

RESEARCH

REPORTS

RECOMMENDATIONS

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THE WAGES OF FEAR

ATTITUDES TOWARDS REFUGEES AND MIGRANTS IN CZECH REPUBLIC

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INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY

The focus groups took place at two different locations: two of them in Prague (15. August 2017) and one in Ústí nad Labem (18. September 2017). The reason was that we wanted to find out and analyse opinions of people from a city with a high share of foreigners among the population as well as opinions of people living in a smaller town.

In both cases, we cooperated with an external partner in order to recruit participants: In Prague, our partner was the so-called “Scout institute”, which often organizes public debates about migration topics, in Ústí nad Labem we cooperated the local branch of our organization, which is involved mainly in social work. Using this strategy, we could reach other social groups than the ones usually following our events. We created a Facebook event, invited participants to an open debate about accepting refugees and made clear, that the results will be used for research. Ahead of the event, we asked people interested in participating to fill an online recruitment form and leave their contacts, so that we could pick up participants according to the given criteria (age, economic situation, opinion towards accepting refugees etc.) and invite them to join the debate. In each debate, we had seven participants.

The biggest challenge was finding participants with exclusively reluctant views about accepting refugees – there are many people holding this kind of view in Czech Republic, but they usually avoid such kind of events. Some of the people refusing refugees, who have registered for the focus group, didn't appear. Most of our participants had mixed opinions about the issue.

PART ONE – SECONDARY DATA

Migration profile

In general, the number of foreigners in the Czech population increases, but not as the consequence of the so-called migration crisis. According to the data provided by the Czech Foreign Police, there were 467,562 foreigners living in the Czech Republic in 2015 (including holders of one of the types of international protection) and 496,413 in 2016. Out of these, foreigners holding a residence permit for more than twelve months represented 4.3% of the Czech population in 2016, 4.5% in 2016. In both years, the majority (56% and 55%) of all foreigners legally residing in Czech Republic consisted of foreigners with permanent residence in the Czech Republic: the type of residence permit, which can be granted to foreigners after five years of continuous residence in the Czech Republic.

Similarly, among foreigners holding any type of residence permit, third-country nationals predominate over residents originally from the European Union. In the long term, the Ukrainians, the Vietnamese and the Russians are the most numerous foreigners legally residing on the Czech territory. The biggest groups from EU-countries are Slovaks, Germans and Poles.

The highest concentration of foreigners is typically in the capital - over 184,000 foreigners live in Prague, followed by Central Bohemia with 65,000, the South-West with 47,000 and the North-West with 52,000. The lowest concentration of foreigners is typically in the Moravian region (26,000). The population density corresponds with the unemployment rate in the particular regions of the Czech Republic. In 2015, the lowest unemployment rate was in Prague (3%), the highest in the Moravian-Silesian region (7.6%).

Foreigners therefore naturally settle in areas where they are more likely to succeed on the labour market.

Based on data provided by the Department of Asylum and Migration Policy of the Czech Ministry of the Interior, the number of international protection applicants has increased in the last two years, but the increase is rather negligible compared to the situation in other European countries.

In 2015, in the Czech Ministry of Interior 1525 applications for international protection were filed: 1240 for the first time and 285 as a repeated request. In contrast, 1475 applications were submitted in 2016, out of which 1213 were the first time applications and 262 were repeated applications. The most applicants came from the Ukraine and Cuba. Asylum has been granted to 71 applicants

and subsidiary protection to 399 applicants. In 2016, 30% (450) of applications have been decided positively, out of which 148 asylum seekers have been granted asylum and 302 subsidiary protection.

In 2015, international protection in the form of asylum and subsidiary protection was most often granted to third-country nationals from Asian countries (Syria, Afghanistan) and Europe (Ukraine, Belarus). In the long term, asylum or subsidiary protection is most often granted to citizens of Ukraine, Syria and Cuba.

Concerning the gender composition of applicants for the international protection, according to data from Eurostat, the males predominate among women in all age categories (1020:490 in 2015 and 920:555 in 2016).

Recent trends in migration policy

Migration policy in the Czech Republic is primarily covered by laws, i.e. the Aliens Act (326/1999 Coll.), the Asylum Act (325/1999 Coll.) and the Temporary Protection Act (221/2003 Coll.); secondly by other documents such as the Administrative Procedure Code (500/2004 Coll.) or the Employment Act (435/2004 Coll.) In the case of the international protection application proceedings, many international conventions come into picture. Both the Aliens Act and Asylum Act have undergone several steps of amendment in recent years. In the case of both laws, the amendments lead mainly to tightening the conditions for obtaining both long-term residence permits and both types of the international protection.

Under the Aliens Act, two major amendments have been made in the last three years. First in mid-2014, the second in mid-2017. In the meantime, there have been several partial modifications.

