

# Selected parameters of social exclusion among immigrants in the Czech Republic

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## Abstract

This article deals with the issue of social exclusion of immigrants in the Czech Republic. A review of expert sources indicates that immigrants are most often excluded from the labour market, housing market, and in communication with institutions. These areas became the target of our research. We observed how they were affected by knowledge of the Czech language, length of residence and type of work performed. The study was conducted using quantitative research strategies, interviews, and a questionnaire, the clarity of which was ensured by a double translation. The research group consisted of immigrants, namely Vietnamese, Slovak, Russian, Ukrainian, and Polish nationalities, living in selected regions of the Czech Republic. Results showed that there were statistically significant differences among the immigrant groups. The Vietnamese were least satisfied with housing conditions; they often reported living in overcrowded apartments and dormitories, and saw little chance of changing their situation because of discrimination by landlords. With regard to Czech language skills, the greater difference between Czech and Vietnamese and the relative similarity between Czech and the other studied immigrant languages also played a role. As a result, this indicator also showed the greatest dissatisfaction among the Vietnamese. For employees, poor knowledge of Czech corresponds to lower socioeconomic status.

## INTRODUCTION

This article represents the partial results of a larger research project focusing on the social determinants of health in selected groups of immigrants in the Czech Republic. At present, the concept of social determinants of health is highly topical. It has created much debate about the definition of its conceptual determination, and research surveys have been completed to determine and suggest strategic objectives for health policies of developed countries (Brabcová and Vacková 2013). Social exclusion is one of these determinants. It is a

process (or state) that restricts certain individuals, families, groups, or entire local communities from accessing the resources needed for participation in social, economic, and political life (European Commission, 2001). Exclusion is a multidimensional phenomenon, which manifests as either poverty (i.e., unemployment and restriction of social contacts outside of their own /excluded/ community) or as spatial segregation and in symbolic dimension, where labelling of excluded people occurs, and areas where they live with pejorative and marginalizing terms (Krieger 1999; Steiner 2004; Lila et al. 2005; Zinn 2013; Benn

2015). This article aims to describe the characteristics of social exclusion. Specifically housing, knowledge of the Czech language, and the experiences Vietnamese, Russian, Ukrainian, Polish, and Slovak immigrants have had with majority institutions in the Czech Republic. We focus primarily on the differences between the various nationalities of the immigrants, and the relationship with other variables, such as length of residence and socioeconomic status. According to Vacková *et al.* (2014) the search for the most vulnerable people in society (such as immigrants) and the risks associated with socioeconomic status creates an opportunity for determining preventive measures that can strengthen the integration of minority groups into mainstream society. According to Olišarová *et al.* (2014) only a multicultural society accepts the cultural uniqueness of all groups and supports intense social interaction between them.

The selected parameters of exclusion lend themselves to analysis, which has revealed that the main and most relevant steps towards integration of immigrants in the Czech Republic are (1) independence in employment (economic activity), (2) housing opportunities, and (3) independent access to information, which leads to better decision-making and gives foreigners access to the same opportunities as host country inhabitants (Tollarová 2006). In many European countries immigrants face spatial segregation; they live on the outskirts of the cities, where rent is lower, which is linked to low incomes (Obadalová 2001).

The Czech Republic is no exception. GAC (2006) presents immigrants as one of the groups most susceptible to social exclusion. According to the research of Brabcová *et al.* (2014), immigrants in the Czech Republic from countries outside of the European Union (Russians, Mongolians, and Vietnamese) often have to take jobs that do not match their qualifications. The comparison of adverse working conditions in the target group of immigrants and the majority population (Czech) shows that immigrants face significantly higher risks in the workplace than the Czech population. The biggest differences in workplace environments were recorded in the area of sexual harassment, psychological oppression, and discrimination. Like access to the labor market and health care, the housing market is a very common area for discrimination towards foreigners in the Czech Republic (Sokačová 2014). There is the theoretical potential for all foreigners to rent an apartment, according to Tollarová (2006), but they often encounter apartment owners who are reluctant to rent to foreigners, mainly due to the fear that the apartment would be destroyed. This reluctance or fear particularly concerns foreigners "from the east". When foreigners manage to reach an agreement, the deposit and rent are frequently extremely high compared to the rates paid by the majority population. Topinka *et al.* (2010) reported that immigrants mostly look for rentals via informal networks, but also through tradi-

