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ARTICLE

The Inter-Factor Zone: A Transitional Phase Between Push and Pull Factors in Post-1968 Migration From Czechoslovakia to Switzerland

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Abstract
This article introduces the concept of the inter-factor zone, defined as a bounded transitional phase that complements the traditional push and pull factor theory by incorporating the dynamics of uncertainty and the impact of contingent events in migration processes. Using the case of the political emigration of Czechoslovaks to Switzerland following the Warsaw Pact invasion in 1968, this study analyses how decision-making during this transitional phase was shaped by structural factors, institutional support, and unforeseen events. The inter-factor zone is empirically traced primarily in transit settings, where departure has occurred but a stable destination orientation has not yet been established. While this article primarily focuses on Switzerland, the analysis also considers Austria, particularly Vienna, as a crucial transit context where many emigrants made pivotal decisions before continuing their journeys. Based on qualitative analysis of 35 biographical narratives and historical documents, the research highlights the critical role of transit countries and humanitarian organizations in shaping migrants' options and interpretations under conditions of suspended orientation. This study enhances our understanding of migration complexity, offers a novel perspective on the significance of this transitional phase, and provides conceptual insights for contemporary migration scholarship and policy debates concerning refugee reception and integration.

Keywords: inter-factor zone; migration; push and pull factors; political emigration; Czechoslovakia; Switzerland; contingency; transit phase; migration policy

1. Introduction

Migration reflects not only individual choices but also broader political, economic, and social forces. Political migration, in particular, offers a clear view of how structural constraints and personal agency interact under pressure. One of the most significant migratory movements during the Cold War was the emigration from Czechoslovakia following the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia in August 1968 (Rychlík 2007; Otáhal 1994). Approximately 100,000 to 130,000 people left the country within a single year (Tigrid 1990; Otáhal 1994). Switzerland, which received over 11,000 Czechoslovak refugees, became one of the main destinations (Swiss Political Department 1970). While Switzerland remains the primary focus of this article, Austria, particularly Vienna, is discussed as a crucial transit space where many emigrants made pivotal choices before moving on to their final destination. The decision-making processes of migrants during this period were shaped not only by structural conditions but also by unexpected and seemingly minor events.

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In transit, these included fragmented information, institutional guidance, and contingent encounters that could shift plans quickly.

In this article, we introduce the concept of the inter-factor zone: a bounded transitional phase in which push factors in the country of origin have lost their immediate force while pull factors in the destination have not yet developed into a stable orientation. This stage is particularly visible in the Czechoslovak case, where many people crossed borders without knowing whether their departure would become permanent or where they would eventually settle. Analytically, we identify the inter-factor zone when three conditions co-occur: (1) a temporary weakening of both push and pull orientation, (2) indeterminate temporality, especially regarding returnability and legal status, and (3) heightened responsiveness to contextual cues such as institutional guidance, legal arrangements, information flows, and chance encounters. Changes in border governance matter because they shape uncertainty and returnability, but border closure itself is not treated as a defining precondition of the concept. To avoid oscillating between a mental state and a fixed spatial label, we treat the inter-factor zone primarily as a narrative-bounded spatiotemporal segment, often unfolding in transit settings and reconstructed from the sequence of narrated events. Feelings of uncertainty, hesitation, and improvisation are treated as indicators within this segment, not as sufficient conditions on their own. In this sense, permeability is time-bound: the inter-factor zone becomes most apparent when migrants perceive returnability and onward movement as unstable and time-sensitive, whether because borders are briefly open, about to close, or because legal status remains undecided.

We argue that this intermediate phase is crucial for a more realistic understanding of migration under rapidly changing political conditions. Drawing on life-history interviews with migrants who left Czechoslovakia shortly after the 1968 invasion and later settled in Switzerland, we analyse narratives that portray a liminal condition marked by uncertainty, improvisation, and restricted access to information. This phase, we contend, constitutes a distinct part of the migration trajectory that has been largely overlooked in existing scholarship. In our material, it is most visible in transit decision arenas, especially Austria and Vienna, where departure had already taken place but a stable destination orientation was not yet established.

Our approach therefore moves beyond a strictly dichotomous push-pull model. We suggest that the inter-factor zone enriches the theoretical landscape by focusing on the temporal and experiential dimensions of migration, particularly on how people navigate moments when structural forces are in flux and decisions must be made without reliable information. To avoid conflating the inter-factor zone with destination pull dynamics, we distinguish between (a) the resolution of the inter-factor zone through early stabilising arrangements after arrival and (b) later settlement processes shaped primarily by pull factors.

Against this backdrop, we examine how uncertainty, suspended temporality, and partial mobility shaped decision-making and subsequent trajectories. Specifically, this study addresses the following questions:

1. How did Czechoslovak migrants experience and navigate the transitional moment in which both push and pull dynamics were suspended?

This question focuses on how decisions were made when conventional structural drivers temporarily lost their force.

2. How did institutional and social actors shape decision-making within this phase of suspended orientation?

This question examines the role of humanitarian organisations, administrative arrangements, and informal networks in shaping options and trajectories.

3. How did contingent events interact with institutional frameworks to produce longer-term outcomes of mobility?

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This question connects the analytical scope of the concept with empirical observations from interviews, focusing on how small events become consequential under conditions of indeterminate temporality and partial information.

1.1. Historical Context

Between late August 1968 and the early months of 1969, Czechoslovakia experienced an unusually permeable border regime. This was not a uniform, deliberate liberalisation but a short-lived administrative disarray in which individual crossings and local practices varied. Many departures in late 1968 thus occurred legally (with valid documents or omissions at checkpoints), whereas by early 1969 the authorities retightened exit controls, curtailed legal avenues, and increasingly criminalised irregular departures. This sequence accounts for the surge in departures immediately following the invasion and their sharp decline once control was reimposed (Rychlík 2007; Otáhal 1994; Government Regulation No. 114/1969 Coll.; Decree No. 115/1969 Coll.). In analytical terms, border closure is not a necessary precondition for the inter-factor zone, but it can intensify it by destabilising returnability and by turning a temporary departure into a potentially open-ended condition. The shift from short-term permeability to renewed restrictions amplified uncertainty and made decision-making more dependent on institutional information, administrative signals, and contingent opportunities encountered in transit.

Migration has been a recurring phenomenon in the Czech lands, with major waves in the 20th century shaped by wars and political upheavals (Lee 1966; Castles, de Haas, and Miller 2014; Massey et al. 1993). This pattern is not unique to Czechoslovakia but aligns with broader East-Central European trajectories of politically triggered mobility. Post-WWII migration was largely organized, including the population exchange with Hungary and the expulsion of Germans (Šutaj 1993). In contrast, emigration after February 1948 and especially August 1968 was more individualised and often driven by urgent circumstances.