In the amendment No. 101/2014 from June 2014, a new type of residence permit was introduced, namely an employee card. The amendment came into force in June 24, 2014. The main objective of the amendment was to implement a European directive on a uniform procedure for handling applications for a single residence permit and work permit in an EU Member State for third-country nationals into Czech laws. The directive has been transposed into the Czech legal order by December 25, 2013.

An Employee card is a type of long-term residence permit in the Czech Republic where the purpose of stay (for longer than 3 months) is employment. A foreigner, who has an employee card, is thus entitled to reside in the Czech Republic while working on the job position for which the card has been issued. An employment card replaced a residence permit for over 90 days for employment, a long-term residence permit for employment and a green card. An employee card is issued for the duration of the employment relationship, but not longer than 2 years, with the possibility of repeated renewal. From the point of view of professional competence, the employee card is designed for all types of employment irrespective of the degree of professional qualification required, unlike the blue card, where a minimum of higher professional or bachelor education is required. The vacant post, on which an application for an employee card can be filed, must be entered into the central register of vacancies. An employee card is always connected to a particular job position (may be more at a time) for which it was issued.

By mid-2017, there were other major changes to the Alien Act. The long-awaited amendment was preceded by the amendment proposed by the Member of Parliament Václav Klučka (ČSSD). Members of the Senate (Higher Chamber of the Parliament), the Government Council for Human Rights and the members of the Chamber of Commerce criticized the amendment as unconstitutional and contrary to European international law: “This proposal amends dozens of provisions and would represent the greatest interference in foreign law over the last decade. The individual justifications of the submitted proposal are totally lacking in the observance of the international obligations of the Czech Republic and European Union law, the statistical data or the assessment of the situation and the legal relations they regulate.”

Klučka’s amendment was prepared in close cooperation with the Ministry of the Interior. According to the Ministry, the amended draft law was fully in compliance with the migration policy of the Czech Republic and will improve the overall migration system.

The Council’s suggestion touched upon four problematic areas: the exclusion of judicial review in residence proceedings, the limitation of judicial review of deprivation of liberty of foreigners, the limitation of the rights of family members of Czech citizens to family reunification, and the failure to assess the adequacy of the impact of the decision on foreigners.

The amendment has made it clear that after the release of a foreigner, the

need to review the decision on which the deprivation of liberty was based ceases and the proceedings are automatically stopped. According to the Council, the limitation of the judicial review of the deprivation of freedom of foreigners is an attempt by the Ministry of the Interior and the police to limit judicial oversight over their own procedures. Excluding the review is, in the Council's view, contrary to the European Convention on Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms.

The proposal further made the right to family reunification with the citizen of the Czech Republic lawful for the family member. It does not allow foreigners who reside in the Czech Republic without a residence permit or on the basis of an exit visa to submit an application for temporary residence of a family member. The Council notes that even this proposed provision is contrary to European law. Another criticized point was not to assess the adequacy of the impact of the decision on foreigners. According to the amendment, the Ministry of the Interior should not assess the adequacy of the impact of its decision in the case of false information or the submission of counterfeit documents or documents in which the data relevant to the examination of the request do not correspond to the fact or in the case of a final conviction for committing an intentional crime.

As for the Asylum Act, the most extensive amendment (No. 314/2015) was made at the end of 2015, and came into force on December 18, 2015. Although the reason for accepting the amendment is primarily a reaction to the increasing number of migrants in the Czech Republic, The Ministry of the Interior of the Czech Republic has been preparing for the amendment for a long time because of the transposition of the European directives. The Ministry of the Interior report states that the main impetus for the amendment is the European Union's intention to introduce the so-called Common European Asylum Procedures Directive.

The amendment clarified some concepts of the Qualification Directive, such as the definition of persecution, but also introduces completely new concepts, such as a new definition of a vulnerable person. This term was missing in the law, which led to ambiguous interpretations when deciding on applications. The amendment introduced a demonstrative list of people who can be considered as vulnerable.

The change also occurred in the case of inadmissible applications. An application made by an applicant from a country deemed to be a European safe third country is also considered to be inadmissible. The law defines a European safe third country as a country that has ratified the Geneva Convention and the European Convention on Human Rights and has a law-regulated asylum procedure. If the applicant arrives from such country, his application is considered inadmissible. Currently, the Ministry considers e.g. Moldova and Montenegro to be such countries.

Another reason for inadmissibility relates to the institute of repeated applications and further repeated applications. In this area, the current EU-wide regulation has made significant changes. This is due to the long-standing difficulty with repeated applications, which accounted for up to 50% of the applications for international protection, in particular in relation to the limitation of the right to remain in the territory of the state during the examination of the repeated application, or the possibility of handling this request in an accelerated procedure. A new repeated application is allowed if foreigners have to provide new facts that would justify a different case assessment.

