

Foreigners in the Czech Republic: “us” and “them”?

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The issue of international migration seems to have become more relevant lately than any time before. The debatable and sometimes problematic demonstration of the human right to decide freely about their place of residence becomes even more popular in the era of technical progress and modernization. Higher access to travelling, attractive pictures of distant countries and unknown lands presented by media, uneven economic development of various countries and parts of the world, political problems and ethnic conflicts force people away from their homelands and lure them to move elsewhere. Majority of immigrants in the world consist, as in the Czech Republic, of economically active actors of the so-called circular labour migration, a phenomenon of continuous temporary migration aimed at increasing one's own economic status or economic status of one's family in their homeland. According to some theories, circular migration is only one phase of a long-term process, during which the intensity of relation of individuals with their homeland gradually weakens and in the end they settle forever in their target country.

Migrants, who have decided to settle permanently in a certain country, whether after direct, one-off move, or after long-term circulation, are awaited by a complicated process of adapting to new conditions in the majority society. Newly coming migrants often find themselves in tension related to the change of environment and language or cultural barriers. Sometimes they are even disadvantaged at the labour market. Their adaptation is on one hand affected by specific psychological characteristics of the individuals and by the closeness of minority-immigrant population and majority population, and on the other hand by immigration politicise of the target country and by the approach of majority to immigrants.

There are various models of adapting migrants to majority society, from their total naturalization and gradual acquisition of citizenship to their absolute exclusion, social or economic marginalization and forming of the so-called permanent ethnical enclaves. Tolerance to migrants depends not only on the approval of their stay in the given country, but also on the acceptance of basic principles of multi-culturalism based on mutual respect and equality of all people disregarding their ethnic, racial or national affiliation. Multicultural society is based not only on acceptance and subsequent assimilation of migrants into majority society, but also on their integration into cultural and social life of the majority and on allowing them to preserve elements of their own culture.

Since 1989 the Czech Republic has had to cope with mass migration influxes. According to statistics of the Headquarters of the Aliens and Boarder Police Service of the Ministry of Interior of the Czech Republic, more than 200 thousand foreigners with a long-term or permanent stay permit resided on the territory of the Czech Republic at the end of 2001. It means that the issues of inter-ethnic tolerance and adaptation to new environment directly concern 2 % of the population of this country¹. Even though this proportion doesn't seem too significant for the whole population, it gradually increases and slowly gets closer to the statistics of developed Western European countries. Czech general public naturally have to notice the intensification of migration movement that happens in their country as well as related increase of incomers. It is quite obvious that opinion of more conservative public will

¹ Here we should mention informal estimations of number of foreigners on the Czech territory without valid residence permit. According to these estimations, number of illegal migrants is at least two times higher than number of those legally registered.

insist longer on maintaining their national unity, and therefore they will be less tolerant towards immigrants, who disturb the status quo. Attitudes of Czech inhabitants towards members of national minorities, with whom they live continually, are a little more positive than to the newly coming foreigners². National minorities, that have “gained” their right to “special treatment” and to preservation of their own culture (except for certain exceptions), fit in the life of majority population fairly well and they know how to keep together and defend their own interests. Newly coming migrants are in a far more difficult situation; they have to cope with the change of environment and also with being labelled by the majority society as “foreigners” for a long time.

What are the attitudes of Czech public towards this social group?

In a survey of CVVM conducted in May within *Our Society 2003* research³, respondents were asked a number of questions concerning preservation of national customs and traditions and also their attitudes towards foreigners. To define migrants, the research used the term “foreigner”, which was not specified any further. It was presumed that members of other nationalities in general, who stay for a short or long term in the Czech Republic for various reasons, were concerned. The results of the questioning of 1048 respondents of 15 years of age or older⁴ indicated that almost one fifth (17 %) of the questioned have a fairly radical opinion on migrants and believe that foreigners should not be granted a long term permit of residence on the territory of the Czech Republic!⁵ On the contrary, only a small fragment of the questioned, a little over 5 %, are practically against any restrictions of foreigners. The remaining 75 % of respondents agree with the possibility of long term stays of foreigners on our territory, but only under certain conditions. 5 % of the respondents did not answer this question or didn’t have any opinion on foreigners residing in the Czech Republic. People up to the age of 45 and people living in larger cities have a slightly more liberal attitude towards foreigners⁶.

