Migrant Academics' Narratives of Precarity and Resilience in Europe

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1. A Journey to the 'Self': From Precarity as Non-Belonging to the Search for Common Ground

Vera Axyonova

'It doesn't really matter how smart you are. After we finish our studies, I will be working at a government ministry and you might still end up cleaning floors'. One of my groupmates said this to me during our International Relations course back in my home country. It was meant as a joke. He made it in reference to my belonging to a 'wrong group' and my family's lack of connections which, if existent, would have helped me get a ministerial position. While I did take it as a joke the moment it was told, I couldn't really laugh. The brutal realization that the suggested possibility might (at least to some extent) materialize never escaped my mind. After all, a diploma with honors in International Relations from a provincial university was certainly not a guarantee for a top-notch career, especially without being backed up by the necessary 'add-ons'. A few years later, the same groupmate, who obviously had the right 'add-ons', was indeed working at a ministry, and I found myself in Europe.

I came to Germany in 2006 for my Master's, equipped with a stipend from the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) and a great deal of motivation to make the best of the two years ahead of me. A few DAAD stipend holders like myself ended up being in my Master's program—all of us coming from the so-called former Soviet countries, where the DAAD was actively supporting young talent in their pursuit of further education in Germany. As time progressed, I realized we formed a special group within the program, not because

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we were all foreigners or because of the 'common communist past' of our home countries, but because our German fellow students saw us as privileged, with DAAD scholarships providing us with a solid financial backing. This was around the time when some German states decided to introduce tuition fees for university students, and many of our course mates complained about their struggles to be able to afford their Master's degrees. The tuition fees did not apply to DAAD scholarship holders. We also received comparably generous funding to support our living and other expenses while in Germany. 'With your stipends you do not have to work to finance your studies like the rest of us', a course mate once told us during a lunch break. 'Well, that is true, but let's wait', my Ukrainian friend replied. 'Once we are done studying, you guys [referring to German students] will be the first to get the good jobs, and we will see about us…'. Turned out she was right.

I was among many foreign students who decided to 'try it' in Germany and one of the very few who quickly found 'something'. In my case, that 'something' was not a job but another… (you guessed it) stipend. A prestigious doctoral stipend for a newly restructured graduate school, in fact. This time, not a support program for foreign students who could 'benefit from studying in the Global North', but a scholarship awarded in an open competition, regardless of the country of origin. Being enormously proud of myself, I felt genuinely privileged, enjoying the intercultural environment of the grad school and intellectually stimulating talks with my peers, the majority of whom were from Germany, other countries in Western Europe, and the US. Yet, the joys of being an international early-career researcher with a full scholarship did not last too long. Outside the university walls, the reality caught up with me quickly at the municipal migration office when the time came to exchange my student visa for a longer-term residence permit.

I remember going to the authoritative (or prison-like) building of the migration office at 5am, hours before it actually opened, during my second attempt to get to the person in charge. My previous attempt was completely in vain, as arriving at the migration office at 9am—when it officially opened—turned out to be much too late to get anywhere beyond the waiting room. With no chance of reaching anyone on the phone or making an appointment online, men and women, some of them with small children and newborns, were standing in front of the migration

office's entrance for hours—no matter the weather conditions—just waiting to get inside. Once the security guard opened the doors, the crowd rushed in—literally sprinting up the stairs—to collect the few admission tickets distributed by another security guard for that day. A sign in the doorway over the security guard's head listed the countries and world regions he was responsible for—the whole African continent, Latin America, South and South East Asia, the Western Balkans, and the former Soviet states. A much smaller sign above another doorway listed the US, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. No one was standing there. I guess the ticket distribution system worked differently for passport holders from those parts of the world.

This was one of many acute moments when I became aware exactly how little the different realities that I was confronted with in my life—as a migrant and as an academic—had in common. Somehow, it reminded me of another incident in the earlier days of my doctoral enrolment. Together with my peers, I was on a train returning from a day-long workshop where we had discussed each other's research projects, many of which focused on fundamental rights, social welfare, precarity, and dividing lines in contemporary societies. While the rigorous discussion still continued on the crowded train, an elderly person passed by, pushing our group apart as he tried to reach for an empty beer bottle standing in the corner. Our group fell silent. 'Wow, that is quite a reality check', one of the fellows said after a while, pointing out how little our talks of precarity and fundamental rights had to do with this person's life and the kind of parallel reality we thought he lived in. Awkwardly though, just a few months later, at the migration office, it was me who felt like living in a parallel reality.

