helping' their hosts with childcare and light housework and, in return, received food, accommodation and pocket money. *Immigration Directorates' Instructions* (2004a) specified a minimal sum of weekly pocket money (at the time of my research, it was £55). Au pairs were expected to spend a maximum of 5 h per day helping families and to provide two additional sessions of babysitting per week. They were expected to have two rest days each week.

The state tolerates the presence of migrant domestic workers whilst they are needed by their employers, who, unlike their employees, are citizens (Anderson 2000). Immigration policies characterise who can enter the country and what kind of persons are suitable for doing paid domestic work (Anderson 2009; Anderson 2013; Yodanis & Lauer 2005). Au pairs in particular had to exhibit specific demographic characteristics, as they had to be between 17 and 27 years of age, unmarried and childless. Until 1993, only females could participate in the au pair scheme in the United Kingdom. Immigration provisions and controls practically defined nationals of certain countries to be more or less desirable as au pairs. In their studies, Bridget Anderson (2007; 2009) and Rosie Cox (2007) revealed racialised elements in such differentiation: au pairs had to be citizens of specified group of largely European countries (for details, see Newcombe 2004). Whilst citizens of the European Economic Area (EEA) did not require visas to become au pairs in the United Kingdom, the nationals of certain other countries – including Slovakia until EU enlargement – required visas to work as au pairs or required both visas to enter the United Kingdom and particular visas to work as au pairs (for details, see Busch & Cox 2014). As there were no other formal institutions regulating the conditions of au pair stays, immigration rules were important in defining au pair stays and au pair visas and immigration

controls were important in controlling the conditions under which they were undertaken. Consequently, if an au pair was from a country whose citizens required au pair visas, the conditions of his or her stay were under the scrutiny of immigration controls. If au pairs were from the EEA, they were bound to respect immigration rules, though no one checked whether this was the case.

In Slovakia and prior to EU enlargement, au pair stays were seen as a popular and comparatively unproblematic route to the United Kingdom, which was the most popular destination of Slovak au pairs (for the numbers of Slovak au pairs granted the UK visas from 1996 to 2002, see Figure 1). Au pairs constituted the most numerous group amongst Slovak migrants to the United Kingdom and were mostly females. It was extremely difficult to shift from the au pair visa to another type of the UK visas. The visa regime was abolished on 18 December 2003, the change being related to the expected accession of Slovakia to the EU on 1 May 2004 (Bahna 2011). As Slovak au pairs neither needed visas to enter the country nor had to register in the 'Worker Registration Scheme', their au pair stays became much less controlled institutionally.<sup>3</sup> Thus the research participants included people who would not have met the criteria for becoming au pairs if they had had to obtain visas; for example, four interviewees (three females and one male) were older (i.e. 29–31 years) than the age limit. Breaching the rule specifying an age limit changed the character of the au pair institution. The au pair programme was designed as a 'period of protected transition from the family home to adulthood' (Anderson 2009: 418). When older people started to work as au pairs, this aspect of au pairing assumed less importance.

The lack of immigration controls affected not only what kind of persons could become au pairs but also the types of work and relationships such a position involved. Au pair stays often resembled paid domestic work for migrants rather than temporary cultural exchanges (cf. Rohde-Abuba 2016). Au pair stays were able to become much less temporary than the regulations intended: four research participants exceeded the two-year limit, one of the interviewees working in the capacity of an au pair for more than five years. The interviewed au pairs often did not attend language schools.