The new law deals with the lack of co-operation on the part of the applicant - that is, cases when he does not come for the interview or provide the requested information - by stopping the proceedings.

The amendment brought several changes to the regulation concerning the decision deadlines. According to the amended regulation, the time limit for issuing a decision is significantly extended from the original 90 days to 6 months, which can be extended up to 18 months in particularly complex cases. On the other hand, the Ministry has set a time limit of 10 days for the decision on the inadmissibility of the application.

In addition to the above, however, there have been more responsive changes such as “above-standard” access to the labor market for international protection applicants. According to the amendment, international protection applicants receive it already 6 months after the data on the application has been submitted.

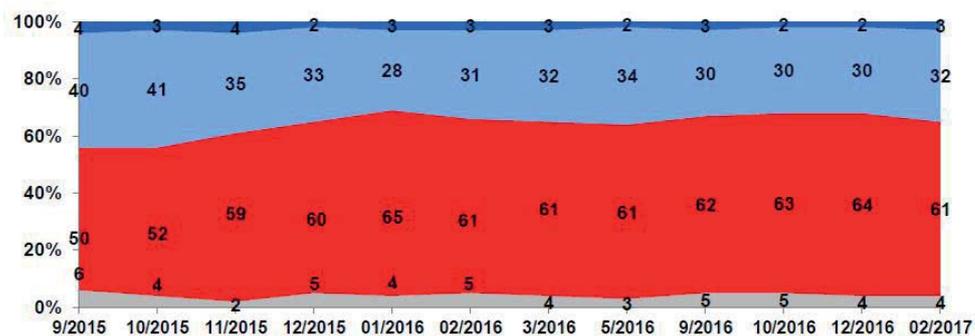
Attitudes to migrants and refugees – changes since mid-2015

Since the refugee issue became a topic of public discussion in 2015, the Public Opinion Research Centre (CVVM) measured public attitudes towards refugees and migrants on regular base. Therefore, it is possible to follow the development of these attitudes using data from one source. Even though we can observe some smaller fluctuations, the data show a clear tendency: the

number of people willing to accept war refugees in Czech Republic is staying rather low and slightly sinking, while the number of people with reluctant views is also stable and slightly rising. During the observed period, only 2 - 4 % of Czechs would agree with letting refugees settle down in the Czech Republic. Another 32 – 40 % would approve accepting them only until they are able to return to their countries of origin.

Whereas in September 2015, there were almost balanced views about the question whether to accept or not accept war refugees (48 % pro - 50 % contra), in February 2017 there were only 35 % of approving against 61 % of reluctant people. As Figure 1 shows, the number of people who refuse accepting refugees was continuously rising since the first survey in September 2015 until December/January 2016, where it reached its highest level and stabilised. Between January and May 2016, we can see a little rise in the share of people inclined towards accepting refugees – same as in February 2017.

Figure 1: Views about accepting refugees from countries affected by war and conflicts – in %

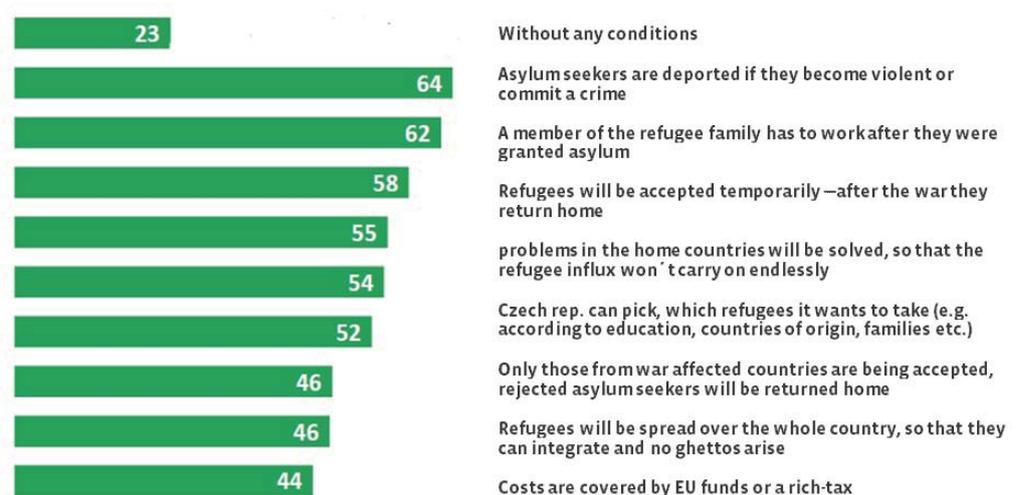


- Yes, we should accept them and let them settle down here
- Yes, we should accept them until they are able to go back to their home countries
- No, we shouldn't accept any refugees
- Don't know