tional advertising on the Internet and in newspapers, as well as through estate agents. In order to make housing more affordable, foreigners often live with another family or friends. It is difficult for them to own their own homes or flats because mortgages are only granted to permanent residents. Additionally, immigrants are often concerned about taking on a mortgage because of job insecurity. A symbolic component of social exclusion of immigrants, mainly reflected in the media and largely through the use of stereotypes such as Vietnamese pitcher or Ukrainian worker (Klvačová and Bitrich 2003), may worsen access to the housing market. The discrimination of Vietnamese in the housing market, for example, was reflected in the research CERGE-EI (Bartoš 2013), which found that when looking for a sublease, the Vietnamese had to send twice as many responses to advertisements than Czechs in order to be invited to view the apartment. Czech jobseekers also have a 180 percent better chance of getting a job interview than Asians. Ukrainian migrants, who are mostly male laborers that live and work in the Czech Republic without their families, usually find accommodation in dormitories. Hostels are deemed adequate housing, especially for workmen. Conversely, for families with children it is common to move to an apartment as quickly as possible. A hostel is considered a cheap alternative, of equal standard, with its typical distinctive community character. Nešporová and Nešpor (2007) mentioned that temporarily immigrants spend most of their time at work, and cut their housing costs to minimize the cost of staying in the country.

Mastering the Czech language is an indisputable condition for integration. It brings a better chance of getting a good job, better health care utilization, and better communication with authorities. According to Gabrielová and Brabcová (2015), knowledge of the language is closely linked to health literacy. Health literacy can be defined as cognitive and social skills that enable individuals to obtain information about health and healthcare, and then subsequently employ these skills to use healthcare to promote and maintain good health. Bártlová *et al.* (2014) pointed to the fact that only a patient to whom information is given simply and clearly (and in a language which he or she understands), can actively participate in ensuring their own health care as well as the safety of their health care. According to Tollarová (2006), who is a NGO worker dealing with immigrants issues, some of the immigrants from the former Soviet Union rely heavily on the similarities between the Czech and Russian languages. They feel that their Russian blended with Czech is sufficient. Čechová (2004) mentioned the important role of the relationship between an immigrant's mother tongue and Czech, and acquisition Czech language skills. It is understandable that the quickest to speak Czech are the Slovaks, Ukrainians, Russians and other immigrants from the Slavic language group, but the phenomena of interference may appear. Problems can occur with lan-

guages that do not use the Latin alphabet (Šindelářová and Škodová 2013). According to Záleská *et al.* (2014) an immigrants' knowledge of Czech (or their ability to understand spoken Czech) was also significantly influenced by the size of their Czech social network. With regards to communication with authorities, these authorities can be divided into two groups, (1) those that are primarily designed to communicate with foreigners and (2) offices where foreigners are among the clients (such as the Employment Office). Immigrants generally have their worst experience with the foreign police, while neutral experiences are often described in trade license handling (Tollarová 2009).

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

The research tool was a custom designed questionnaire with closed and open ended questions. These were translated into the native languages of all five surveyed minorities, Vietnamese, Slovak, Russian, Ukrainian, and Polish. To ensure the accuracy of the interpretation of the terms used in the questionnaire, a double translation was made to ensure clarity for all respondents. In the area of social exclusion the questions focused on:

- Housing conditions (e.g. housing type and size, number of residents per dwelling, number of times people moved house, relations with neighbors, and subjective satisfaction with housing);
- A subjective assessment of Czech language capability in written and spoken form (active and passive);
- Experience with majority institutions; government agencies, local governments of the Czech Republic, and the offices of asylum and migration.

The research group consisted of adult immigrants living in the Czech Republic. The respondents were contacted through partner organizations that deal with migration in South Bohemia, Central Bohemia, Pilsen, Ústí, Moravian Silesia, South Moravia, the Hradec Králové regions, and also in Prague. It was not possible to calculate a representative sample for each region. Immigrants continue to migrate within the Czech Republic, which means the declared place of residence and work does not represent the place where immigrants live. According to the Czech Statistical Office in each region, the numerical division does not affect the life strategies of foreigners. The selection of respondents was conducted according to the proposed stratification criteria. These were sex, length of residence (up to 5 years, 6–10 years, 11–15 years, over 15 years) and age (18–30 years old, 31–50 years old, 51 and over). The total number of questionnaires assessed was 1,014. Data were collected in 2013 and 2014 with the informed consent of respondents; they were also assured anonymity.