I found out that host families often explicitly looked for someone who would work for more than 5 h daily, paying their au pairs more than the sum of £55 recommended as pocket money by the Home Office (Immigration Directorates' Instructions 2004a), but less than the minimum wage. Some au pairs welcomed this possibility of working and earning more, though criticised the fact that they were doing the work of nannies but not paid as such. Such arrangements also existed before 2004, when they were in breach of regulations. However, they were much more frequent afterwards, when, like other citizens of the EEA, Slovaks had the right of free movement and residence in the United Kingdom and, therefore, could work in the capacity of 'au pair plus'. Responding to the demand for au pairs working longer hours, au pair agencies recruited people from the EEA to work in the capacity of 'au pair plus' (an 'au pair plus' being an au pair who worked more than 25 h but less than 35 h a week and earned higher pocket money, but less than the PAYE (pay as you earn) and national insurance threshold for the particular tax year). Whilst employment of an 'au pair plus' breached neither immigration rules nor labour law, according to the Home Office, it was 'not suitable for au pairs who are in the UK under the au pair scheme as it exceeds the requirements of the Rules' (Immigration Directorate's Instructions (IDI) 2004b: Annex A, Au Pair Placements. Chapter 1, Section 4). Similarly, the British Au Pair Agencies Association (BAPAA) specified that '[an "au pair plus"] is not part of a traditional cultural exchange

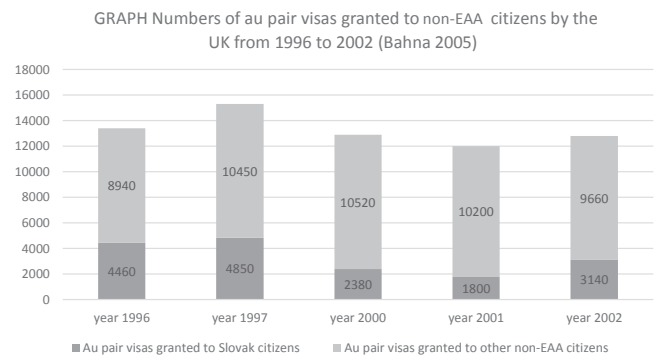


Figure 1. Number of au pair visas granted to non-EAA citizens by the United Kingdom from 1996 to 2002 (Bahna 2005)

programme, as it usually involves longer hours and schedules can conflict with language classes' (BAPAA). In general, therefore, it seems that au pair stays covered much more varied relationships and conditions than those envisaged by the regulations (see also Bikova 2010; Busch & Cox 2016; Calleman 2010; Cox 2006; Cox 2015; Hess & Puckhaber 2004) and that changes in immigration policies after EU enlargement facilitated such a variation.

This situation augured the more intense changes that followed in 2008, when the au pair scheme was ended in the United Kingdom and au pairs (together with other temporary workers, students on gap years and voluntary workers) fell under the more general Youth Mobility Scheme (YMS) of Tier 5 of the points-based application system (PBS)<sup>4</sup> (Busch & Cox 2016). Following au pairing after the introduction of PBS and the abolition of the au pair visa in 2008, Nicky Busch argued that the resulting absence of regulation 'significantly changed the construction of the *au pair*, building precarity into the role and creating a new "not-worker" status', institutionalising thus 'a group of very low-paid migrant workers employed to perform childcare and housework in private homes whose exploitation, precarity and vulnerability is overlooked' (Busch 2014: 10).

## EU enlargement and the visa regime

What effect did EU enlargement have on the role of immigration status when it comes to the experience of au pairs? We can see that EU enlargement did not change the formal definitions of what an au pair was and what kinds of relationships au pair exchange embraced. Both before and after enlargement, au pairs were young foreigners who were not workers and came to engage in a cultural exchange; the details of their rights and duties did not change. Nevertheless, changes in the visa regime and the sudden accessibility of the labour market affected au pairs as migrants even though they were not formally workers.

Pre-enlargement visa status did not allow Slovak au pairs to do other work than 'help' their host families. Obtaining other than au pair visas after the end of an au pair stay was difficult, almost impossible. Under such circumstances the au pairs' immigration status weakened their positions in negotiating their working and living conditions in households of host families. Indeed, three of my informants reported that their host families explicitly threatened them with visa withdrawal when they disagreed with the conditions of their stays, notwithstanding that the holder of the au pair visa was the au pair and

not the host family. Whilst host families could not literally withdraw the visas from their au pairs, they could give them a two-week notice without specifying the reason. In order to stay in the country, au pairs had to find a new host family within two weeks from the termination of their stay with their previous hosts.