Another, more differentiated picture of the views towards accepting refugees shows another survey carried out by the public opinion research agency MEDIAN in March/April 2016. This time, respondents were not only asked, whether or not they agree with accepting refugees in Czech republic, but also under which conditions they were willing to change their reluctant opinion. As Figure 2 shows: when certain economic, security, or other conditions were proposed, the rate of acceptance increased to from 23 % (no condition) up to 64 % (with one condition). The two conditions that increased the rate of refugee acceptance the most were the assurance that refugees would be deported in case of violent behaviour or a criminal act (64% acceptance) and the assurance that someone from the family would work (62% acceptance). Despite of the central role of Islam in the debate about refugees in Czech Republic, surprisingly the least relevant condition was accepting only non-Muslim refugees (44 %).

From these findings we can deduce, that there is a quite high number of people who are not „ideologically blind“, and willing to change their opinion about accepting refugees under some circumstances. The fact, that some of the given conditions are already in place shows that many people lack information about legal and practical measures and policies concerning accepting and dealing with refugees. This opens a window for awareness raising, information campaigns and quality reporting by the politics, civil society and the media.

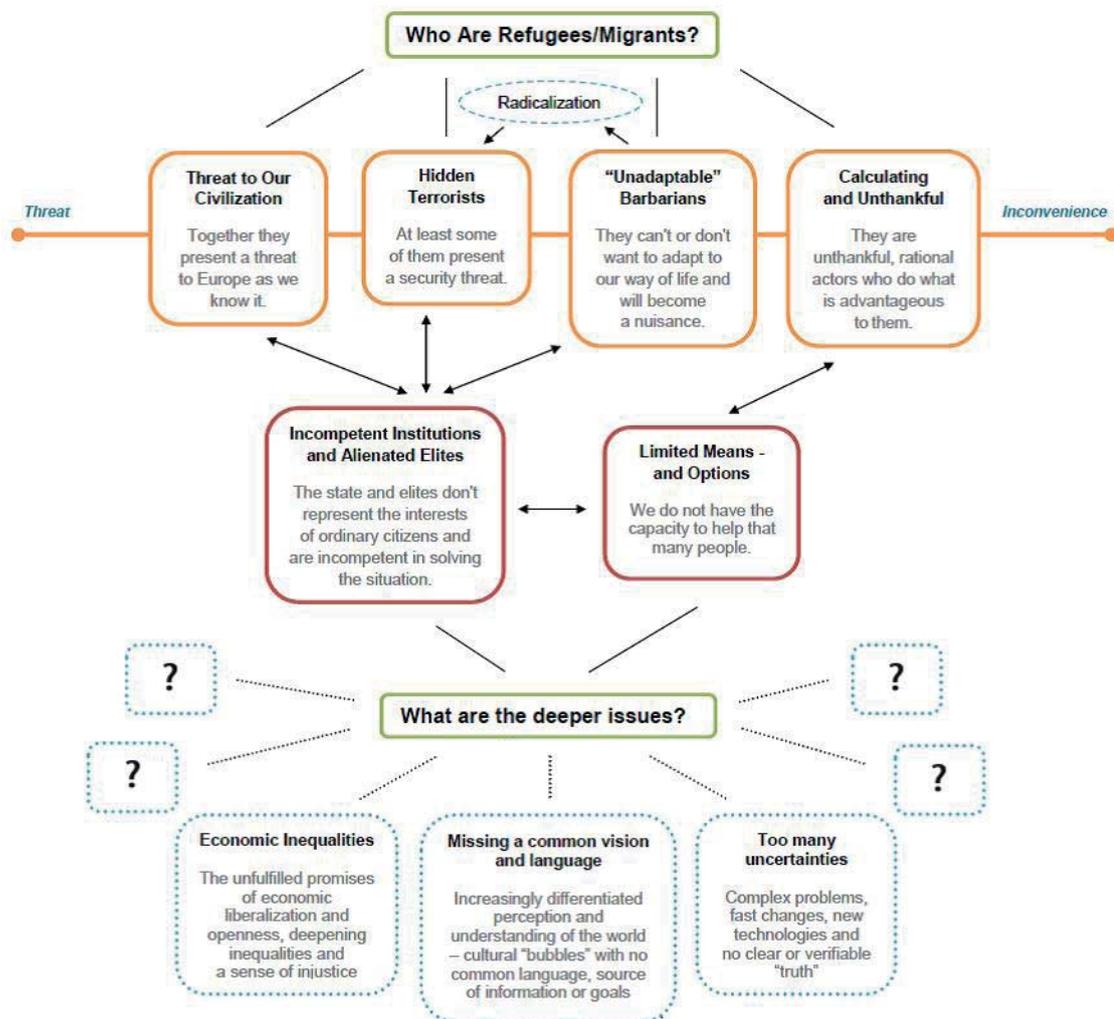
Figure 2: Would you agree with accepting part of the refugees from areas affected by war in Czech republic under the following conditions? – number of those who answered „yes“ in %



Public discourse, role of media and civil society

A study published by the think tank Glopolis in 2017 aimed to identify the main migration narratives in the Czech society in order to find paths to a more open, rational and constructive debate. Based on own qualitative research combined with secondary quantitative data analysis, the study finds an “anxious middle” – people who do not outright reject migration or do not support it unconditionally, but are conflicted and possibly worried about some of its impacts.

