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I changed my mind

My perception of myself as a migrant has changed over time. A year ago, I didn't name myself as one. I worked as a refugee lawyer in Madrid for some years, and I know well the difficulties endured by migrants across the European Union, while trying to be granted a residence and work permit and the level of precariousness they bear. My position upon arrival was, in contrast, a quite privileged one. How could I consider myself a migrant, if, as an EU citizen, I had almost the same rights as a Dutch citizen? I could even use my Spanish credit card and bank account everywhere! But after a year of listening to other EU citizens' experiences and re-thinking mine, I changed my mind.

As it is widely known, finding a place to live in the Netherlands is arduous: the housing market is highly competitive. Social housing is usually not a possibility for migrants, unless they know very much in advance that they will move to the Netherlands or have been previously living in the Netherlands. It wasn't my case – I got hired by mid-July 2022, and I had to be in the Netherlands by September 1st – so I entered the housing market in competition with people who earned much more than me and who could go to visit apartments on-site.

I finally found a place but ended up paying between two and four times as much rent as my colleagues. To be able to pay it, it was crucial to be eligible for the 30% facility for foreigners with high incomes and PhD researchers. But some people are not that lucky.

As for the working possibilities, there are plenty of jobs in the Netherlands, and one would say that having a work permit and a university bachelor's and master's degree would allow you to get one. However, the truth is that a high English proficiency, or basic Dutch knowledge is required, preferably with a not-so-strong accent. This requirement poses a significant barrier for many of my Spanish friends who are willing to come, or have come with their partners to the Netherlands, but haven't had the chance to learn languages, as some of us could through (quite expensive) supplementary classes.

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Last but not least, the cultural differences: I find myself sometimes adapting my behavior to avoid being assigned to certain stereotypes concerning southern Europeans or Spaniards, such as being too emotional – as it is unfortunately considered the opposite of rational – or lazy. These circumstances have made me think that, even when I find the Netherlands an incredibly welcoming place to live, and at the beginning I didn't picture myself as a migrant because I was 'skipping' all the legal difficulties, I am still a migrant who had it more attainable than most of my peers thanks to the intersection in me of several privileges, but that still has to continue fighting to remain.

Dit jaar worden de columns geschreven door mensen wier verblijfsrecht of dat van hun familie ooit door het migratierecht is bepaald.