Lívia<sup>6</sup> came to the United Kingdom as an au pair at the beginning of 2004. The problem undermining her otherwise good relationship with her host family were too frequent (and unpaid) sessions of babysitting and the fact that her hosts did not allow her to take side jobs for other families in her free time, threatening to fire her and consequently revoke her permission to stay in the country. Instead, they offered her ironing for their household as an extra job. Lívia's hosts converted the officially determined minimum weekly pocket money into hourly pay and suggested that they would pay her two pounds an hour for ironing. Though Lívia protested that a previous worker had been paid substantially more to undertake this task, the family refused to pay her more. Nevertheless, she accepted their offer, because she wanted to save some extra money. Like other Slovaks, Lívia knew about the changes brought by EU enlargement: it was common knowledge that Slovaks would have free access to the British labour market. After the accession of Slovakia to the EU, Lívia renewed the discussion about her pay:

'Once we were in the Union, I told them I wanted to have my overwork paid. If they wanted me to continue ironing and doing babysitting almost daily, they had to pay for it.'

Lívia's case illustrates that some au pairs actively used the changes related to EU enlargement in negotiating their working conditions. Also, host families could no longer use the threat of visa withdrawal to extract more work or compliance from their au pairs.

However, Lívia was exceptional in both openly challenging her host family as well as succeeding in her challenge. She herself stressed that compared to other au pairs she was extraordinarily assertive in dealing with her host family, ascribing her audacity to her previous work in a PR Company and her age; being 27, she was older than the majority of au pairs.

Owing to the asymmetry in power relations and the lack of any institutional control over living and working conditions, host families had the power to set up the conditions of au pair stays. In the end, most host families ignored at least some of the regulations governing au pair stays and the majority of au pairs participating in the research worked more than 5 h daily, did more than two sessions of babysitting weekly and failed to have their rights to free time or language education fully respected (Búriková & Miller 2010, Sekeráková Búriková 2015). Au pairs usually saw leaving an exploitative or unpleasant host family as the only way to deal with exploitation. This is by no means unusual in paid domestic work: with respect to this issue, Caterina Rohde-Abuba revealed how Russian au pairs who were dissatisfied with the conditions of their au pairs stays in Germany either complained to their host family or moved to another one (Rohde-Abuba 2016). Pierette Hondagneu-Sotelo (2001) explained that both employees and employers try to avoid discussions about problematic aspects of their relationship and rather tend to terminate contracts, very often without discussing the real reasons for such terminations. Whilst Latina employees find voicing their concerns too difficult or risky, their middle-class employers in the United States are very uncomfortable with confronting conflicts (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001: 114-134).

Prior to EU enlargement, the au pair visa was held by the au pair rather than the host family and au pairs were able to change their hosts without implications for their immigration status (Anderson

2009). However, they had to find a new family within two weeks in order not to jeopardise their permission to stay in the country. Through the ethnography I found that when au pairs decided to leave their hosts, they usually tried to find a new host family in advance. More difficult situations occurred when they were fired. Some fired au pairs had to return home, because they were not able to find a new host family within two weeks. Others found refuge at the homes of other au pairs or even strangers who helped them to look for new hosts.

According to my data, Slovak au pairs were much more mobile after EU enlargement. The changes in the visa regime and free access to the British labour market enabled them to leave their hosts much more easily. They could stay in the country legally and also move to other sectors of the labour market. Thus, whilst au pairs found it hard to change their working conditions within their host families, they could now stay in the United Kingdom and possibly find a new host family or another form of employment.