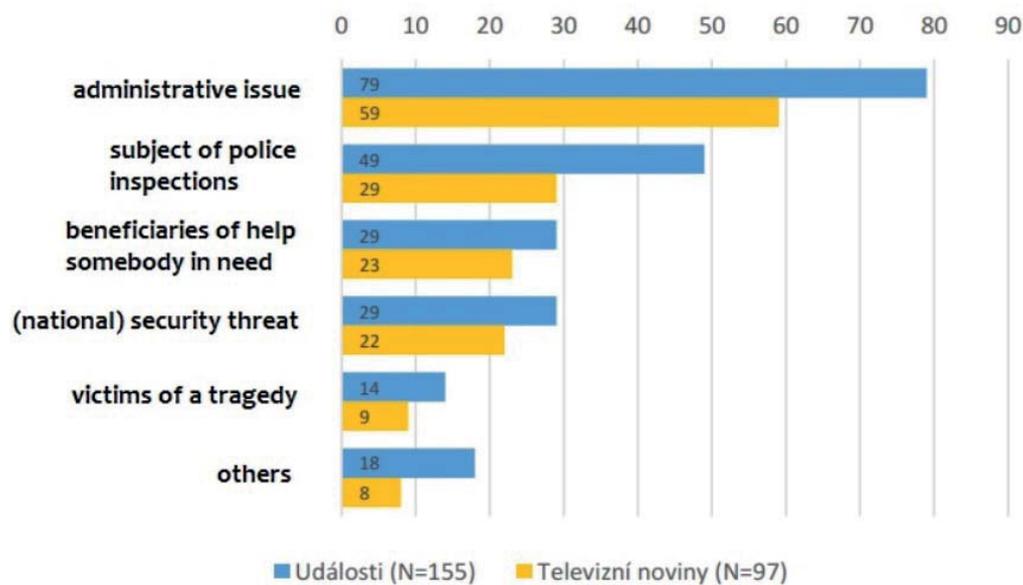
Figure 3: The main identified narratives, their relations and deeper influences



As Figure 3 shows, the study identified four main narratives about refugees, which are shaping the overwhelmingly negative tenor of the Czech debate. Many Czechs see refugees as a threat to our civilisation, as hidden terrorists, as unadaptable barbarians and as calculating and unthankful people. On a deeper level, the narratives are connected to the perception of the state institutions and elites as incompetent and alienated and the capacities of Czech Republic to help as limited. It also shows the connection between the narratives and some underlying issues, such as economic inequalities, general uncertainties and “social bubbles” without a common communication ground.

How have these and other narratives about refugees developed? Media and politicians played an important role in shaping the public discourse. According to a study conducted by MEDIAN for People in Need, for 84 % of Czechs the TV is the main source of information about migration. 39 % use mainly the internet, almost as many get their information especially from print media and radio. That makes television clearly the most important source. A team of researchers from the Masaryk-university in Brno analysed and compared the two main evening news programs by the two biggest TV channels: Události by the public broadcaster Czech TV and Televizní noviny by the biggest commercial channel Nova. Both programs have shown the same tendencies: presenting refugees as an issue of administration, police activities and a threat, or as victims and people in need (less often), but almost never as individuals with their own stories and motives (Figure 4). The media spokespersons were mainly politicians or police representatives, only few experts and very rarely the refugees themselves or NGOs working with them. This resulted in a strong securitisation of the topic and a dehumanisation of the refugees, which doesn't only apply for TV, but also for other media formats. The media language very often used metaphors connected to nature catastrophes or military (flood, wave, invasion etc.) None of the analysed contributions focused on the causes of forced migration, so it could seem that the refugees themselves caused the crisis.

Figure 4: Presentation of refugees (total amount of contributions)



Whereas this biased reporting might be caused mainly by the quality of news reporting in general and a lack of experience with migration issues, the third most-watched channel in Czech Republic, the private TV Prima, manipulated its reporting on purpose. Leaked records from a meeting of the management with editors proved, that editors were ordered to present refugees as a problem and a threat.¹

The role of the civil society in the refugee issue was quite important, since refugee assisting organisations, charities and civic initiatives were – given a few exceptions – the only actors, who resisted the negative public discourse and took side of the asylum seekers. Among the established NGOs, there were especially members of the Consortium of Migrant Assisting Organisations, who organised public events, talked to media, advocated for migrants and refugees and supported those who applied for international protection or who were detained with legal help and social assistance.