Similarly alarming results appeared in the survey of Opinion Window – Research International Agency, commissioned by the Czech Government Office at the beginning of 2000 as a part of the “Tolerance” project, which launched a national campaign against racism and xenophobia. It was found out then that only one quarter of respondents perceive national

² This was confirmed, among others, by results of the survey conducted in 1998 within the project “Ethnic relations and problems of multicultural society” (“Mezietnické vztahy a problematika multikulturní společnosti”) of Charles University in Prague under the direction of PhDr. Miriam Moravcová, DrSc.

³ RNDr. Milan Jeřábek, Ph.D., author of the research, is a research worker at the Czech boarderland research department of the Institute of Sociology of the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic. The research was supported by GA ČR č. 205/02/0321 project “Work related migration as a part of the international (trans-boarder) Czech labour market in the context of European integration” (“Pracovně podmíněné migrace jako součást mezinárodního (přeshraničního) trhu práce Česka v kontextu evropské integrace”) in cooperation with research teams from University of Western Bohemia, Charles University in Prague, Masaryk University in Brno and Ostrava University.

⁴ Respondents were chosen according to quota type selection, data are not considered.

⁵ The question was following: “Foreigners in the Czech Republic a) should not be granted a long-term permit of residence at all, b) should be permitted to stay only under certain conditions, c) should be permitted to stay without restrictions?” Respondent could choose only one of the variants offered. The answer “doesn’t know” was accepted and was coded separately.

⁶ This difference, however, turned out to have little statistical significance, and it is therefore impossible to say, that it has not appeared accidentally in the data.

minorities and legal immigrants as beneficial for the Czech Republic. Most of the questioned did not see any benefit in immigration and advocated stricter controls. The “Tolerance” project discovered that supporters of immigration influx restriction were significantly represented also among University educated people. They insisted on their stand even if the decreasing rate of immigration would influence unfavourably the rate of economic growth of the Czech Republic⁷.

CVVM results have not supported these findings completely, because the advocates of unlimited stay of foreigners in the Czech Republic were not represented sufficiently. Nevertheless, respondents with higher education more frequently preferred compromise answers and agreed that foreigners should be able to stay for a long term under certain conditions. Respondents without A levels often advocated extremely restrictive opinion on government policies towards immigrants. It means that the original hypothesis that education brings more understanding and higher degree of tolerance was partly confirmed.

The Czech population attitudes are very different towards different nationalities. The knowledge of the homeland of a particular foreigner, the geographical and cultural distance and even the similarity of political or economical system of the Czech Republic and the foreigner’s country of origin belong among individual factors affecting attitudes to specific nationalities. For example the historically conditioned relation of Czech society to migrants from the East and especially from former Soviet Union is significantly different than the relation to migrants from Western countries. A survey conducted in February within Our Society 2003 research has indicated that Western European nations and Slovaks are most favoured by majority Czech population. On the contrary, nationalities from former Soviet Union and Asians are the least favoured⁸. We can see a similar tendency even in public opinion surveys that were conducted earlier. In 2001 sympathies of Czech population to Ukrainians and Russians were twice as low as to incomers from Great Britain and USA⁹.

In the Czech Republic, as in many other countries, there are certain prejudices against foreigners, who are often regarded by the majority society as an element of external negative influence. As a consequence of migration movements, the Czech Republic is enriched by new inhabitants. At the same time, however, it has to face problems caused by cohabitation with people of different culture and different historical experience. Mass influx of migrants presents, besides others, a big challenge for the Czech Republic, which has only a short experience of being a target country and doesn’t have social and economic structures facilitating “painless” acceptance of such a significant increase of inhabitants. These complications are of course reflected also in attitudes of the majority society towards new migrants.

Our Society 2003 survey has indicated that in May 2003 only 13 % of respondents believed that foreigners didn’t cause any problems in our country. On the contrary, 22 % of respondents answered that members of other nationalities were one of the cause of problems both in their place of residence and in the Czech Republic in general.¹⁰ Almost one half of

⁷ Detailed information about the project and the survey mentioned are available on pages of Government Office: <http://www.vlada.cz/1250/vrk/rady/rlp/projekt-tolerance/projekt.htm>

⁸ Chludilová, I.: “Foreigners in the Czech Republic” (“Cizinci v České republice”). Our Society 2003/1-2.