However, if we want to examine the role of immigration status in shaping the working and living conditions of au pairs (and other migrant domestic workers), we have to consider factors other than the particular visa regime and access to the labour market. Whilst EU enlargement brought the abolishment of the visa and free access to the labour market, it did not change the fact that au pairs were migrants and migrants from a country with different economic conditions to the United Kingdom. If an au pair could not reach agreement with his/her host and either party decided to terminate the contract, the au pair would lose more than his/her hosts economically: au pairs had paid for their travel costs and health insurance (some even borrowed money from their parents to do so). Also, au pairs did not always have sufficient money to stay in the United Kingdom or to travel back to Slovakia and many lacked clear educational or employment prospects. The fact that my interviewees were migrants disadvantaged them also in other respects. They lacked knowledge of the host country. They did not know what institutions to contact if they happened to be exploited or abused. It appears that the way in which immigration status moulded the particular experiences of au pairs was at play in the much wider context of generally *being a migrant*, not only in one defined by immigration regulations and controls.

## EU enlargement and free access to the British labour market

Though EU enlargement opened up other employment possibilities promising better economic prospects and more independence than the living-in condition of au pairing, au pair stays in the United Kingdom remained very popular amongst Slovak migrants. Compared to other possibilities, such as arrival in the United Kingdom with no prior arrangements or using (often expensive and exploitative) job agencies, au pairing did not demand large amounts of starting capital apart from funds to cover travel costs, health insurance and (possibly) the agency fees. When looking for a placement, applicants could rely on au pair recruiting agencies, or personal networks, mostly consisting of friends staying as au pairs in the United Kingdom. Furthermore, neither these arrangements nor host families expected a high degree of language competence or other qualifications. As a bonus, a host family was seen as a guarantee of security and well-being, ideally providing au pairs also with warmth and affection.

However, some migrants saw au pair stays as equivalent to other migrant jobs. Indeed, in 2004, the average (non-minimum) amount of monthly pocket money for an au pair was approximately



the same as the average gross monthly salary in Slovakia; in 2005, it was just slightly less. In addition, au pairs complemented their pocket money with earnings from side jobs. Prior to EU enlargement, seven interviewees (including one person who finished her stay before 2004) undertook cleaning, ironing and babysitting for other employers than their hosts. Another person performed cleaning duties in the public house owned by his hosts. Such side jobs were technically in breach of regulations before EU enlargement, because holders of au pair visas were not allowed to do other work than 'helping' their host families. Au pairs, their hosts and employers did not see this practice as 'too illegal' (see also Ruhs & Anderson 2010): it was situated out of the formal labour market, and au pairs worked in private households, were engaged in domestic work and worked only a few hours weekly. In some cases, it was the host family that arranged the match between their au pair and neighbours. According to the interviewed au pairs, host families problematised side jobs and labelled them as 'illegal' only when they did not want their au pairs to work outside their homes, afraid that the au pairs would neglect their duties in their households by giving preference to better paid side jobs.

It seems that after EU enlargement, involvement in side jobs increased rapidly: 27 out of 50 interviewed au pairs undertook cleaning, babysitting or ironing work outside of their host households. Even though they could work legally in the formal labour market, only one au pair worked as a shop assistant during her free weekends. The increase in side jobs reflects both free access to the labour market and the changing motivations and backgrounds of the au pairs. According to my observations, people coming to the United Kingdom as au pairs before 2004 tended to have higher levels of education and were more focused on learning the language than those coming after EU enlargement. Both the motivations for au pairing and the backgrounds of au pairs were much more varied after EU enlargement. As au pairs received free board and food, with income from side jobs, they could sometimes save at least as much money as migrants in other low-wage occupations. This explains the continued interest of Slovak citizens in au pairing, despite the availability of other, apparently economically more advantageous occupations.