Other important society actors during the so-called refugee crisis were civic initiatives of people, who offered immediate help to refugees. The biggest among them, Pomáháme na útěku (We help people on the run), contained around 3 000 volunteers going to the most frequent places on the Balkan route and refugee camps. Another initiative, Iniciativa Hlavák, assisted refugees on

¹ Břešťan, Robert: Czech TV's management ordered news reporters to depict refugees as a threat. V4 Revue, 13. 6. 2016

the Prague main station, where they were stranded on the way to Western Europe after their release from Czech detention camps.

The activities of civil society didn't pass unnoticed by anti-immigration and anti-Islam groups and initiatives, who started attacking them and questioning their sources of funding, intentions and legitimacy. These attacks had different forms, reaching from hateful messages and threats to the leading personalities of the pro-refugee side to fake news and accusations especially in the popular pro-Kremlin "alternative media".

PART TWO – FINDINGS FROM FOCUS GROUPS INTERVIEWS

Experience with refugees and other migrants

One of the most fundamental findings of all three focus groups is that almost nobody have personal experience with refugees, as one of the participants said: "Mainly in small towns and villages no one has ever seen a refugee alive". The highest amount of personal experience with migrants was among participants with jobs in international companies living in Prague or university students. These migrants came mainly from other European countries.

People know also migrants from Vietnam, because they run small grocery stores also in smaller municipalities. However, as one participant said: "The community of local Vietnamese lives separately and has little connection with the long-term residents". Opinions on the reception of refugees are based more on mediated information on this subject (mainly from media) than on personal experience.

Relations between newcomers and long-term residents

If the participants talked about relations between newcomers and long-term residents, they spoke more often about their perception of the general atmosphere in the society, than about the situations they have personally experienced. Migrants wouldn't usually live in smaller towns or villages. According to the participants, if there were migrants living in the area, they would not associate with locals much (participants most often talked about the Vietnamese). The "usual" migrant communities living in Czech Republic were rather well integrated. The last two findings might sound contradictory, but it seems that participants often meant by integrated "not causing problems". Migrants from European countries were no big issue for the Czech society.

People, who are afraid of refugees, are a very heterogeneous group. As one

participants said: “I think that people from smaller villages have mostly negative opinion towards anyone different”. In the countryside, people are much more radical in their views towards refugees than in the city. Other participants rejected strictly, that there would be a difference between the city and the countryside. Few participants said: “I have only good experience with the relations between majority and the migrants”.

What are the most frequently cited reasons for negative reception of refugees and migrants:

Some participants expressed the feeling, that they do not had a chance to decide whether to accept refugees or not: “it is a process beyond our control”, and maybe therefore, they are afraid of it. Satisfaction with the own life was also important, frustrated people were more likely to have negative attitudes towards refugees. One participant said: “The problem is the language barrier; the majority is not willing or able to communicate with people who do not speak Czech.” One participant talked about his own experience with situation in the immigration office. The attitude of officials towards migrants was mostly negative and lacking empathy.

There was no consensus about the question of the impact of own travelling experiences on the question of refugees reception. Some participants think, that people who travel, do not tend to be more pro-refugees, because they had the possibility to see the problems with refugees and migrants in other countries. On the contrary, a part of the participants think, that the possibility to feel themselves as foreigners makes people more open-minded and tolerant. One participant pointed out: “The problem may be the lack of information, for example, how the asylum process works.”

Arguments against the reception of refugees

Participants partly talked about their own fears (“Refugees from the Middle East and Africa have different values and culture”); partly about what they think other people were afraid of (“People believe that migrants from Middle East and Africa have many children.”).

The arguments against the reception of refugees could be divided into few categories:

a/ Fear of foreign culture, that is not compatible with “ours” was the most frequent concern. People mainly referred to refugees from Muslim countries. Some participants distinguished between Shiite Islam and the so-called Salafist

movement, which is radical and poses a risk to democracy. Other fear was that the ratio of foreigners to the majority would go on increasing as they often had a higher birth rate. People often mentioned the different position of women in Muslim countries, which would be a huge contradiction to the Czech and European equality values.

b/ Concerns about safety in Czech Republic and Europe – such as the fear of spreading extremist views and the fear of terrorism (“We are worried about spreading radical views through mosques”). This was a very often-mentioned concern, and participants often kept coming back to it during the whole discussion. Some participants talked about the problem, that even if most refugees were peaceful, even a handful of fanatics among them could be a major security risk. The only way of eliminating this risk would be not taking any refugees at all (“Why should we put our safety into risk, if we don’t have to?”). Czech Republic wasn’t a target country for refugees, which were the only reason, why there were no religiously motivated attacks happening.

c/ Safety vs. economic reasons for travelling to Europe – refugees could find a safe place in the neighbouring countries. One participant summarized the situation like this: “If people were trying to get to Europe, they were no longer looking for the refuge from war, but for a better life. They should be asking for asylum in the first safe country, where they arrive.”