The 1968 Warsaw Pact invasion and subsequent period of 'normalisation' caused widespread disillusionment and fear of repression. Emigration became a way to escape political persecution and seek personal freedom. This was not the result of an official political decision but rather of temporary disorganization within the state apparatus and a lack of coordinated control (Rychlík 2007; Otáhal 1994). In practice, the situation varied considerably: while crossings to the West were often tolerated or even informally assisted by local border guards, other sections of the frontier remained more closely monitored. Oral testimonies describe instances where guards helped emigrants pass, reflecting humanitarian impulses rather than state policy. From early 1969, however, the Czechoslovak government reintroduced strict exit regulations through Government Regulation No. 114/1969 Coll. and Decree No. 115/1969 Coll. (Government of the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic 1969; Ministry of the Interior and Ministry of Foreign Affairs 1969), effectively closing the borders and re-criminalising emigration (Nešpor 2005).

Many migrants transited through Austria and Yugoslavia, receiving aid and information from humanitarian organizations. Switzerland emerged as a key destination due to its asylum policy and the role of organizations like the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) (Swiss Political Department 1970). By the end of 1969, Switzerland had granted asylum to 11,108 of 13,000 Czechoslovak refugees (Swiss Political Department 1970).

Czechoslovak law No. 140/1961 Coll. (Criminal Code) criminalised unauthorised departure, enabling the regime to prosecute emigrants after 1968. This law reinforced restrictions on return and punished families left behind through job loss or limited access to education (Nešpor 2005).

The fall of communism in 1989 opened archives and enabled deeper research into this migration. Scholars have since explored not only the political causes but also the long-term social impact, including the divide between those who left and those who stayed (Jeřábek 2005).

Analytically, this brief period of border permeability (late 1968 to early 1969) created conditions characteristic of an inter-factor zone, a temporary phase in which neither push nor pull forces fully prevailed, and decisions depended on contingent cues, networks, and administrative signals

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2. Literature Review

The theory of push and pull factors, which explains migration processes, emerged in the mid-20th century. Donald Bogue (1969) highlighted economic and social influences on migrant decision-making. Jansen (1969) emphasized the role of social conditions and individual choice within broader structures. Lee (1966) categorized migration factors into four areas: conditions in the country of origin, in the destination country, obstacles along the route, and personal factors. His classification shows that migration results from a combination of positive and negative influences. For the present article, Lee's attention to obstacles along the route is especially important because it draws analytical focus to decision-making that unfolds between origin and destination, rather than treating migration as a single, linear move.

The theory has since evolved. Van Hear et al. (2018) introduced the Push and Pull Plus framework, incorporating mediating factors such as infrastructure, migration networks, and cultural values. It also considers proximal causes such as conflicts and environmental crises, highlighting the complex and dynamic nature of migration. This extension is relevant here because it explicitly recognizes mediating conditions in transit and the role of institutions, networks, and information in shaping how mobility decisions unfold.

Empirical research illustrates specific applications of the theory. Urbański (2022) examined migration between Poland and Romania, where economic opportunities played a key role. Bernini et al. (2024) show that corruption can operate as both a push and a pull factor in European migration patterns, underlining that the salience of drivers is often filtered through institutional conditions rather than operating as simple pushes or pulls. Stojšin et al. (2021) described migration from Serbia to Slovakia, driven by low wages and political instability on one side, and better living conditions on the other. These studies confirm the continuing relevance of driver-based explanations, while also indicating why intermediary contexts and changing constraints along the route can become analytically decisive.

Klaus and Pachocka (2019) introduced the "push out–push back" concept, emphasizing the active role of destination countries in deterring forced migration through restrictive entry measures, deportation, and anti-immigration rhetoric. This perspective helps explain why decision-making may shift from selecting a destination to managing uncertainty and constraint in transit, especially when entry and settlement are politically and administratively contested.

Recent research focuses on contingency, meaning unforeseen events affecting migration. Gladkova and Mazzucato (2017) described migrants as either "hustlers" (who actively seize opportunities) or "pawns" (who respond cautiously), emphasizing the critical role of contingency, especially in transit phases. This was echoed in narratives where small, unforeseen events shifted life trajectories. For instance, one respondent remembered: "My mother panicked because Romanian radio reported there was a war in Czechoslovakia" (František, personal communication, 2019). Another recalled: "I met a friend in London who simply told me: 'Don't go back'" (Myra, personal communication, 2019). Such incidental encounters often proved decisive for migrants' long-term choices. In this article, contingency is treated not as random noise but as a patterned feature of decision-making under indeterminate temporality and incomplete information.

Szaló (2007) works with the concept of transnational migration, which unfolds on two levels: building new social ties in the host country and maintaining connections with the country of origin. A key element in this process is social networks, relationships between migrants and non-migrants that support integration and stability. Social networks are an important factor in individual migration decision-making. Research shows that these networks operate primarily through two mechanisms. The first involves the transmission of information, such as employment opportunities, living conditions, or requirements associated with arrival in a new country (Borjas 1992; Munshi 2003). The second mechanism is the provision of support, both material and informal, that can reduce the risks related to relocating to an unfamiliar environment (Carrington et al. 1996; Comola and Mendola 2015). These two functions of networks can significantly facilitate migration, especially for individuals with limited resources or experience.

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This study builds on these insights by introducing the concept of the inter-factor zone, not simply as uncertainty, but as a specific transitional configuration in which push factors lose force and pull factors have not yet developed into a durable destination orientation. This phase is marked by uncertainty, sensitivity to small stimuli (e.g., institutional information), and the significance of contingency. Unlike previous studies, this concept systematically integrates structural influences, institutions, and social networks into one framework. Importantly, the inter-factor zone is most visible in transit settings, where migrants have already left their country of origin but have not yet stabilized their settlement plans.

The inter-factor zone deepens our understanding of migration dynamics by linking driver-based theories to how decisions are actually made and remade during transit. It offers an analytical tool for scholarship on forced and politically triggered mobility, and it clarifies why early reception and humanitarian infrastructures can matter before long-term integration begins.

2.1. Conceptualizing the Inter-factor Zone

Migration studies have long relied on the conceptual dichotomy of push and pull factors to explain the drivers of migration (Lee 1966; Castles et al. 2014). While this framework offers a useful macro-level perspective, it often fails to account for the dynamic, nonlinear, and contingent nature of migrant decision-making, particularly in forced migration contexts (Richmond 1993; Bakewell 2010).

In this article, we introduce the concept of the inter-factor zone as a transitional phase within the migration process. We define the inter-factor zone as a bounded transitional phase that emerges after exit from the origin but before a stable destination orientation is formed. Empirically, it is identified when three conditions co-occur: (1) push and pull drivers are temporarily weakened or suspended, (2) temporality becomes indeterminate, especially regarding returnability and legal status, and (3) decision-making becomes highly responsive to contextual cues such as institutional guidance, legal arrangements, information flows, and chance encounters. The inter-factor zone ends when a durable orientation is established – for example, through a clear settlement decision, stabilized legal status, or a concrete plan to return. In this phase, migrants are no longer acting under immediate compulsion to leave, yet they are not guided by a stable attraction to a specific destination. Instead, their decisions are shaped by uncertainty and by responsiveness to immediate cues such as informal networks, bureaucratic decisions, and unanticipated encounters.

