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## Original research article

# Selected areas of immigrant integration in the Czech Republic

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## ABSTRACT

This article presents the results of the project: “Social determinants of health and their impact on the health of immigrants living in the Czech Republic”. During the project, quantitative data were collected in 2013 and 2014 from 994 immigrant respondents from Ukraine, Vietnam, Russia, Poland, and Slovakia living in the Czech Republic. Data interpretation relied on the theory of social determinants of health. The key areas of integration were analysed using SWOT analysis with recommendations drafted for overcoming the identified barriers to integration, not only with respect to the selected nationalities, but also with regard to common characteristics. Our research suggests that integration of the selected groups of immigrants was affected by three basic aspects, specifically: active participation in the labour market, degree of fluency in Czech language (both spoken and written), and social support as prevention of social exclusion. These aspects coincide with the current priorities of integration in the Czech Republic. The research results and the SWOT analysis served as the basis for formulating recommendations aimed at improving the immigrant integration process within the Czech Republic, i.e. increase fluency in Czech language for immigrants, matching of previously acquired qualifications with jobs in the Czech labour market, improvement of working conditions for foreign nationals, better preparedness of employment offices to deal with foreign nationals; personal assistance in cooperation with employers, effective participation of successful foreigners within the integration process, training for government agency employees in dealing with foreign nationals, and increased understanding of integration and intercultural empathy issues.

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## Introduction

The issue of integrating foreign nationals, particularly in connection with the refugee crisis, is presently one of the very important problems being addressed in the Czech Republic (CZ). Following a slight decrease in 2010 (associated with the economic crisis), the number of foreign nationals with a (long-term or permanent) residence permit has been moderately increasing each year. This applies to both EU and non-EU nationals. In 2016, the number of legally residing EU nationals increased by 5.5%, with the number of non-EU nationals growing by 1.6%. As of 31 December 2016, the Czech Statistical Office [1] registered 496 413 foreign nationals living in the Czech Republic (including recognized refugees), with the following nationalities being the most common: Ukrainians (110,245), Slovaks (107,251), Vietnamese (58,080), Russians (35,987), Germans (21,216), and Poles (20,305).

Integration can be viewed as a gradual process of settling into a society. This process has been described by various assimilation models/theories that describe the nature of cohabitation of immigrants/minorities, both static and dynamic. From the perspective of development, “classic assimilation” may be considered the original model/theory [2], where, according to Barša [3], the minority unilaterally adapts, while the host majority remains unchanged.

World War I and World War II contributed to the development of multiculturalism, as a counterbalance to the positivist perception of total assimilation [4]. The “core culture,” as the “sole identity” for assimilation, has been redefined into many subcultural identities differentiated by, for example, social status (i.e. upper, middle, and lower class), by gender (i.e. women vs. men), etc., meaning that the “core culture” no longer represents a monolithic structure [5]. According to Baršová and Barša [6], individual autonomy, with an emphasis on group culture and its preservation within multiculturalism, has resulted in segregation and insufficient integration of immigrants into socioeconomic, civil, and political areas. Therefore, new assimilation tendencies have been emerging, with the so-called “new assimilation” being the predominant one [7]. However, in addition to the “new assimilation,” there are other theoretical concepts that try to avoid the term “assimilation” for pragmatic reasons [8] and view it as a subcategory of integration theory. Esser [9] focuses on structural social integration, i.e. de facto inclusion of immigrants into social systems as individual actors, thereby increasing the similarity of ethnic groups, irrespective of who actually adapts; therefore, it is called “pluralist assimilation”. Bosswick and Heckmann [8] extended Esser's theory [9] by adding (1) a structural dimension (integration within an economic area), (2) an interactive dimension (establishing new social relationships within target countries), (3) a cultural dimension, and (4) an identification dimension. They define social integration as the inclusion and acceptance of immigrants into the core institutions of the majority and establishment of relationships and positions in host countries. According to Bosswick and Heckmann [8], immigrants view integration as a process of learning a new culture, acquiring rights and obligations, gaining access to socially significant positions and social status, building personal relationships

with members of the host society, and forming a feeling of “belonging to” and “identifying with” the society that accepted them. In principle, integration is perceived as a two-way process/state (i.e. it comprises both dynamic and static aspects).

In our approach, we naturally lean towards integration in the form of a dynamic two-way process of mutual assimilation, open to all immigrants, involving both foreign nationals and the host society [10,11]. This approach is most similar to the “individual integration model,” i.e. transition from group diversity (plural multiculturalism) to individual civil integration [4]. It is a comprehensive process that has political, legal, economic, social, cultural, psychological, and religious aspects [12]. Integration is the key precondition to any successful immigration policy in our country [13]. Consequently, the Concept of Foreign Nationals' Integration was created for the Czech Republic [14]. It is based on the principles of the Concept of Foreign Nationals' Integration within the Czech Republic of 1999 and the national legal regulations governing the status of foreign nationals in individual areas, as well as international documents adopted by a decree of the Czech Government in 2000 [14]. This concept was subsequently revised and adopted in 2016 [15]. The current priorities for integration in the Czech Republic are as follows: knowledge of Czech language, social and cultural navigation of the society, economic self-sufficiency, and non-conflicting relationships between communities [16].

From our literature review, we identified key aspects of integration that need to be monitored and evaluated. However, it is safe to assume that the level of integration relative to these key aspects (i.e. evaluation of integration in selected areas from a subjective point of view) could differ among individual nationalities.

Selected aspects of integration were also addressed under the project: “Social determinants of health and their impact on the health of immigrants living in the Czech Republic” (reg. no. LD13044) conducted by the Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sports during the period of 2013–2015, with financial support from COST (Cooperation on Scientific and Technical Research) [17]. The main objective of the aforementioned project was to ascertain whether the selected social determinants impacted the selected health aspects. The paradigm of social determinants of health, published by Wilkinson and Marmot in Copenhagen in 2003 [18] and in the CZ in 2005 [19], became the conceptual framework for the research. It concerns ten selected determinants: social gradient, stress, early life, social exclusion, work, unemployment, social support, addiction, food, and transport. Although the “determinants of health” concept is rather broad [20–22], the framework of the ten selected characteristics solidifies the key areas of immigrant life very well. If we were to look for connections between the determinants and integration models, it is absolutely clear that they can all be used. However, in this article, we only selected those findings that were corroborated through testing (i.e. significant relationships were proven, together with the direction of such relationships based on an analysis of adjusted residuals).

In summary, the objective of this article, which is based on the aforementioned project, was to describe and present recommendations for drafting a strategy that would impact the most important groups of immigrants living in the Czech

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