As already mentioned, au pairs often decided to leave their hosts and take other employment when they were exploited or when they felt dissatisfied with their host families. However, shifts from au pairing to other positions on in the labour market were not the only response to ill treatment. Free access to the UK labour market following EU enlargement enabled Slovaks to make their au pairing part of larger migration projects (cf. Cox & Busch 2016; Tkach 2016). Some of my interviewees used their au pair stays as a comfortable way of finding a job in the formal labour market in the United Kingdom or of learning the language and acquiring skills enabling them to find such a job. Sometimes, au pair stays had been planned as a first step on the ladder of labour migration from the very beginning: Jarmila had trained in catering and desired a job in catering for parties and other special events. She could not find such a job in her native region and believed London would provide her with many more opportunities. Speaking only a little English, she decided that she would become an au pair in London, believing that after a year of learning English she would feel more confident in looking for her ideal job there. Other people started as au pairs with the intention of finding some – unspecified – job abroad, often taking any available opportunities. Whilst some au pairs planned to stay with their host families for the agreed period of time (usually a year) and only after this period look for other positions, others were much more opportunistic in their

attitude towards au pairing. For example, Darina made it explicit that she would stay with her host family only until she found a suitable job and an inexpensive place where to stay and leave them immediately without fully honouring their agreement.

The most usual trajectories were starting as au pairs and continuing as live-in or live-out nannies, cleaners, waitresses or shop assistants (cf. Cox & Busch 2016). Some people embarked upon their post-au pairing trajectories by accumulating their former side jobs; others began to work as full-time nannies or nannies/housekeepers for their former hosts or side job employers. There was little evidence of former au pairs finding jobs outside of the service economy: one of our research participants was a nurse by training and, after finishing her au pair stays, found employment in the health sector; a further two, having worked in Slovakia as primary school teachers, managed to gain employment in education; similarly, after a series of low-paid jobs, a former PhD student in microbiology found a place as a technician in a laboratory. Two research participants started to study at British universities, one at undergraduate, another at PhD level.

Though some people planned their au pair stay as a prelude to other employment in the United Kingdom, they either could not find a job they would be satisfied with or realised they were not happy with the prospect of a longer stay abroad and returned to Slovakia. In contrast, sometimes, usually as a result of forming a romantic relationship with a local person or migrant from another country, people who did not plan to stay in the United Kingdom for more than one year as an au pair decided to stay in the United Kingdom more permanently and took other employment. It is apparent that personal relationships were crucial in forming particular migration trajectories.

Access to the labour market also influenced host families in their decisions whom to hire. In her study on au pair employers, Bridget Anderson found that '[e]ven if the migrant's status is dependent on them [domestic workers] working in the particular sector, rather than for a particular employer, this is perceived as an advantage by employers. It is one reason that host families give for opting for au pair visa-holders as childcare' (Anderson 2007: 260). As a consequence of the changes, research indicates that host families concerned that their au pairs would use them as a base for finding another job often shifted to nationals of other countries such as Romania, Bulgaria or Turkey (Anderson 2007: 260-261; Spencer, Ruhs, Anderson, & Rogaly 2006: 85) or opted for an au pair with very basic knowledge of English. Jana, trying to find an au pair position by responding to local advertisements, complained that one family explicitly rejected her on the grounds that her English was too advanced, being afraid that she would very soon look for another occupation. Other au pairs confirmed this experience, bewildered that what they saw as an apparent linguistic advantage could disadvantage them in looking for an au pair position.