The data was processed using the SPSS program using descriptive statistics. The selected statistics were

further analysed and  $p < 0.05$  was considered statistically significant using the chi-square test and Spearman's correlation coefficient.

## RESULTS

### *Housing issues*

One indicator of social exclusion is the housing situation. Here we describe primarily the type of housing, and focus on lower category flats and apartments. The results showed that this kind of housing is quite exceptional. Ukrainians represented the largest share of immigrants living in dormitories. This type of housing was mentioned by 13.7% of the total number of the respondents, followed by the Vietnamese (13.5% of the total of the respondents). Unfurnished flats and apartments for non-payers were cited by respondents in exceptional cases (only two instances). Most immigrants lived in blocks of flats in panel housing estates, or in apartment buildings. In all cases, respondents who lived in dormitories or unfurnished flats had lived in the Czech Republic for less than 10 years. Unfurnished flats were utilized primarily by those who were unemployed.

Another indicator of social exclusion was overcrowded apartments. Therefore, respondents were asked how many rooms they had at their disposal, and how many other people shared their housing. In most cases, respondents lived in three rooms, with three other people, and in two rooms with two other people. Given that there is no official indicator for the number of people relative to the number of rooms, we set a limit of four or more people in one room and five or more people in two rooms. A total of 11 (1%) respondents stated that there were four or more people in one room, and a total of 24 (2.3%) respondents stated five or more. A total of 38 (3.7%) respondents stated that there were five or more people living in two rooms. The flats were located in blocks of flats in panel housing estates, or in common apartment buildings. Conversely, overcrowding was not a problem in dormitories and unfurnished flats, where two or three respondents lived together. A significant relationship ( $p < 0.001$ ) was detected between the number of roommates in small apartments and their nationality. The most overcrowded flats are inhabited by the Vietnamese, and the least by the Slovaks.

The respondents also reported their subjective satisfaction with housing conditions on a five-point scale. There was a statistically significant difference among the individual nationalities ( $p = 0.004$ ). Although the most frequent value was the mean value (average satisfaction), the extreme values showed the highest satisfaction in Poles and the lowest in the Vietnamese. Changes in place of residence was very significant ( $p < 0.001$ ) among Ukrainians, while the Slovaks move the least often. There was a negative correlation between the frequency of migration and satisfaction with housing ( $r = -0.061$ ).

Most immigrants lived in neighborhoods with a majority of Czech citizens (47.7%). This was followed by neighborhoods with various nationalities, including their own and Czech (39.9%). Only 9.8% live in segregated neighborhoods based on their own nationality. A statistically significant difference was found between the nationality of immigrants and the ethnic composition of their neighbors ( $p < 0.001$ ). Most Ukrainians lived exclusively alongside their compatriots, although the figure may be significantly distorted by the fact that this minority also frequently reported living in dormitories.

### The language issue

As for the Czech language, we focused on all forms – passive and active knowledge, and knowledge of spoken and written forms. The list of questions was supplemented by an extra question about the respondents' subjective satisfaction with their Czech language skills. All questions were rated on a five-point scale. In terms of active use of the Czech language, we found a significant relationship ( $p < 0.001$ ) between nationalities. The Vietnamese exhibited the worst subjective knowledge, and the Slovaks and Poles the best. The level of spoken language was also related to the length of residence in the Czech Republic ( $p < 0.001$ ). With regards to reading in Czech, the results were almost identical: generally respondents showed lower reading ability compared to speaking ability. This was similar for written Czech as well, where the subjective evaluation was more negative; the Slovaks reported better ratings than Poles ( $p < 0.001$ ). Respondents reported the highest self-esteem when answering the question about how well they understood spoken Czech. As stated above, there was the same statistically significant difference between the nationalities and the length of residence. The Poles and the Slovaks were most satisfied with their knowledge of Czech, while the Vietnamese were the least satisfied ( $p < 0.001$ ). The Vietnamese more often reported dissatisfaction (50.3%) vs. satisfaction (7.9%). Conversely, the Slovaks and Poles were the least dissatisfied, 10.5% and 13.25%, respectively. The fact that a lack of Czech language skills can significantly affect access to employment was revealed by testing the following variables: "socio-economic situation" and "subjective evaluation of the Czech language". There was a significant difference in that full-time employees showed a better knowledge of Czech compared to the unemployed or part-time employed, including entrepreneurs ( $p < 0.001$ ). We also discovered that people who worked at manual labor jobs exhibit poorer knowledge of Czech compared to those people working skilled or semiskilled jobs ( $p < 0.001$ ).

