

Migration in a global world from an Eastern European perspective

- the Visegrad context (HU, CZ, PL, SK) -

Discussion, 5/11/2013

The aim of the discussion was to compare and contrast international migration in the Visegrad countries in order to delineate divergences and common challenges.



Moderator: Attila Melegh, Corvinus University of Budapest (HU)

Participants:

Andrzej Bialko, The Union of Associations Multikultura (PL)

András Kováts, Menedék Association (HU)

Lenka Laugesen, Counselling Centre for Integration (CZ)

Ivana Steúankova, Counselling Centre for Integration (CZ)

Galya Terziava, Society Development Institute (SK)

Summary:

1, First Attila Melegh, the moderator of the conversation asked the speakers to identify the key elements of an integration process.

Lenka Laugesen pointed out that integration is a two- way- process, not only about migrants and minorities.

According to András Kováts, self- sustainment is the most important – financial security, accommodation, social contacts.

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Andrzej Bialko said that language is a key element, and also some knowledge about the country, about its history, because different historical interpretations can lead to conflicts.

Ivana Steúankova talked about the most important areas, and the services their centre provides to migrants: legal advising, aid by social workers, language courses, individual psychological support.

Galya Terziava thinks that the interpretation of the term is crucial because we can talk about different types of migrants: illegally trafficked people, asylum seekers, people coming for family reunification, students, incorporate replacement travellers. These target groups need different approach. Language can be a key element, but not necessarily, self- confidence of migrants is important, how accepting society is, which can be connected with discrimination and employment possibilities. Security is essential. Later she added we also need to take into consideration the host and sending environment.

2, Attila Melegh agrees that we have to specify the migrant groups to be able to interpret their situation. Then Melegh asked the speakers to give examples from their countries for formal or informal institutional steps and situations which are successful, and also where they can see major problems.

Galya Terziava said that there is no working system in Slovakia, no special policy, mostly random projects for giving qualifications, teaching the language and intercultural education. They lack special policy due to the fact that it depends on European Union funding, and there is no special budget for migration integration policy.

Andrzej Bialko emphasised the role of local associations and NGOs. He gave the example of a project they did in Poland a few years earlier, named *Others are also us*, where they organised workshops for children from different minority groups who could cooperate and play together very well. However, the meetings for these children's parents were full of conflicts, even being helped by facilitators. This is a good example why it is worth working with children and starting teaching about other groups very early.

Lenka Laugesen is optimistic, though migration laws have been stricter and stricter every year in the Czech Republic. There are many troubles, especially because of financing, but there is an integration centre in every region. Here migrants can meet, can get social and legal counselling, and there are educational activities for children and adults. So there are steps forward in the Czech Republic.

András Kováts said that the main environment is neighbourhood, personal contacts and the local community. In Hungary mostly informal integration processes are going on, which are rather natural, not much facilitated by policies, local or central government interventions. The most important area of integration is education, so schools, where children integrate much more easily and faster than their parents. His association has organised local programs at primary schools where immigrant and non- immigrant children are together, working with issues like immigration, intercultural encounters. This can be very rewarding. It is important to mention that admission policies about visas and residence permits are very controversial and restrictive in Hungary. A lot of people are excluded, who cannot afford to live here, and thus those who remain are generally more well- off and better integrated. His association works with refugees and asylum seekers, people having humanitarian protection, who cannot be excluded by the law, and it is the responsibility of the majority to integrate them. NGOs and local family welfare centres are doing counselling for them. In his opinion Hungary is not doing well at all.

3, Attila Melegh asked the speakers how they would evaluate intercultural education in formal education? He mentioned that in Hungary teachers usually pretend to be colour blind.