## Conclusion

Adrian Favell and Randall Hansen argued that East-West migration following EU enlargement has challenged standard narratives of post-war migration based on post-colonial, guest worker and asylum models (Favell 2008; Favell & Hansen 2002). EU enlargement has also challenged basic expectations with respect to au pairing, revealing weaknesses in both formal definitions and their enforcement. The regulations have always struggled with trying to keep the au pair institution separated from work (and, indeed, servitude) through constructing au pairing as a form of cultural exchange and au pairs as young non-workers equal to their hosts (Anderson 2009; Calleman

2010; Cox 2006; Cox 2007; Hess & Puckhaber 2004; Sekeráková Búriková 2015; Yodanis & Lauer 2005). The ethnography on the experience of Slovak au pairs after the accession of Slovakia to the EU illustrates how the weakening of immigration controls and changes in labour policies made the boundary between cultural exchange and migrant domestic labour even more unclear. Owing to the lack of official controls, au pair stays were often longer than the expected two years, or the people involved did not fall under the age limit. More importantly, the lack of regulation enabled au pairs and host families to enter agreements in which au pairs worked more hours and were paid more, though still less than the minimum wage. The visa-free regime included also the abolition of au pair visas for Slovak citizens; thus, Slovak nationals could enter the United Kingdom as au pairs without being checked (and without the conditions of their stays being controlled) by the immigration authorities and stay in the country without limitation. Apart from loosening controls over regulations, this change shifted slightly the negotiation of conditions in so far that host families could not use the threat of visas being withdrawn in order to extract more work or compliance from their au pairs. However, it is clear that it was not sufficient in strengthening the positions of au pairs in negotiations regarding their working and living conditions. It has been argued before that immigration status alone cannot explain the power asymmetry between au pairs and host families (Anderson 2009; Anderson 2013).

The experience of au pairs also demonstrates that when considering the role of immigration status in the experience of paid domestic workers, we have to consider the wider context of being a migrant, not merely the particular visa regime. Despite the fact that au pairs were not formally recognised as workers, the possibility of taking employment in the United Kingdom significantly changed their strategies relating to migration in general and their perspectives on au pair stays in particular. Free access to the labour market changed Slovak migrants' considerations of au pair stays as limited temporary stays in the country, because they could make them more long term and combine them with other types of activities and work in the United Kingdom. Not only did they sometimes see their au pair stays as a form of migrant labour; they could also use their au pair positions as a stepping stone to other employment in the United Kingdom. Unlike temporary visits to the country, au pair stays became part of much more complex migration routes and stories, often unpredicted by the au pairs themselves. Similar to other Central and Eastern European migrants (Ruhs, Anderson & Rogaly 2007: 77), Slovak au pairs often changed their ideas about how long they would stay in the country. Their decisions depended on the availability (and desirability) of work either in the United Kingdom or in Slovakia, on their personal relationships and on the level of satisfaction with their social lives in the United Kingdom.

It has been widely argued that au pairs are in a vulnerable position within host households and are often exploited (Búriková & Miller 2010; Cox 2006; Cox 2007; Cox 2015; Cox & Narula 2004; Hess & Puckhaber 2004; Rohde-Abuba 2016; Sekeráková Búriková 2015; Stenum 2012). However, free access to the labour market enabled

au pairs to use their host families as a comfortable base from which to look for other employment and which they left (sometimes without notice) when they found a more suitable job. Thus, EU enlargement has, in a sense, democratised the au pair institution, slightly shifting the power distribution and also created new possibilities for exploitation in both directions.

To conclude, the importance of the cultural exchange component, which had been the core of the au pair institution, diminished because of the summarised changes following the EU enlargement. Unfortunately, the fact that numerous Slovak au pairs considered au pairing just as another type of migrant labour and that British families wanted au pairs working longer hours, did not bring about proper wages or work contracts. The types of people and working relationships covered by au pairing changed, making au pairing more similar to other types of exploited migrant domestic work.

## Notes

1. That is, The Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia.
2. Au pairs did not earn a wage but pocket money. They did not pay taxes but were not subject to employment protection and did not have to be paid the minimum wage. Also, they were responsible for paying their health insurance.
3. This is also the reason why we cannot accurately estimate the numbers of the Slovak au pairs in the United Kingdom after EU enlargement.
4. The PBS does not apply to Slovak citizens or other EEA and Swiss nationals, who are free to stay and take work in the United Kingdom.
5. All names of research participants have been changed.

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