The notion of the inter-factor zone intersects with concepts such as liminality (Turner 1969), forced temporariness (Brun 2003), and waithood (Honwana 2012). However, it differs by focusing explicitly on the transitional moment of decision-making in transit and on how uncertainty is mediated through institutions and contingent events. This resonates with respondents who described the invasion as a moment of being "in between," unsure whether to return or continue abroad. As one interviewee recalled: "It was such a shock, we didn't know whether to go back or not" (Irma, personal communication, 2019). Several narrators emphasized the uncertainty of this waiting period: "One day it was like this, the next day everything changed, and we just waited to see what would happen" (Myra, personal communication, 2019). Such accounts highlight the suspended orientation typical of waithood. The inter-factor zone is therefore not conceptualized as passive waiting; it captures an active space of decision-making in which migrants revise, delay, or redirect plans in response to shifting information and institutional conditions.

Conceptually, the inter-factor zone can be understood as a spatial and temporal field in which structural, institutional, and incidental factors become temporarily decoupled from the classic push pull logic. Migrants in this phase may revise, delay, or even reverse prior decisions. Recognising and analysing this transitional moment is essential to grasping the complexity of contemporary migration, especially in post-crisis contexts where journeys are rarely linear and decisions are often made under incomplete information and shifting political conditions.

While the concept of the inter-factor zone draws on theories of liminality and contingency, it also intersects directly with debates on transnationalism and migration trajectories. Rather than

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opposing transnational approaches, it captures the micro-temporal formation of transnational ties, the moment when cross-border networks, institutions, and identities are still in flux and not yet consolidated. In this sense, it complements the notion of transnational social fields (Glick Schiller et al. 1992) by focusing on the threshold phase in which migrants' relationships with both origin and destination are being negotiated rather than stabilised. Similarly, the inter-factor zone resonates with trajectory-oriented models of mobility (Collyer and King 2015; Hagen-Zanker and Mallett 2020), which conceptualise migration as a non-linear process shaped by shifting constraints, opportunities, and chance. Yet it adds an analytical layer of temporal and affective indeterminacy, emphasising how decisions are made before transnational structures fully emerge.

Beyond its analytical proximity to transnationalism, the inter-factor zone may also be read through what De Genova and Tazzioli (2022) call migration as a critical standpoint – that is, as an epistemic vantage point from which the conventional paradigm of political and social theory can be unsettled. We use this perspective cautiously, as a way of clarifying why the in-between phase matters analytically, rather than as a separate theoretical agenda. Methodologically, this epistemic lens did not structure the interview guide or the interaction with participants; it serves only as an interpretive reminder that accounts of uncertainty reflect what migrants could reasonably know at the time, given fragmented information, institutional mediation, and ongoing movement.

2.2. Social Networks and Transnational Ties

Research on international migration shows that social networks play a crucial role in migration processes. Contemporary migration theories therefore emphasize the concept of migration networks and transnationalism. The theory of migration networks is based on the assumption that personal ties between migrants and their acquaintances (family members, friends, compatriots) significantly influence the decision to migrate, the direction of movement, and the success of settlement (Massey et al. 1993; Bilecen and Lubbers 2021). This approach helps explain why migration often takes the form of chain migration: each successive migrant benefits from the contacts of previous migrants, reducing the risks and costs associated with the journey. Networks thus tend to expand and reinforce migration flows over time (Massey et al. 1993).

Once a certain critical density of contacts is achieved within a community, migration becomes somewhat self-sustaining and continues independently, as the established network provides a lasting social infrastructure supporting ongoing movement (Massey et al. 1993; Bilecen and Lubbers 2021). In this way, social networks become one of the intermediate factors explaining why migration streams persist even after the original economic or political causes have diminished.

The concept of transnationalism emphasizes that migrants maintain multiple ties across national borders. As early as the 1990s, Glick Schiller and colleagues defined transnationalism as "the processes by which immigrants build and sustain multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement" (Glick Schiller et al. 1992). Migrants thus create a transnational social field in which family, economic, cultural, and political relationships transcend geographical boundaries.

Migrants' social networks include both strong ties (family, close friends) and weaker ties (acquaintances, members of the broader community). Strong ties provide emotional support and direct assistance (such as housing or financial help), while weaker ties often mediate new information and opportunities (Granovetter 1973; Bilecen and Lubbers 2021). Research confirms that both bonding networks within communities and bridging connections outward are important for migration. Ethnic community organizations and voluntary associations (such as religious groups) extend networks beyond family and can facilitate integration by providing newcomers with information and practical assistance (Massey et al. 1993).

Thus, social networks constitute a form of social capital that migrants use not only to accomplish migration but also to find their place in the new environment (Ryan 2023). In the context of this article, networks are also crucial during the inter-factor zone, because they often operate as

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short-term informational and practical infrastructures that shape options before destination orientations stabilize. Dahinden (2005) is relevant here in showing that transnational ties do not necessarily carry the same weight across phases of mobility, and that their significance depends on concrete network practices and the kinds of support that are available.

Here, "social capital" is used in a narrow, practical sense: actionable resources embedded in ties and mobilised to obtain information, shelter, documents, and onward transport during short windows of uncertainty. Related scholarship on refuge and camp-like settings similarly highlights how people craft provisional forms of home and orientation under conditions of waiting and constrained choice. Brun and Fábos (2015) conceptualise "home in limbo" in protracted displacement, showing how uncertainty is materially and socially managed through everyday practices and temporary infrastructures. While the inter-factor zone analysed here is typically shorter and often unfolds in transit rather than in long-term camp settlement, both perspectives draw attention to how "temporary" arrangements can become decisive for subsequent trajectories.

3. Materials and Methods

This study is based on qualitative data collected through 35 narrative interviews with former political migrants from Czechoslovakia who emigrated to Switzerland after the Warsaw Pact invasion in 1968. The research uses the method of oral history, understood as a continuously evolving set of approaches for studying individual experiences and attitudes towards historical events (Vaňek 2009, Portelli 1991, Eastmond 2007). Oral history emphasises that memory is selective and that personal narratives are shaped by the narrator's current position, later experiences, emotions, and the social context in which the story is told.

The oral history method was chosen for its ability to capture life stories in the participants' own words and to provide insights into the subjective experiences of migration and transitional phases of uncertainty. Importantly, uncertainty was treated as a broad experiential category and was not automatically equated with the inter-factor zone. We coded uncertainty separately and identified the inter-factor zone only when uncertainty co-occurred with (1) a suspended push and pull orientation, (2) indeterminate temporality regarding returnability or legal status, and (3) an observable decision point shaped by contextual cues such as institutional guidance, temporary legal arrangements, information flows, or chance encounters. This procedure distinguishes general uncertainty from the analytically specific configuration captured by the inter-factor zone.