Galya Terziava said that there are refugees and asylum seekers in all of the four countries, we have funds for that and the state is trying to redistribute these funds through NGOs. In her view the problem is not solved with that, because it is the NGOs who provide legal advice to the foreigners, give support, language training and intercultural education, so the NGO sector is supplying the duties of the state. Once the NGOs decide not to do some projects, there will be nothing for the migrants. The Czech Republic is a bit of an exception, but the V4 countries should influence their governments to do something. She brought the examples of Germany and the Nordic countries, where the state financially supports the integration process and development of the migrants, even supporting those municipalities which are migrant friendly. They recognise the potential in migrants, and would like to use their labour skills, and consider them social profit.

Ivana Steúankova pointed out that in the Czech Republic money is also a central question, which comes from the European Social Funds and the NGOs can use them for different services.

András Kováts said that the reason why positive integration measures are introduced in Hungary is because refugees, without international protection and their unconditional right to stay in the country, would not be able to stay in the country due to their low social economic status. He added that Hungary does not spend money on the integration of 'ordinary' migrants like the previously mentioned areas, because behind the migrants here there is not a strong political or economic power. According to András Kováts the numbers matter, we will not have integration programs and higher, more rewarding immigration until higher immigration numbers, but the programs have to be introduced. We see that the order of the steps is that first there is immigration, then come the social problems, and as a reaction, the integration programs are born.

Andrzej Bialko mentioned that they are just preparing a special project, which is focusing on collaborative learning in multicultural groups. The methodology was developed by Elisabeth Cohen, and it seems to be very successful, it puts intercultural education into practice.

Attila Melegh's last question is if the speakers see any special or vulnerable groups in their countries which would deserve more attention, but do not receive it.

Lenka Laugesen spoke about a project they are working on, in which they help Muslim women from traditional Muslim countries. They are especially disadvantaged on the Czech labour market. The key challenges are the language, being a mother is also a potential problem, because they are potentially problematic employees, so they have less chance to get a job, sometimes the motivation, and cultural and religious differences and specifics can cause difficulties as well.

Attila Melegh pointed out that gender is very important and not much attention has been paid to that in terms of integration policies.

András Kováts added that not only women with children but also spouses and family members coming for family reunification have a very difficult situation. They need a sponsor to provide for their existence. They are totally dependent on their sponsors, and if anything happens with that sponsor, the migrant becomes very vulnerable, loses their rights. They are in a constant threat of losing their status. He mentioned a third vulnerable group, people in irregular status, usually over stayers with no documents. They are stuck in the system, constantly deported back under the European Dublin regulation procedure. There is a shelter for them in Hungary, but the time of residence here is shortened to two months. After that they have to leave with no perspective of legalizing or regularising their status in Hungary. Without a legalisation system (like in the

Mediterranean countries) their life is really hopeless.

Lenka Laugesen pointed out that another big problem is illegal immigrants without permanent residence not having access to health care or social benefits.

Galya Terziava said that for those migrants whose status is not guaranteed by the law, the labour market position is really vulnerable, they are often made to work too much, they tend to be exploited and most of them are forced to be illegal workers, they do not know what they sign and sometimes the employers are not aware of the possibilities either. The V4 countries are not used to foreigners, because they are not colonisers, the situation is different from the Western European countries. In our countries we are always trying to create our own identity, which is somehow superior, and this is also a reason for lack of integration and discrimination on different levels.

Ivana Steúankova said that there are problems with long term visas. Social and health insurance is needed.

Andrzej Bialko mentioned the Roma people to be a vulnerable group, who are traditionally discriminated. Now that the borders are opening to the European Union, there is a big Roma migration to England, especially through France, because that is a cheaper way. However in Poland they are still strongly discriminated.

Audience Question: Is there a Middle- Eastern- European perspective, if there is, what are the particularities?

Galya Terziava answered that the Eastern societies in the last 15 years have lost a lot of human potential and power, now lacking a lot of highly educated and skilled people. So V4 countries should look for replacement for these employees to develop knowledge economy and innovations, if we do not want to be the back door of the European Union where we only have factories. To produce highly valued products or services we need people with multi- language abilities and we need to know how other countries work, think and trade. Migration policies should be developed, because migration is a part of global development. She thinks that it is also very important that governments can communicate the benefits of migration.