### Experience with majority institutions

With regard to individual nationalities, a statistically significant relationship was discovered ( $p < 0.001$ ) in terms of experience with the department of asylum and

migration policy. The worst experience was reported by the Vietnamese ("very bad" and "bad", 25.8%, "good" and "excellent" only 4.3%). Ukrainians chose "very bad" and "bad", 16.9%, and all positive variations only 5.0%. The most positive experience was recorded by the Poles (only 4.1% reported a "bad" to "very bad" experience). We achieved the same results in terms of immigrant experience with state agencies and local governments in the Czech Republic. Bad to very bad experiences were reported by 23.1% of the Vietnamese, and good to very good by only 6.9%. While only 2.7% of Polish immigrants reported a bad or very bad experience.

## DISCUSSION

The results revealed some very interesting differences among the surveyed nationalities of immigrant groups. With regards to housing conditions, the least satisfied were the Vietnamese, who also frequently live in overcrowded apartments and dormitories. This may represent a causal relationship, i.e., dissatisfaction comes from substandard conditions. On the other hand, the Vietnamese don't often change housing. The reason for this may be the reluctance of landlords to provide housing to this group (see Bartoš, 2013). The frequent movement of other ethnic groups supports the findings of Topinka *et al.* (2010), who attributed this phenomenon to the fact that apartments are usually rented with a one year contract. According to these authors, moving is also linked to the evolution of prices in the housing market.

An issue much discussed abroad is the concentration of one ethnic immigrant group in a specific neighborhood or locality. This appears to be rarely the case in the Czech Republic even though in the capital, there are neighborhoods where more Ukrainians live together. Research has shown that this is associated with the location of cheaper hostels, or proximity to their place of employment, rather than a desire to live together (Leontiyeva, 2005). However, according to Drbohlav (2005), it is illusory to believe that there will be no significant concentration of immigrants in certain areas and locations. Immigrants, particularly in the early stages after their arrival, tend to gather due to economic and socio-cultural reasons, and no de-concentration measures will be effective. Independent (non-team) housing is considered a necessary step towards integration (Nešporová and Nešpor, 2007).

## CONCLUSION

Knowledge of the Czech language depends greatly on the differences between Czech and an immigrant's mother tongue; therefore this indicator had its greatest ranking of dissatisfaction among the Vietnamese. The biggest problem for foreigners is active written Czech, and this result is consistent with other studies on foreigners' language competence (see e.g. Topinka *et al.*, 2010).

According to Obadalová (2001), foreigners considered a lack of Czech language skills to be a problem relative to housing, i.e., because it discourages landlords. Among the Vietnamese we identified both a lack of language skills and unsatisfactory housing conditions, which suggests that this combination is likely linked. Poor language skills were also associated with low income and job profiling (manual positions), and also causes discrimination against foreigners in other areas.

The relationship between language skills and length of residence is logical and predictable. It has also been mentioned in other studies, for example Šindelářová and Škodová (2013). Čechová and Zimová (2000) reported that most foreigners communicate without too much difficulty after about two years of living in the Czech Republic.

If we consider that the opposite of exclusion is inclusion and integration, it is necessary to work not only with immigrants, but also with Czech society (Uherek *et al.*, 2002). Although there are certain ideal theoretical models of cohabitation, particularly the pluralistic model, these are still not applied in the Czech Republic as models of coexistence, and foreigners are perceived as legitimately limited in many areas of life (Tollarová, 2006).

### Conflict of interest

The authors report no conflicts of interest.

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