The interviews were conducted through field research between 2019 and 2023 and typically lasted between 60 and 120 minutes. They were carried out in two stages. The first stage consisted of biographical storytelling, where the participants freely recounted their experiences from the period just before emigration to their integration in Switzerland. The second stage involved a semi-structured interview focusing on clarifying details and exploring specific research topics. Participants were selected using purposive and snowball sampling to ensure diversity in gender, age at emigration, region of origin, and migration routes. All respondents had left Czechoslovakia for political reasons and had been accepted in Switzerland either as asylum seekers or permanent residents.

The interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analysed using thematic coding. The analysis focused on identifying key decision-making moments, emotional reactions, the role of social and institutional networks, and the impact of unforeseen events. Special attention was paid to how participants constructed meaning over time and how their narratives reflected the interaction between individual experiences and structural or incidental factors. In accordance with the principles of oral history (Vaňek 2009, Portelli 1991, Eastmond 2007), the analysis also distinguished between life as lived and life as remembered, recognising that narratives represent a selective and reconstructed view of the past. Reflexivity was maintained throughout the research process, particularly with regard to the possible influence of the shared linguistic and cultural background between the interviewer and the participants.

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Operationally, this distinction was implemented by coding uncertainty as a broad descriptive category (e.g., fear, hesitation, not knowing) and then tagging a segment as inter-factor zone only when uncertainty coincided with (a) a narrated suspension of both return and destination orientation, and (b) a decision point shaped by contextual cues (institutional guidance, legal arrangements, information flows, or contingent encounters). During coding, we wrote analytic memos for each case, compared segments across interviews, and actively searched for negative cases in which uncertainty was present but destination orientation was already stable. These checks helped prevent an overinclusive use of the concept.

This approach is particularly well suited to capturing transitional phases of migration, because it allows respondents to narrate how decisions were revised over time and how institutional contexts, information, and contingent encounters shaped choices before settlement became stabilised.

This research was conducted in compliance with the ethical research standards of the Ethical Code of the Czech Association for Social Anthropology and the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its subsequent amendments. All participants provided informed consent before participating in the study, and their anonymity and confidentiality were strictly maintained. The study adhered to ethical principles for qualitative research, ensuring that the participants' narratives were handled with respect and integrity.

4. Results

Our analysis shows that migration trajectories were shaped by an interplay between the initial decision to leave and subsequent decisions made in transit about whether to return, wait, or move on. We argue that these transit decisions were often mediated by what we term the inter-factor zone, a bounded transitional phase that emerges after exit from the origin but before a stable destination orientation is formed. In the material analysed here, this phase is most apparent in Austria, especially Vienna, where returnability and legal status were unclear and where choices were shaped by contextual cues such as institutional guidance, information flows, temporary arrangements, and contingent encounters. Switzerland enters the analysis primarily as the context in which this phase was resolved through early stabilising arrangements, rather than as a full account of later integration dynamics.

4.1. Motivation for Emigration

The decision to emigrate was a pivotal moment, influenced by a range of push factors that often overlapped, reflecting the individual experiences and subjective perceptions of the narrators. In the case of Czechoslovak emigrants to Switzerland during the period 1948–1989, the dominant factor was the invasion of Warsaw Pact troops in 1968, which triggered fear for the future and uncertainty. However, this decisive factor, along with other motivations, cannot be fully understood through the classic push and pull factor theory alone. Our analysis revealed that decisions were often shaped by unplanned events and chance encounters, which significantly influenced the migration trajectory. At the same time, it is important to distinguish the initial decision to leave from later decisions made in transit, when returnability and destination orientation were still unclear.

The push factors can be divided into two main categories. The first and most significant was the fear for the future, spurred by the invasion. Many narrators stated that their presence outside Czechoslovakia at the time of the August events contributed to their decision to leave, such as vacations, study trips, and visits to relatives. Information from foreign media, whether incomplete or distorted, further amplified feelings of insecurity: "My mother panicked because Romanian radio reported how there was a war in Czechoslovakia," one narrator recalled (Filip, personal communication, July 22, 2019).

Secondary factors included poor work and study opportunities in Czechoslovakia, often resulting from negative political assessments. These were linked to previous family persecution or earlier

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waves of emigration. Such assessments severely restricted professional and educational opportunities, thus prompting the decision to emigrate.

Another significant factor was religious identity, particularly among narrators of Jewish descent. Events surrounding the so-called Prague Spring (a period of political liberalisation, particularly in 1968) and the subsequent shift toward stricter policy revived fears of persecution, deeply rooted in the wartime experiences of the Holocaust survivors.

"My mother and I took a train to Vienna. They took care of us there, and from Vienna we arranged our entry into Zurich," Petr (personal communication, July 11, 2019).

This testimony highlights the active role that migrants played in organizing their movement through the transit country. At the same time, it reflects the effectiveness of institutional support in Austria, which enabled a smooth transition toward the destination country. In the context of this article, such transit episodes are analytically important because they show how migrants moved from the initial push-driven departure into a phase where decisions were revised under uncertainty and in response to institutional cues.

4.2. The Role of Transit Countries

Transit countries played an indispensable role in the decision-making processes of migrants. Austria represented the most important transit point, serving as a bridge between Czechoslovakia and the final destinations chosen by migrants for short-term or temporary stays during August 1968. Czechoslovak citizens returning from Italy, Yugoslavia, and other countries often crossed the Austrian border in hopes of gaining asylum, temporary residence, or access to up-to-date information about the situation back home. Vienna, Austria, became a vital information hub where migrants received their first guidance about possible onward travel, including asylum conditions in Western countries. Up to 90% of Czechs and Slovaks seeking temporary refuge in Austria remained in Vienna (Stern 2008).

"People were fleeing to Austria because it was the closest," Dan (personal communication, July 13, 2019).

Austria was frequently selected not only for its proximity, but also due to its accessible infrastructure. This statement reflects how the combination of geographic closeness and cultural familiarity made Austria a logical first step in the migration trajectory. Perceptions of safety and the ease of access strengthened Austria's position as a key transit point. For many, Austria was less a chosen destination than a practical decision arena, a place where migrants waited, gathered information, and recalibrated plans.

"So I got married and applied for a honeymoon trip to Yugoslavia. I also told them I had asthma and needed saltwater. I mentioned I had fond memories of Vienna from my childhood and wanted to see it again – which they approved," Dan (personal communication, July 19, 2019).

This account illustrates how migrants made strategic use of official reasons to legally exit Czechoslovakia. Personal, medical, or sentimental justifications were used to create the conditions necessary for departure. Austria therefore served not just as a transit space but as a crucial decision-making platform in the broader migration process.

"Thanks to having previously arranged visas for a holiday in Yugoslavia with transit through Austria, we were more or less able to leave without any problems," Jozef (personal communication, July 19, 2019).

This statement illustrates how legal travel arrangements created room for manoeuvre at the moment of rupture. Rather than presenting emigration as a fully planned exit, it shows how an initially ordinary itinerary could become the practical basis for a decision made under uncertainty, especially once the situation at home became unclear and returnability could no longer be taken for granted.