Attila Melegh added that also we tend to believe that under state socialism there had not been migration, it is not true.

András Kováts said that he would rather call this kind of migration, from this region to mostly Western European countries, intra- European mobility, for example if a person from Poland goes to Germany to take a job. However, being on the external borders of Europe takes us into a peculiar situation. He asked where the replacement mobility that we are looking for should come from. From Russia, or Ukraine, or outside the European Union? This region cannot take all the gains and benefits of the worldwide transnational migratory movements. From policy perspective the region should have a say to speed up and enjoy the gains of replacement migration. Also these countries are much more in a taker position than making a difference or influence on European policy. Except for the Czech Republic, where there are some proactive measures, our countries are only following European priorities, not taking into account the actual migration potential and situation in these countries. We should at least set goals along the line of benefitting from migration.

Attila Melegh's next question was if Polish out- migrants make the political climate more respectful towards immigrants.

According to Andrzej Bialko the general public do not make a connection between who had left and who came from the Eastern countries, there is no lesson for them.

András Kováts pointed out that actually there is a link between sending migrants to other countries in big numbers and the public attitude towards migrants. The two countries in the region, where the attitude is more positive towards immigration are Poland and Romania, and those are the two countries which send the majority of labour migrants to Western- Europe.

Galya Terziava mentioned the importance of migration policies both for sending and hosting migrants. There can be considerable fear about the labour migrants returning home in case of a crises, and that would mean decreasing the salaries of employees in the home country. It can happen that migrants come home, even at a larger number, and the sending country is not prepared for it, there can be social tensions. There should be policies for reintegration mostly on regional and local level.

Audience question: The acceptance of migrants is a very important issue. Is anything happening in these countries on a national level?

According to Andrzej Bialko, it is very important to develop the acceptance of the movement of people. He thinks that the European Union looks at The United States as a model in that respect. It is very common in the USA that the migration of people follows the job opportunities, which is very positive for American economy. The European Union supports mobility and the goal is to adapt to this kind of movement.

Ivana Steúankova said that in the Czech Republic, they have a good practice of volunteers helping the immigrant families in integration.

Lenka Laugesen said that in the Czech Republic local people do not hate foreigners and there are no fights, but obviously the fear is present that immigrants would take their jobs.

András Kováts thinks that this can be connected to the initial definition of integration, which is the general well- being of a community, society, how close or far people to each other are, and what the level of solidarity, mutual respect and equity is. The situation in Hungary is very worrying, because here has been a set of laws, institutions and policies introduced which work towards the segregation, discrimination and exclusion of particular social groups. This is a general attitude of communities which exclude its homeless, its poor, its disabled or those who have different political opinions in major way through the education, health or housing system or just in general, in public, or in political discourse. This way integration decreases and immigrants are typically one of those groups who can easily be scapegoated when there is a crises or problem. It is very worrying when immigrants are handled as non- humans, non- members of the community.

Galya Terziava said that in Slovakia people differentiate even between people coming from different areas of Slovakia, especially in poor communities people can easily blame others, they sometimes cannot even accept that foreigners are coming, who actually might be contributing to the local economy more than them. However, acceptance exists, especially when local people get close to foreigners, and understand that they are the same normal people. Although it still exists in Slovakia, even among the youth that people have never met any foreigners in their lives, not even any Roma people. The acceptance also differs from family to family, on their situation, being open- minded or not. Also politicians can use this topic to get votes when needed.

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Andrzej Bialko emphasised the role of NGOs in making the image of immigrants, but also the media is responsible for this. There is a policy that national television has to create a new image to minorities, and to discriminated groups.

Finally Attila Melegh summarised the conversation: in the V4 countries there are some formal institutions and some countries are actually developing. There are informal institution as well, but it seems the sense that we need to do something and we have to work for better integration is still missing.