I was struck by how defining such moments seemed to be for my identity and how difficult it was to reconcile my academic 'self' with personal experiences in other spheres of social life. As years passed, I tried to accommodate the different realities I was facing as a scholar and as a person 'with a non-European migration background'. At times, though, I watched these realities clashing as they overlapped across time and space. More than once I asked myself: how do you manage to go to an international conference and give a convincing presentation on the promotion of European values, such as the respect for human dignity, just one day after your own dignity was pretty much kicked in

the face at the migration office? Or, how do you explain to a European colleague complaining about the difficulties of traveling to the US 'after the pandemic' that despite following all the rules and being fully vaccinated, there is no chance a person with your color of passport would be granted a visa at the moment? And would you even mention that previously, the effort, time, and money you invested in arranging your conference travel to the UK or the US were by no means comparable to that of the colleague?[1] With your non-European citizenship, you had to spend half a day online just filling out visa application forms, trying to remember which countries you visited in the last ten years (something UK authorities actually ask for) and then another day traveling across the country to the consulate or visa application center for the interview and to submit your files. Finally, how do you react to a German fellow researcher claiming, 'we are all in the same boat, and academic career prospects are equally dim for all young scholars in this country'? How do you explain that you did not have equal chances in German academia at any point in your life? Where do you even start?

Over the years, my initial admiration of the German education and research system, which I aspired to become part of since the start of my Master's studies, was slowly substituted with mild frustration. I realized that, despite the officially promoted appearances of inclusiveness and diversity, the German academic system (and especially the Social Sciences and Humanities domain) remained a privileged club, which did not eagerly open its doors to those coming from outside. There is no need to spend years in the system to understand that, in fact. All it takes is to look at the list of names of political science professors in Germany, prepared by the German Political Science Association in 2017.[2] The proportion of full professors with non-German names is so strikingly low that talking about the internationalization of the country's higher education appears somehow misplaced.

One experience made me realize this more than anything else. Having presented at a large German political science conference, I was

1 On inequalities in global academia and access to international conferences see also: Rabe, M., Agboola, C., Kumswa, S., Linonge-Fontebo, H., and Mathe, L. (2021). 'Like a bridge over troubled landscapes: African pathways to doctorateness', *Teaching in Higher Education*, 26/3: 306–320, https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2021.1896490.

2 Politikwissenschaftliche Professuren in Deutschland, www.dvpw.de.

asked by another panelist and a friend of mine if I wanted to join a group of colleagues from his conference section for dinner to celebrate the final day of the event. I gladly agreed, anticipating interesting conversations with peer scholars working on similar issue areas. Although most of the conference was held in English (to attract international participants), we soon switched to German, as discussions developed around the dinner table. This was when it hit me that I was the only non-native speaker in the group. Confident of my fluent German, I tried initiating friendly discussions with a few colleagues sitting next to me. It quickly caught my attention that the only people I could engage with in longer exchanges were the two I knew personally from previous conferences. While others were preoccupied exchanging contact information, deliberating possible cooperation plans, and discussing the current situation on the academic job market, I was somehow not part of any of those conversations. On the way home, I tried to recap the evening in my mind, wondering why that had been the case, until I realized: most of the people at that table may not have seen me as serious competition on the academic market or as someone it would be important to connect with professionally. Considering how very few political science professors at German universities carry a Slavic name, I actually understand why.

There are moments in life that are truly defining, that divide your life into before and after. Such turning points can change the way you see the world and your own 'self'. Many parents would say the day their first child was born was such a moment in their lives; it made them fully reconsider their priorities, both personal and professional. In my case, the moment that changed everything was noon of 1 November 2017, when I saw the last signs of life leaving the little body of my son. After multiple surgeries and almost six months in hospitals and cardiological centers, he could not be saved. Hardly any words can describe the all-devouring pain of loss and of having to live longer than your own child. I will not be searching for those words here—the story of that pain is not for this essay, but the resulting experiences of non-belonging are.

Having survived this major trauma, I made a radical decision to take a break from academic research. I wanted to do something that felt more meaningful than chasing my own dream of becoming a professor. I switched to science management to coordinate a mentoring program for at-risk and displaced scholars, who left their home

countries involuntarily, having been pushed out by war, fear of political prosecution, or a humanitarian crisis. Somehow, I associated my personal experiences of trauma with theirs, although our life courses didn't really have much in common. After all, I wasn't forced to leave my country, give up everything I worked for, or be in the limbo of exile. Yet, what I felt connected me with those who had lived through all this was the sense of existential non-belonging, which one acquires through deeply traumatizing experiences.