Yugoslavia appears in the interviews less as a structured reception space and more as a legally sanctioned itinerary that created an initial corridor out of Czechoslovakia. Several narrators

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describe tourist visas, organised trips, or a "holiday" rationale as the practical device that made departure possible, even before emigration was fully imagined as permanent. When the invasion occurred while people were already abroad, this ordinary travel frame was abruptly reinterpreted as a potential exit, and decisions shifted toward improvised onward movement. In such accounts, Yugoslavia functions as part of the inter-factor zone's temporal opening, a short window in which travel legality and uncertainty interacted, before Austria became the main site where information, humanitarian support, and onward options were consolidated.

In response to the surge of Czechoslovak refugees, the city of Vienna activated its emergency infrastructure. Under the leadership of Mayor Bruno Marek, a coordinated effort included the Austrian Red Cross, Catholic charities, trade unions, and city services. Public buildings, such as stadiums and military barracks, were converted into temporary accommodations for thousands of displaced persons (Stern 2008, 1032-1035).

Conditions in refugee facilities, particularly in Traiskirchen and the Arsenal compound, deteriorated rapidly due to overcrowding. Official reports highlighted an atmosphere of uncertainty and emotional strain among new arrivals. Authorities responded by transferring migrants to smaller regional centres and offering financial and housing assistance to those granted political asylum under the Geneva Convention (Bumová 2006, 48-49).

Eleven emergency shelters managed by the Austrian Red Cross employed roughly 30 staff members per site. Meal distribution was handled by the WÖK organization in cooperation with volunteers. Despite the difficult conditions, many refugees later recalled the assistance as respectful and well-organized (Stern 2008, 1035).

Due to the burden placed on official facilities, many migrants relied on informal networks for temporary housing. Distant relatives or fellow countrymen opened their homes to prevent refugees from sleeping outdoors. This form of solidarity played a key role in easing institutional strain and offered migrants a more secure transition (Bumová 2006, 51).

In cooperation with UNHCR and the Intergovernmental Committee for European Migration (ICEM), Austrian authorities secured international support. Beginning in September 1968, the United Nations provided an emergency grant of $50,000 for logistical and humanitarian aid, facilitating the resettlement of Czechoslovak refugees to third countries (Stern 2008, 1031; UN Project 68/ES/Aus.1).

An important location during this transit phase was the refugee camp in Traiskirchen, located approximately 20 km from Vienna. This camp, originally established during the 1956 Hungarian refugee crisis (Niessen 2017), played a key role in receiving migrants. Austrian reception facilities played a key role in receiving migrants. Records indicate that between 21 August and 15 September 1968, the Vienna branch of the Austrian Red Cross registered over 61,000 overnight stays (Übernachtungen) of Czechoslovak refugees and tourists in the camps it administered (Stern 2008). Swiss diplomatic documents confirm that the Austrian government funded transportation to reception centres near the Swiss border (Swiss Federal Police Department 1969).

Inside these camps, care was provided by Red Cross personnel and local volunteers, who offered food, medical attention, and temporary accommodation. The camps also enabled migrants to connect with other Czechoslovak refugees, offering emotional support and critical information. Thus, the transit phase was not merely a geographic movement but a deeply social and informational network that significantly shaped subsequent migration decisions.

Respondents' testimonies show that these transit countries were more than just waypoints. They often became sites of suspended decision-making, emotional disorientation, and openness to influence. This transitional phase, conceptually defined in this study as the inter-factor zone, emerged when the initial compulsion to escape had been fulfilled, yet the final destination remained uncertain. In these settings, the inter-factor zone is observed when uncertainty co-occurred with indeterminate temporality and with concrete decision points shaped by contextual cues, including institutional advice, temporary legal arrangements, information flows, and chance encounters. In this state, migrants did not always proceed with a clearly defined plan. Instead, their decisions were

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shaped by immediate circumstances, interactions with institutions, and minor but consequential events. Interviews highlighted that factors such as encounters with volunteers, overheard information, or the emotional climate in camps influenced not only the pace of movement but often the ultimate direction of the migration trajectory.

4.3. The Role of the Inter-factor Zone in Migration Trajectories

The inter-factor zone represents a critical phase in the migration process, during which push factors lose their immediate influence, while pull factors in the destination country are not yet fully active. In this state of uncertainty, migrants often find themselves "in between" two decisions: whether to return to their country of origin or proceed to a new destination. Following the analytical definition used in this article, the inter-factor zone is not equated with uncertainty alone. It is identified only where uncertainty co-occurs with indeterminate temporality and with decision points shaped by contextual cues in transit settings.

In the interviews, narrators frequently highlighted feelings of disorientation and uncertainty experienced in transit countries. In this phase, uncertainty was often intensified by rapidly changing information, unclear legal possibilities, and the social environment of camps and temporary facilities. Central to the inter-factor zone was the influence of institutions and organizations, which often motivated migrants to either remain in transit or continue their journey.

The role of contingency is a distinct dimension that transcends traditional pull factors. This phase, described by participants as a time when they "didn't know what to do next" or were "just waiting", illustrates a space between two certainties, departure and destination, during which orientation was suspended and minor inputs could shift long-term outcomes. In the narratives, contingency often emerged as a decisive element during the transit phase, when migrants were in an uncertain state of being "in between" having left Czechoslovakia but not yet firmly decided on their final destination. In this context, contingency encompassed unplanned events that were not part of the migrants' intended trajectory but directly shaped the direction and choice of their destination.

"Then around three in the morning, suddenly there was a huge racket, we were staring at the doors, the windows," Tomáš (personal communication, February 2, 2019).

This vivid description captures the intense sense of vulnerability migrants experienced in camps or temporary facilities. Confusion, sleeplessness, and sudden disturbances often contributed to emotional instability at a moment when life-changing decisions had to be made under pressure.

"You could apply for asylum, but the process took a while. We just wanted to move on as quickly as possible," Jan (personal communication, July 12, 2019).

This quote reflects an urge to avoid stasis, even at the expense of possible security. While legal protection in Austria was available, some migrants perceived waiting as a greater risk than continued movement. The inter-factor zone is therefore understood here as a time-sensitive decision arena in which legal ambiguity, partial information, and institutional mediation shaped how migrants evaluated whether to wait, move on, or attempt return.

"My brother left for Austria back then. For a holiday. And he never returned," Jan (personal communication, July 2, 2019).

Such brief yet powerful recollections show how decisions to emigrate were often the result of deferral or passivity. The transit phase blurred the line between tourist and refugee status. The failure to return sometimes replaced a formal decision to leave.

"They had the radio on, and the broadcast was calling for help. It said tanks had arrived, " Pavel (personal communication, July 11, 2019).

In the absence of official communication, migrants' responses were often shaped by rumours and emotionally charged reports. These external messages received during transit could tip the scale from indecision to exile within hours.

Based on interviews with narrators, contingency factors can be categorised into several key themes. Narrators described encounters with Red Cross workers, embassy staff, and volunteers in

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transit countries, who provided critical information about Switzerland's asylum policies. Leaflets distributed by volunteers reassured migrants that Switzerland would grant asylum to all Czechoslovak refugees, without requiring permanent residency. For many, these actors were pivotal in their decision-making process, as they offered practical assistance, such as food and temporary shelters, and facilitated border crossings into Switzerland. One narrator shared: "I didn't want to leave Europe, and I wasn't sure what to do – whether to stay in Austria or go back. Then I heard Switzerland was taking in Czechoslovak refugees," Miroslav (personal communication, July 12, 2019).