Some participants saw the issue from a different perspective. The fear of migrants and refugees could radically transform the host society and awaken the national tendencies, which could be a threat to democracy. We could already see the support for extremist movements rising.

d/ The costs of refugee reception for the host countries – the costs of the support for one refugee in Europe were much higher than the costs of equivalent aid in the country of origin or neighbouring countries. Other participants opposed, that if Germany was not afraid about the economic impact of the reception of refugees, Czech Republic also had nothing to worry. One participant said: “If the number of refugees hosted by a country stayed reasonable, then it was manageable. We should have the right to choose, which refugees we do want.” Many participants have agreed with this opinion.

e/ The integration perspective – people were afraid, whether refugees from some backgrounds, mainly from the Middle East, were able to integrate. On the other hand, participants also expressed doubts, if Czechs were able to accept refugees in their middle, so that they have a chance to integrate. During

the discussion, one participant said: “If refugees felt excluded from the Czech society, it could cause big problems.”

Sources of information

“Public opinion about refugees in the Czech society is greatly influenced by media.” This was the most commonly mentioned opinion on all three focus groups. The personal experience with refugees was missing. Most information people had about refugees came from media.

The attitudes towards refugees were strongly affected by the source of information. The main source of information, mostly used by the elderly, was television. Some participants discussed the difference between public and private television – the private channels were more negative in their coverage about refugee and migrant issues. Most participants would also use different newspapers and magazines as a source of information.

Participants expressed following problems related to the Czech media:

Most participants expressed their distrust to the Czech media.

Czech media would copy news from foreign media; moreover, the facts were chosen selectively.

Regarding foreign news in the Czech media, some participants recommended to verify the facts from the media from the given country.

The presentation of migration topics in the Czech media was often associated with crime, problems and dangers.

Journalists working for Czech media were under big pressure (time, economic pressure, etc).

Czech media was under-funded. Media was missing funding for foreign correspondents and reporters. Reports were written out of the offices, not from places of the event.

Participants expressed greater confidence in foreign media, such as German, Austrian or British. These media would more often bring specific personal stories, which were missing in the Czech media.

Many people in the Czech Republic would also use the so called “alternative media”, especially websites, as their source of information. Another problem mentioned were hoaxes and purposeful misinformation.

One participant was following the UNHCR newsletter. Another one would actively look for the statistics.

Attitudes towards hate speech and violence against refugees

None of the participants actively participated in protests against refugees. Most participants only knew protests from the media. Participants from the focus group in Ústí nad Labem talked about a local demonstration against Islam organized by an extreme right wing group.

Several participants witnessed verbal abuse of migrants or women wearing the hijab, or they have noticed hateful slogans written on the walls, shops, etc.

How do participants explain such hate speech or violence?

Earlier, followers of extremist movements were easy to divide from the rest of the society, but nowadays the “ordinary” people mixed up with them. The reason was that extremists would promise easy solutions for the migration issue.

Problem of Muslim women wearing the hijab – before the terrorist attacks it was not a problem if Muslim women covered up, but nowadays the hijab was symbol of an ideology people were afraid of. The hijab would not be usual in our society and covered-up women should not wonder, if people react reluctant – in Muslim countries the same could happen to uncovered European women

On the other hand, another participant said, that in Europe we have the freedom to wear whatever we wanted. Therefore, if we prohibit wearing hijab, we threaten our own freedom.

People do not agree to spend money from their taxes on refugees when local people have enough problems and needs.

Czech society allows hate speech towards migrants by not reacting on it at all. Such a sharp rhetoric and behaviour in public would not have been accepted few years ago.

Some participants said the situation has calmed down since the past few months. People noticed that no refugees come, nothing special happened at all.

Response to pro-refugee arguments

We talked with participants about three essential arguments for the reception of refugees to find out how they do react to these arguments.

a/ We should be open to refugees because they escape a very difficult situation in their country.

If people are escaping from war, they should stay in the first safe country. People coming to Europe were looking for something else than safety, they were looking for the European standard of living. The proof for it was that so many people are going to the Germany, instead of staying in a less wealthy country in Europe.

There were big problems with rejected asylum seekers. It was not possible to force them to go back to their home countries. They stayed in Europe as undocumented migrants.