Non-belonging can take various forms and can be dealt with in different ways. What is common though, is the perception of lacking shared ground with most counterparts in social interactions or groups which one would actually like to be a part of. The sense of non-belonging becomes existential when it is internalized and is not questioned anymore on a daily basis—when it becomes part of one's own identity. It is difficult to avoid for those whose life paths take an extreme turn, such as being abducted and tortured on the way into exile, witnessing the violent deaths of people you know, or losing your children. These are experiences of absolute powerlessness and despair. For those who have never had them, experiences like these are difficult to comprehend and relate to. And for those who have had them, there is no easy way to reconcile them with 'normal' life in a society where crime and death are things you commonly hear about in the news or read in monthly statistics.

Reconciling such experiences with the normality of academic life in apparently meritocracy-driven Global North universities is even more difficult. In a system built on rewarding high-achievers, there is no time and place for those who struggle to recover from trauma, and you are rarely given credit for having managed to do so. Moreover, the ability to adjust is largely taken for granted, excluding those who cannot do that instantly, which only adds further facets to experiencing non-belonging.

Those trying to continue their research work and 'enter' the academic system in their country of exile realize that their new normality is quite different from what they were used to back home. Their previous work and credentials, in many cases, have little value in the new environment. Their publications were all in the 'wrong journals' and in the 'wrong

languages', years of teaching experience are depreciated, and their accents give them away as foreigners the minute they start talking.[3]

Academia allows very little space for deviations in what is considered excellent, successful, and trendsetting. As a scientist, you are constantly assessed by your outputs and their quantity and quality (however the latter may be measured). What is never assessed, however, are the personal life circumstances of those behind the outputs, their resilience, and the ability to overcome moments of absolute despair and powerlessness and carry on with the scientific work against all odds.

Working with exiled scholars has shown that to me most bluntly. But it has also taught me that the feeling of non-belonging is fluid and precarity is relative. And both can be mitigated (if not overcome) through experiences of genuine solidarity. In summer 2021, when I closely followed the #ichbinhanna debate on Twitter, I saw it reaffirmed once again. The initiative, started by three younger German scholars to draw public and political attention to the issues of academic precarity, quickly attracted thousands of followers and contributors to the debate. Young and not so young scientists united in their frustration about the university practice of issuing fixed-term contracts for academic positions in Germany and the lack of professional perspectives, preprogrammed by the federal 'legislation exempting university employees from usual labor rights'.[4] Within just a few days, hundreds of academics had shared their very personal stories of precarity, powerlessness, and existential fears. And yes, one could still question whether these stories are in any way comparable when told by a white male scholar with a German passport or by a female scholar of color who is awaiting a decision on her asylum application. And, of course, they are not comparable, and they never will be. But that is also not the only thing I have learned from this initiative. I have learned that solidarity is possible only when you search for common ground, and not for differences.

3 Cf. Seyhan, A. (2022). 'Exile in a translational mode: Safeguarding German scholarship in Turkey and the United States during the Nazi reign', in V. Axyonova, F. Kohstall, and C. Richter (eds), *Academics in Exile: Networks, Knowledge Exchange and New Forms of Internationalization*. Transcript.

4 Citation from the English version of the grassroot initiative's website: https://ichbinhanna.wordpress.com/.

Finalizing my work on this essay, I look through all the notes I made in preparation over the last weeks. I realize I could have included many more examples of experiencing precarity as (perceived) powerlessness and non-belonging. However, they would only have reaffirmed what's been said. I decide to draw the line here by sharing one last personal story that has already become my favorite anecdote to laugh about with friends. Having returned to academic work recently, I am looking through literature review articles related to my new research project. As I progress through the texts, I discover that a well-known Central Asian scholar and fellow countryman cites my earlier work in a review of 'Western scholarship' on Central Asia. The irony of it makes me smile. Not only am I cited by someone much more senior and famous in this academic area, but I am also apparently a 'Western scholar', at least in the eyes of a fellow academic from my own country of origin. Regardless of how others see me, what matters more is where I place my 'self'. And if I've learned anything throughout my journey into European academia, it is that the labels others give you by ascribing you to a certain group do not define who you are.