A key contingency factor was the three-month grace period offered by Switzerland, during which migrants could legally remain in the country without applying for asylum. This period allowed migrants the necessary time to deliberate on their next steps, particularly in the chaotic aftermath of the invasion, as they awaited development in Czechoslovakia and weighed the pros and cons of emigration. Even those who did not initially apply for asylum were quickly employed or enrolled in education under government regulations, which ultimately encouraged the majority to seek asylum. Geographical proximity also played a significant role in decision-making. As one narrator recalled: "I emigrated with my parents. Our first stop was Vienna. They didn't choose Switzerland. It was simply the first country that accepted them," Petr (personal communication, January 4, 2019). Many narrators noted that Switzerland's relative proximity to transit locations such as Vienna, coupled with the availability of rail connections, made it a natural destination. For migrants without private transport, special trains were organized to take them to border crossings, further facilitating their movement. In this section, Switzerland is treated primarily as the context in which the inter-factor zone was resolved through early stabilising arrangements, rather than as evidence of later pull dynamics.

Another significant category of contingency comprised unplanned events that occurred during vacations abroad at the time of the Warsaw Pact invasion. Many Czechoslovaks were on organized tours in Yugoslavia, Italy, or other countries in August 1968, and their return routes often led through Austria. In these cases, Austria became the site of critical change in plans. Some tours disbanded in Vienna, leaving participants without immediate means to return to Czechoslovakia. This sudden situation forced them to consider remaining abroad, leading to decisions made under significant time pressure. In the present material, Yugoslavia appears mainly as an exit route and background context for these disrupted return journeys, while Austria, particularly Vienna, functions as the central transit decision arena.

The various situations described in this section illustrate how migrants' decision-making occurred within the inter-factor zone, a phase during which push factors had lost their immediate influence and pull factors in destination countries were not yet fully developed into a durable orientation. This phase was characterised by migrants' heightened sensitivity to available opportunities and contingent events, which could significantly alter the trajectory of their decisions. The role of the inter-factor zone thus underscores the importance of transit phases in migration, where individuals found themselves in conditions of uncertainty and openness to external influences.

4.4. Switzerland as a Destination Country

For many interviewees, Switzerland did not appear from the start as a fixed and clearly chosen "destination". It often became the destination because it offered a workable way out of the uncertainty that dominated the transit phase. What mattered first was that migrants could enter, stay legally, and gain time to decide what to do next. In this sense, Switzerland is discussed here mainly as the place where the transit phase began to settle into an initial orientation, not as a full story of integration. The role of Swiss cantonal authorities, which issued temporary residence permits during the crisis and allowed migrants to remain in the country, represented a crucial institutional support mechanism during a period of uncertainty.

In addition to these institutional arrangements, social ties and practical knowledge helped people navigate the first weeks and months. Relatives and acquaintances could provide information,

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temporary help, and a sense of direction. In many cases they mattered most after departure, when migrants were still weighing options rather than following a long-planned route. Secondary factors also played a role in decision-making. These included knowledge of German among some migrants, which made everyday communication easier in German-speaking cantons, and the relative accessibility of Switzerland from transit locations such as Vienna. These features did not automatically "pull" people in a straightforward way. Rather, they made Switzerland feel manageable at a moment when plans were still fragile and returnability was unclear. This section analyses these factors and their specific impact on how migrants moved from transit uncertainty toward an initial settlement orientation, *the decision-making and integration processes* of Czechoslovak emigrants.

4.4.1. Swiss Migration Policy and the Reception of Refugees

Swiss migration policy mattered for how the post-1968 trajectory unfolded, especially because it offered quick legal and practical pathways that helped migrants move out of the uncertainty typical of the transit phase. In the interviews, Switzerland often appears less as a long-planned destination and more as a workable solution once people had already left and were trying to understand what was possible. The information circulating in transit countries about Switzerland's three-month window for asylum applications and its high acceptance rate of refugees from Czechoslovakia increased the country's appeal.

Following the decision of the Federal Council on 23 August 1968, all Czechoslovak nationals present in Switzerland during the events of 21 August were instructed to remain in their current locations. This measure aimed to prevent the concentration of refugees in major cities (Swiss Federal Police Department 1969). The Swiss Red Cross established reception centres at two border crossings, Buchs and St. Margrethen, which became operational on 1 September 1968. From these centres, migrants were distributed across Swiss cantons, ensuring an even geographical distribution to avoid concentrations in specific areas. For many new arrivals, this organised reception functioned as an early stabilising framework, because it reduced improvisation and gave people immediate points of contact. This process, designed for efficiency, typically lasted no more than 48 hours (Swiss Federal Police Department 1969).

The role of institutions in this process was pivotal. Cantonal social departments were tasked with assisting migrants from the very day of the invasion, especially given the presence of approximately 1,000 Czechoslovak tourists in Switzerland at the time, many of whom had limited financial resources. The Federal Council granted migrants the freedom to decide whether to apply for asylum or remain in the country temporarily (Swiss Federal Police Department 1968). By October 1968, municipal social offices were instructed to assist refugees in securing appropriate housing and employment. Given the scarcity of affordable housing, this support was crucial, as refugees often arrived with only the clothes they were wearing. Aid extended beyond immediate necessities, encompassing housing, food, medical care, and clothing, and it created the basic conditions in which migrants could start making more settled plans rather than reacting day by day.

"We were granted asylum in a short time. About a week. And we got a room and everything, " Jan (personal communication, July 12, 2019).

This testimony confirms the efficiency of Switzerland's early refugee support system. Migrants received accommodation and official protection quickly, reducing initial uncertainty and helping to stabilise legal status and everyday routines

Narrators consistently praised Switzerland's migration policy, highlighting solidarity demonstrated not only by the long-established Czech and Slovak communities, but also by Swiss authorities, who responded promptly to the events of 21 August. The combination of institutional action and humanitarian support is repeatedly described as reassuring, particularly because it reduced uncertainty at a moment when many migrants still did not know whether they would return, move onward, or settle.

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4.4.2. Motivations for the Selection of Cantons and Cities

In many cases, there was little "selection" in the ordinary sense. Early on, where people ended up was shaped mainly by reception arrangements and administrative allocation, which provided an immediate place to stay and a first point of contact with local services. Only after this initial placement did some migrants begin to make more deliberate choices – for example, by moving closer to relatives, looking for work, or seeking educational opportunities. The choice of destination often depended on factors such as the presence of relatives, employment opportunities, or locations offering language courses for Czechoslovak students.

