

Zuzana Bargerová – Boris Divinský: Integration of Migrants in the Slovak Republic. Challenges and Recommendations for Policy-Makers

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Today many social phenomena and problems have come to the fore. During the first part of the past twenty years of democracy, political elites and society focused their energy on solving basic political conflicts. Later, this focus turned towards becoming a member of the EU and NATO and on reforms. A capacity to solve all social problems did not exist. One of these problems was migration. It is a phenomenon which has always been here and is globally present, but in the last years a significant change in migration behaviour patterns and in the whole “in- and out-flow” has appeared. But in Slovakia, migration and integration policies and expert analysis have very much lagged behind the importance and prevalence of this problem. Boris Divinský addresses this issue (in, for example, *Migration trends in selected EU applicant countries, Volume V Slovakia – An acceleration of challenges for society*, 2004; *Zahraničná migrácia v Slovenskej republike. Stav, trendy, spoločenské súvislosti*, 2005; *Labour market – migration nexus in the Slovak Republic: time to act in a comprehensive way*, 2007). His latest book, which this social geographer and foreign migration expert wrote in cooperation with the lawyer Zuzana Bargerová, is *The integration of migrants in the Slovak Republic. Challenges and recommendations for policy-makers*. Here the authors focus less on the migration process as such, as on the integration of migrants in general and especially in Slovakia.

The book contains 10 chapters, but it can be divided into 3 main parts: the current situation of integration and its sociological aspects, the legislative framework, and recommendations for public policy. The first part of the book focuses on the definitions, components and goals of integration. Most importantly, this part introduces the common principles for the integration of immigrants in the EU. These eleven principles seem noble and logical on paper, but the reality is more or less distant from these declared ideals depending on many factors.

Indicators of integration are also introduced. The authors draw on foreign literature in order to select the most important indicators of integration – economic, social (health care), educational, language, cultural and religious, residential, legislative, political integration and the respect for human rights. Even though Slovakia does not have its own indicators (It does not even have a systematic integration policy!), Slovakia is a part of the European Integration Index, called MIPEX, which assesses different dimensions of integration as defined by its authors, namely: conditions for receiving a residence permit, access to the labour market, a reunion with family members, participation in politics, acquiring citizenship and antidiscrimination measures. The MIPEX rating for Slovakia has been available since 2006 and the results are not encouraging – we have one of the lowest rate numbers of all EU countries for these dimensions. One exception is access to the labour market, where we got an average rating. Sweden is the country with the most favourable conditions concerning all rated dimensions.

The quantified index has been enhanced by a brief overview of the opinions of immigrants who live in Slovakia. Unfortunately the authors have little empirical data to base their work upon. Apart from pilot studies by B. Divinský, there is only one more major project, *Migrants' needs in Slovakia*, which was carried out in 2005 and 2006 by the Department of social and biological communication at the Slovak Academy of Sciences (Popper et al. 2006). Even these brief outcomes are alarming and confirm the results of the MIPEX “measures”. In particular, these respondents critically assessed several aspects of migration. They feel they are victims of public institutions. Economic integration is difficult because of a lack of information and because of discrimination. Courses of Slovak as foreign language are scarce, religious integration is a problem (mostly for Orthodox and Muslim migrants), and access to participation in public and political life is unsatisfying (pp. 51-52). In other words, integration problems don't only have legislative aspects, but also aspects of discrimination in everyday life.

This part of the book calls for the incorporation of another important aspect of integration – the attitudes of majority of the society towards foreigners and “otherness” as such, since we know that openness toward different cultures is not one of the strengths of the Slovak population. Various research findings show that more than 40% of the population think that immigrants contribute to growth of the crime rate or take jobs from local people (SNSLP 2006) despite (or maybe because of)

the fact that the share of immigrants in Slovakia is far smaller than in other countries, for example, the Czech Republic. The research data also show that while personal experience and contact is very limited and general public knowledge is very low, the level of stereotypical attitudes toward immigrants is very high.

The authors of the reviewed book avoided theoretical polemics concerning different approaches to integration. They did not try to resolve whether a “melting pot” or “salad bowl” is a better approach. Instead, they show empirical models of integration policies in different countries – the Czech Republic, Sweden, Austria, the Netherlands and Canada. Sweden obtains the most favourable results. Canada offers an interesting example – in Canada they adopted multiculturalism as an official integration policy in 1971. The authors show historical differences between Europe and Canada, where “the borders between immigration, integration and naturalisation of immigrants are not as sharp” (p. 40).

The Czech Republic provides a relevant referential frame and possible inspiration for Slovak integration (and other) policies. The Czech Republic has chosen a different migration policy strategy and priorities than Slovakia. In the last decade, from all components of foreign migration, the Czech Republic focuses mainly on integration of foreigners with a legal residence permit. Moreover, in 2002, the Czech government launched an interesting pilot project *The active search of qualified foreign workers* in order to attract a qualified labour force from abroad (mainly from southeast Europe and Asia). However, some other sources (Ivo Možný’s lectures in Bratislava, for example) inform us that this pilot project was not successful. It is symptomatic (and the authors of book confirm this), that even though Czech experts are very critical toward the quality of their integration politics, compared with the Czech Republic, Slovakia has worse results and evidently lags behind (p. 34).

The legislative part of this book focuses primarily on a description of the present situation. It leads the reader through a maze of legislative amendments, starting with the issue of the residence permit. It offers an exact explanation about what kind of legislation relates to which category of foreigners, especially in terms of employment and health care.

The last part of the book provides suggestions and recommendations for an improvement of the integration of immigrants in the Slovak Republic. It contains 12 general recommendations and 4 special measures regarding some specific parts of the integration process. Like other parts of the book, this is valuable mainly for its complexity and systematic approach. It highlights the fact that there is a basic component missing in Slovakia – a separate and coherent plan for an integration policy. The Ministry of Work, Social Affairs and Family of the Slovak Republic should be responsible for this component. The book addresses other related issues, such as the support of migrants’ associations, local and regional government, the education system, and the issue of statistics, data collection and research on integration. As I have already mentioned, and as everyone who starts to work on this topic quickly finds out, reliable data and statistics are a problem.

Specific suggestions included in the book concern four topics that are analysed in detail from a legislative point of view – the residence permit, employment, health care and citizenship.

This book is an excellent source of well-arranged and highly qualified information for everyone who works with issues of migration and the integration of foreigners. It is a particularly reliable guide for policy makers. The authors are not very polemic, but instead focus more on the categorization of relevant ideas. They do not open the Pandora’s box full of controversial issues such as multiculturalism, the tolerance of the majority toward minorities, dysfunctional situations in an intercultural dialogue, conflicts resulting from the co-existence of people of different cultural backgrounds, how to counter the idea among voters that immigrants take jobs and live here at their expense and the politicians who abuse this stereotype. The authors approach the issue of migration as a fact, as a social phenomenon, that needs to be dealt with in the best possible way. Many dilemmas that concern European countries with a high immigrant flow are not addressed. This is understandable since the goal of this book was mainly to contribute to the debate on public policies of (im)migrants’ integration. This book clearly shows that we cannot avoid a serious social discussion and sociological reflections on the entire spectrum of migration problems.

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