⁹ Source: data from CVVM research, April 2001.

¹⁰ The question was following: “Do citizens of other nationalities, who have come to our country in the last few years, cause problem... a) at your place of residence, b) in the whole of the Czech Republic?” With each of the two statements respondent could answer “Yes” or “No”. Answers “Doesn’t know” and “Is not concerned” were

respondents see connection between the general problems in the Czech Republic and the foreigners, even though they don't have personal experience with "the problem of migrants" in their place of residence. Almost none of the questioned thinks the opposite (that is that foreigners present a problem not for the Czech Republic, but for their place of residence).

Negative attitudes of the majority population towards foreigners are not always connected to the real problems among the ethnics. In this sense, mass media function as an important and unfortunately very effective tool for affecting public opinion. According to the results of several content analyses of most widely read public press, media often present the "problem of immigrants" in the Czech Republic in a context that arouses rather negative emotions towards migrants¹¹. Information about problems related to increasing number of foreigners and their increasing criminality is given much more space in the Czech media. This information is often presented to the readers in a way that exposes partial attitudes of the author and evokes concerns about other nationalities living in the Czech Republic.

Concerns connected with stereotypes created by media are very often not based on direct experience with foreigners. The low number of people, who personally know any foreigner with long-term residence permit in the Czech Republic, can serve as evidence. In Our Society survey in May there was less than a third of such respondents (28 %)¹². People, who know personally someone of a different nationality, are a little more tolerant towards foreigners and they support more frequently their possibility to stay in the Czech Republic permanently. These people also believe more frequently that foreigners in the Czech Republic do not present a source of problems. This was mostly the case of educated respondents in productive age. Czech public is most familiar with the representatives of most widely represented foreigners in the Czech Republic: Ukrainians, Vietnamese, Slovaks and Polish. Because of the low proportion of respondents who had a personal contact with foreigners we are not able to judge whether experience with other nationalities affect general attitudes towards migrants. Nevertheless we can presume that respondents' personal experience is very important for assessing the whole minority community.

Numerous migrants bring, among others, their own culture to the Czech Republic, which is often very different from the culture of the majority population. When asked whether foreigners should adapt to the customs of the Czech population, the absolute majority of respondents answered positively, while 56 % of them said that foreigners should adapt as much as they can. 34 % admitted that the migrants could maintain their original habits¹³ and only seven percent of respondents did not deny the possibility that foreigners could live in the Czech Republic in full accordance with the habits of their homeland. Assimilation approach to representatives of other nationalities is related to the support of restrictive politics against migrants and to the conviction that immigrants are "troublesome". Among respondents with

accepted and were coded separately. 15% of respondents didn't have a pronounced opinion on this issue, didn't want to answer and in few cases this question didn't concern them, because they had a different nationality.

¹¹ Hard to Make Out Foreigners: How Foreigners Are (Not) Written about in the Czech Press (Nečitelní cizinci: Jak se (ne)píše o cizincích v českém tisku)

¹² The question was following: „Do you personally closely know some foreigners, who stay in the long term in the Czech Republic?“ Answers "Yes", "No", "Doesn't know" and "Doesn't Concern" were accepted, each of them was coded separately.

¹³ The question was following: "Foreigners in the Czech Republic should ... 1) try to adapt as much as possible to our traditions, 2) adapt to some extent to our traditions, 3) have a possibility to live completely according to their own traditions?" Respondent could choose only one of the variants offered. Answer "doesn't know" was accepted and coded separately.

more liberal approach to the adaptation of migrants there is a higher proportion of people with University education and people under 45 years of age.

Our Society 2003 survey demonstrated that there is a certain link in the Czech environment between the significance of maintaining national traditions and the willingness to tolerate different cultures in our own country. The more important national traditions are for the individual, the more convinced this individual is about the necessity of the foreigner to adapt to Czech traditions. As the survey indicates, most inhabitants of the Czech Republic are willing to tolerate foreigners on our territory under certain conditions. They believe, however, that foreigners present a problem in our country. And if they want to, obtain long term residence permit, they should adapt to Czech traditions.

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