By 31 December 1968, the most popular cantons for Czech and Slovak refugees included Zurich (2,236), Bern (1,119), St. Gallen (615), Vaud (538), Basel-Stadt (537), Aargau (520), and Solothurn (313). Other cantons, such as Geneva (308), Basel-Landschaft (300), Lucerne (261), and Thurgau (194) also received significant numbers. In contrast, only 32 individuals settled in the Italian-speaking canton of Ticino (Zpravodaj Čechů a Slováků ve Švýcarsku 1969). The majority of migrants chose German-speaking cantons such as Zurich and Bern. This pattern likely also reflects practical considerations, including language skills and the distribution mechanisms used in the first weeks and months.

"I came in early October 1968… In the tenth month I was assigned to Bern," Helena (personal communication, July 24, 2019).

This recollection illustrates how most migrants were assigned to cantons without actively choosing them. Placement decisions were made by institutions based on capacity and reception strategy, and many accepted them without question. For respondents, this was often experienced as relief rather than loss of agency, because it reduced the need to improvise at a moment when legal status and plans were still uncertain.

The Federal Council sought to distribute migrants evenly to prevent the formation of segregated communities. For those without relatives or acquaintances in Switzerland, authorities proposed cantons where they were subsequently relocated from border crossings. Responsibility for their welfare was then transferred to the respective municipality. It is important to note that several thousand Czechoslovak migrants were not included in official statistics, as they had not yet applied for asylum. This detail also matters analytically, because early stabilisation did not always coincide with immediate entry into formal asylum statistics.

Overall, this decentralised approach shows how administrative allocation structured the first stage of settlement. It helped create basic stability, and only then did some migrants begin to pursue more individual preferences about where to live, work, or study.

4.4.3. Employment as a Key Pull Factor in the Selection of Cities

For many respondents, employment functioned less as a classic pull factor and more as a concrete mechanism of early stabilisation. Securing legal access to work and finding a first job often reduced uncertainty quickly and helped transform a temporary stay into a more durable settlement orientation. This trend is closely linked to Switzerland's economic growth during the study period. In the 1960s, Switzerland experienced a period of economic prosperity, with the state aiming to minimise unemployment. Migrants from Czechoslovakia were predominantly of working age and highly educated. The largest demographic group among these migrants consisted of young individuals aged 21-30 years (45.6%), with another 30% being under 40 years (Kosová 2000). An impressive 43% of these exiles held university degrees, primarily from medical and philosophical faculties, while an additional 49.3% had completed secondary education (Kosová 2000).

This combination of education and working age made early labour market entry feasible for many and became a key part of the first months after arrival. A decree issued on 23 August 1968 mandated the immediate employment of Czechoslovaks regardless of their asylum status. Those who did not apply for asylum were granted provisional work permits. Switzerland's practical approach in 1968, including early measures that enabled access to work, fits a broader pattern of

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refugee reception that had precedents in earlier post-war crises, including 1956. In 1968, the policy framework explicitly prioritised rapid practical handling of arrivals and early support measures (Swiss Federal Police Department 1968; Swiss Federal Police Department 1969).

By 1968, refugees were granted the same rights on the labour market as Swiss citizens, and work permits were typically issued immediately upon their arrival. Notably, these migrants were not officially counted among the foreign workforce, highlighting the Swiss government's efforts to treat them as an integral part of society. For the purposes of this article, the key point is that these arrangements reduced indeterminate temporality: migrants could support themselves, plan the next steps, and reassess whether to return, move on, or settle.

As one narrator recalled: "What mattered most was that our whole family, apart from my brother, who went to school, had work permits within a week, and all three of us were able to start working" (Jozef, personal communication, July 19, 2019). Other respondents stressed how quickly employment provided them with security and dignity. "At first I worked in a factory, even though I had studied economics, because that was the only way to make a living" (Miroslav, personal communication, 2019). Another added: "I started working in a hospital within two weeks, which completely saved me" (Helena, personal communication, 2019). These recollections highlight both the initial downward occupational mobility and the transformative role of early employment in stabilising migrant lives.

Employment placements were managed by cantonal social offices, and migrants were generally allowed to choose jobs that matched their qualifications and prior experience. In practice, however, the path was rarely straightforward. Several narrators mentioned compromises and mismatches, often framed as temporary but necessary decisions. "I was told to take whatever was available, and later I could try to move closer to my profession" (Anna, personal communication, 2019). Such accounts show how institutional frameworks and contingent constraints shaped decisions at a moment when long-term plans were still unsettled. In other words, the inter-factor zone can be observed here not in employment as such, but in how people navigated trade-offs, partial information, and time pressure while moving from transit uncertainty to a first stable routine. Consequently, the cities where the interviewees resided during the interviews often corresponded to the locations where they had secured their first jobs. For many, work acted as a decisive anchor for settlement, outweighing other considerations such as previous networks or cultural familiarity. In several narratives, the first job was also what made later choices possible, including potential moves to other cantons, occupational upgrading, or family reunification.

Overall, early access to work contributed to stabilisation in the first phase after arrival. It reduced immediate vulnerability and helped migrants shift from short-term coping to more durable planning. In the structure of this article, this is treated primarily as part of the resolution of the inter-factor zone, rather than as a full account of longer-term integration outcomes.

4.4.4. Education

Education emerged in many narratives as a practical route toward stability and longer-term planning. For a substantial number of respondents, especially those who were young at the time of departure, studying in Switzerland was not only about credentials but also about regaining options that had been closed to them at home. The age structure of these migrants, with nearly half being under the age of 30, predisposed many to continue their studies and further their education.

One of the key challenges they faced was the lack of recognition of Czechoslovak secondary school certificates (maturita) in Switzerland. Consequently, emigrants were required to complete secondary education in accordance with Swiss standards. Preparatory courses were established to address this gap, focusing on cantonal dialects, Swiss history, and specificities of the local education system. Upon successful completion of these courses, they were eligible to advance to higher levels of education. In practical terms, these requirements often meant a delayed educational trajectory and additional costs in time and effort at a moment when many migrants were still trying to stabilise daily life.

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At the same time, scholarship on credential recognition in skilled migration often emphasises that such procedures can function as a form of labour market closure and devaluation of foreign-acquired human capital, producing underemployment and "brain waste" even when migrants are formally admitted (Reitz 2001; Bauder 2003). In the Swiss context, more recent work likewise shows that certification and recognition can shape the degree to which immigrants are able to utilise their skills, and that the absence of recognition is associated with higher risks of mismatch (Pecoraro and Tani 2023). Our material points to an important historical counterpoint: in 1968-69, institutional pathways (including preparatory courses and relatively rapid access to study) could also work as stabilising mechanisms that reduced uncertainty. Yet the narratives also show that credential recognition is not a simple administrative formality: it can redirect trajectories, delay progression, and channel migrants into specific educational or occupational pathways precisely when their plans are still fragile.

Many of these migrants had been excluded from university studies in Czechoslovakia due to negative political assessments by the Communist Party (kádrové posudky). In Switzerland, however, they were afforded new opportunities, as documented in government records: "A significant group consists of students from Czechoslovakia, whose number reaches 335. These students are emigrants who left their homeland due to domestic political unrest. Under peaceful domestic conditions, only very few of them could have received education at Swiss universities," (Swiss Federal Statistical Office 1970). This record captures a central contrast that also appears in interviews: access to education was experienced as newly possible, but it was also structured by institutional rules of recognition and language.