The asylum process was not transparent. The asylum seekers could present self-created life stories and we had no chance to find it out. Talking about this topic, it showed that participants have very unclear view of how the asylum process looks like.

Some of the participants, who were in general less reluctant towards refugees said, that for them this was the most relevant argument.

b/ The newcomers enrich the culture of the receiving country.

The only think people enjoy with refugees is their exotic cuisine

People were rather afraid of differences than interested in foreign cultures

This argument didn't seem very relevant to the most participants

c/ Migrants contribute to the economy of the receiving country

Each country should have limits of how many refugees it is able and willing to integrate. However, it was very difficult to set such a limit. The economic condition of the recipient country was an important factor.

Specific problems with Muslim migrants or refugees. Their belief could be an obstacle in deep (also economic) integration - for instance, women remained only in the households and stayed unemployed.

People were afraid that refugees or migrants would stay in ghettos.

People do not want to subsidize refugees from their taxes.

Other, country specific issues

Many participants associated the question of refugees and migrants with the issue of Roma living in Czech Republic; probably because these would be the “strangers” they know the most. They argued that if the integration of Roma people had failed - how could we think, that we could integrate refugees coming from countries with very different cultures?

Czech society would not work with people’s fears of migration and refugees.

The migration crisis had become an interesting issue for Czech politicians to address their voters. This had contributed to the migration topic becoming a hot political question. Politicians would not try to explain the issue and work against fears and stereotypes.

The police in the Czech Republic showed racist tendencies.

CONCLUSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS, GOOD PRACTICES

The frightening scenarios of refugees flooding the Czech republic didn’t fulfil and the numbers of refugees coming to Czech republic have stayed low even after 2015, which made the topic is less hot in the public discussion. Unfortunately, the picture of migrants and refugees, which was and still is painted by the media, populist politicians and right-wing groups, stayed very negative and selectively focuses on terrorism, crime and failed integration. Even though act of physical violence against migrants and refugees are very rare, the tone of the public debate became rough and verbal attacks, hate speech, and threats towards migrants and those who take their side got an everyday occurrence.

In the meantime, not only asylum seekers, but also labour migrants are becoming subject of criminalisation by populist politicians and some media. The last amendment of the Aliens act shows that legal measures are following the path of the public discourse, tightening the legal framework for stay and economic activities of foreigners in Czech Republic.

The findings from the focus groups confirmed earlier findings of a survey conducted by MEDIAN for People in Need that has discovered a huge lack of information about the asylum process, activities and plans of the government concerning refugees and migrants and the issue of integration in Czech republic and abroad among the general public.

To achieve changes of this stagnant situation, we would propose to focus on and intensify the following kind of activities:

Cooperating with the media

As the overwhelming majority in Czech Republic doesn't know any migrants and refugees, most people know them only through media. Many people lack information about conditions and mechanisms of refugee reception and integration, but also don't understand the broader context of forced and regular migration – there is a huge gap left to fill for media and quality reporting.

We are convinced that media in most cases don't intend to paint a negative picture of migrants and refugees, but rather automatically follow the common opinions within the society, lack resources (money, time, expert knowledge) and don't reflect about the influence of their language and bias used in migration reporting on the public opinion.

That is why we cooperate with journalists, providing contact to experts, information about migration, seminars about migration and integration, study trips etc. We also work with journalism students offering them migration courses, because an early sensibilisation and establishing knowledge about the topic will help them handling it well in their future work.

Reaching outside the “bubbles”

The rise of migration as a topic of public interest has uncovered a divided society in Czech Republic. People, who refuse migrants and refugees and these who are willing to accept them both usually, stay within their “social bubbles” of like-minded individuals, which only strengthens their own opinion and makes it difficult to meet in the middle to discuss and listen to each other. Our focus groups, where people with mixed opinions met at one table, was therefore a good example of bringing people together and creating space for discussion. Organisations focusing on awareness raising in the field of migration should be more active in rural areas with very few migrants.

Moreover, NGOs and other actors in the field of migration need to more often approach the most popular sources of information such as private TV channels and infotainment magazines in order to reach the majority of the society, not only focus on high-quality and public service outlets and media formats.

Building coalitions

In the Czech Republic, NGOs working in the field of migration and integration built an umbrella organisation called The Consortium of Migrant Assisting

Organisations. Within the Consortium, the organisations exchange information about their activities, good practices and experiences in the field, but also join forces for advocacy or media work. Since the different organisations have different focus and strengths, together they can benefit from the cooperation and be more efficient in reaching their goals. International or Europe-wide organisations such as PICUM are useful as a platform to exchange inspiration and articulate common goals and suggestions towards international institutions.

Nevertheless, it is essential to build coalitions not only among NGOs, but also with external actors, who have the same focus and similar interests. This can be cultural organisations, schools, local administrations, academic institutions, private companies or well-known public personalities.