The highest concentration of Czechoslovak students was found at universities in Zurich and Geneva, where they predominantly studied medicine and technical disciplines. These locations became important educational hubs, and respondents often described them as places where study opportunities and professional pathways began to look realistic again.

Several narrators emphasised the difficulties of navigating the recognition process. One respondent recalled: "They told me my diploma was not valid, so I had to repeat two years of secondary school, and only afterwards I could continue to university" (Marek, personal communication, 2020). Others stressed the importance of language as the foundation for academic and professional development: "First we had to learn German properly, otherwise we could not even think about studying or better jobs" (Anna, personal communication, 2019). Such accounts illustrate how institutional barriers, linguistic requirements, and personal resilience intersected in the pursuit of education. In the logic of this article, these are also moments where the inter-factor zone fades: once language training, recognition procedures, and admission rules became clearer, respondents describe a shift from improvisation toward more durable planning. The policy of dispersal across cantons shaped access to schools, language environments, and local support structures. While such allocation can limit everyday contact with co-nationals, it can also accelerate exposure to local institutions. In the material analysed here, educational pathways were often pursued within these local settings, and respondents describe both constraints and opportunities that followed from where they were placed.

For many narrators, education was not merely a pathway to qualifications but also a means of empowerment and belonging. One student summarised this by saying: "We had to start again from zero, but it gave us the chance to really become part of this society" (Jan, personal communication, 2019). This demonstrates how education in Switzerland not only restored professional opportunities but also provided a symbolic break with exclusionary experiences in Czechoslovakia. At the same time, these accounts do not suggest a smooth process: they highlight how restarting, learning the language, and meeting recognition requirements were experienced as demanding, but also as a way to regain control over an uncertain trajectory.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

Migration is a dynamic process shaped not only by structural push and pull factors but also by uncertainty, contingency, and institutional influence. Traditional migration theories often conceptualise

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decision-making as a direct response to adverse conditions in the country of origin or the attractive prospects of a destination country (Lee 1966). However, the findings of this study suggest that such a binary model can miss an important part of the story in politically triggered mobility. Central to our analysis is a transitional configuration that we term the inter-factor zone. It is not defined by uncertainty alone. It is identified when uncertainty co-occurs with indeterminate temporality (especially regarding returnability or legal status), with a temporarily suspended push and pull orientation, and with decision points that are shaped by contextual cues such as institutional guidance, information flows, temporary arrangements, and contingent encounters. During this phase, seemingly minor factors such as a letter from relatives, the availability of transport, or an encounter with a volunteer could significantly alter migrants' decisions.

Push factors, particularly the 1968 Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia, provided a critical impetus for emigration. This aligns with theoretical expectations linking political shocks with mass movements. Narrators frequently cited fear of repression, political uncertainty, and the momentary weakening of border controls as key motivators. However, the push impulse primarily functioned as a trigger: it explains why people left, but not necessarily why they stayed abroad or why a particular destination became viable. Once outside Czechoslovakia, migrants' decisions were often reassessed. In countries such as Austria and Yugoslavia, many experienced a period of hesitation and reconsideration, often questioning what to do next and whether they should return. This is where the inter-factor zone becomes analytically visible: the initial push has already been acted upon, yet return remains possible in principle and destination orientation is not stable. In this phase, decisions were frequently described as time-sensitive and dependent on what information and options were available in the immediate setting.

This uncertainty opened the way for new influences to emerge. Humanitarian organizations such as the Red Cross, international agencies, and local volunteers played a vital role by providing not only material support but also timely and trusted information. In the interviews, institutional contact often appears as a practical turning point, not because it "pulled" migrants in a simple sense, but because it clarified options and reduced the costs of waiting or moving on. As one narrator noted, discovering that Switzerland allowed a three-month stay before applying for asylum became a turning point in his migration journey. The impact of such encounters shows how decisions in the inter-factor zone were deeply embedded in context and often made under partial knowledge. Our findings thus support the view that migration is not a linear or unidirectional process but rather a sequence of evolving decisions that unfold in specific moments and places.

The inter-factor zone builds upon and extends existing theoretical models. It complements migration network theory (Massey et al. 1993; Boyd 1989) by identifying a phase in which information flow and social ties can become especially consequential. It also aligns with trajectory-oriented models of mobility (Collyer and King 2015; Hagen-Zanker and Mallett 2020), which conceptualise migration as a non-linear and adaptive process. Furthermore, the prominence of institutional mediation during this phase supports Haug's (2008) argument on the role of opportunity structures and spontaneous interactions. Yet the inter-factor zone goes further by emphasising temporal indeterminacy and decision-making under partial information, before a stable destination orientation and longer-term transnational practices are consolidated. In this respect, it complements the notion of transnational social fields (Glick Schiller et al. 1992) by drawing attention to the early, still unstable phase in which such ties are being formed and tested.

Finally, the inter-factor zone has a more modest theoretical implication: it draws attention to how categories like "origin", "destination", and "return" are not always stable from the migrants' point of view at the time decisions are made. In the interviews, these categories often appear as provisional and negotiable, especially in transit. We use this observation to sharpen the analytical focus of the concept, rather than to advance a separate epistemological argument.

Switzerland's response in 1968 illustrates the practical implications of acknowledging transitional uncertainty. Cantonal authorities provided rapid access to housing, work, and education, while humanitarian organizations offered reassurance and practical guidance. The coordinated

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presence of such actors reduced uncertainty and helped migrants move from short-term coping to more durable planning. In the terms used in this article, these measures helped bring the inter-factor zone to a close by stabilising legal status, everyday routines, and the horizon of possible choices. This suggests that measures which provide time, reliable information, and clear procedures can have strong effects precisely in transitional phases, when destination orientation is not yet fixed.

At the same time, the analytical scope of the inter-factor zone is not unlimited. The concept applies primarily to situations of abrupt geopolitical or institutional rupture, where established regimes of mobility are suddenly destabilised. It may be less applicable to more routine or cyclical forms of mobility, in which decision-making is gradual and cumulative. Nonetheless, recognising this phase as an active site of decision-making, rather than a passive waiting period, provides a clearer understanding of how agency unfolds under constraint and uncertainty.

By introducing the concept of the inter-factor zone, this study offers both a historical interpretation of the 1968 Czechoslovak exodus and a broader framework for analysing migration under volatile political conditions. The inter-factor zone does not dispute the push–pull model; rather, it complements it by adding a temporal and situational layer of decision-making that the classic schema tends to leave aside, especially in moments of abrupt rupture, suspended orientation, and partial information. The framework may also be useful for thinking about other settings marked by sudden rupture, where migrants must decide under partial information and shifting institutional conditions. Future research on migration trajectories should therefore pay closer attention to these moments of suspension, when neither push nor pull forces are fully operative, yet decisive actions take place. In doing so, we may better grasp the contingent character of migration decisions and the role of institutions in shaping their direction.

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