
Beyond Borders: Migration and (In)Equality in Central Europe in Comparison

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"The 20th century led to the erosion of the Czech land's multicultural heritage. With the integration into the European Union and global economic structures, Czech society is becoming more diverse and multicultural. A multicultural society enriches and stimulates but it can also create tensions and misunderstandings. The Multicultural Centre Prague aims to help all people understand and explore this reality."

On the 23rd and 24th January this year I attended a conference focusing on migration issues in the Czech Republic, organised by the Multicultural Centre in Prague and hosted by the Faculty of Humanities at Charles University. With such an international community at our university, I believe that the event could not have had more of an attentive and keen audience, and it succeeded at raising some very relevant and fiery discussions through a series of talks, presentations and debates.



Upon receiving an invitation to the event I researched in to the Multicultural Centre, which is an understated, highly active local organisation that I think students and migrants should be made aware of. They define themselves as "a non-profit organization interested in issues related to the coexistence of different cultures in the Czech Republic and abroad" and have reached all vital corners of contemporary education in Prague by carrying out a variety of events and campaigns since 1999, including film screenings, educational fixtures, websites, seminars and discussions.

They aim to address a spectrum of hot topics on identity, race, equality, nationality and politics including European Union policies, immigration, integration and most importantly, tolerance, the beauty of diversity and "multicultural coexistence" in an ever-growing multiethnic society in central Europe and the Czech Republic. They have a clear criterion of set goals in their mission and from what I observed at the international conference *Beyond Borders: Migration and (In)Equality in Central Europe in Comparison*, are doing fantastically in spreading awareness, giving a voice to citizens, students, the community and to migrants and minorities in the Czech Republic. Their work, of course, involves a good bit of momentum to some fresh and bracing debate.

It was very invigorating to see such a large audience at the event composed of different nationalities, backgrounds and occupations coming together to listen and educate one another. It was held in English although Czech translations were available, and funded by the International Visegrad fund, the Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the EU commission program *Europe for Citizens*, entailing a series of critical and analytical papers submitted to the hosts in December 2013. The event was divided into five panels, each given an allotment of twenty minutes for their presentations, which was then vocally reviewed or added to by specialists on the topic – this included professors and scholars and was followed or entwined with the viewpoints of other speakers, some of which were themselves migrants. The two days were well segmented in to morning and afternoon sessions with breaks, where I eavesdropped on some lively discussion amongst audience members. The individual panels were entitled under equally engaging topics with interdisciplinary approaches – this was my favourite aspect of the conference as it was so embracing and topics were (rightly) broadly tackled – Migration, Citizenship and the Politics of Belonging; Human Rights in the Context of State Security and Migration Control;

Migrant Workers Inside and Outside of the Labour Code: A Case of the Electronics Industry and Migration; and *Health Inside the European Union*.

Both days were wrapped up with some informative and powerful film screenings, and questions were asked throughout. For me, it was the first two segments that stood out the most, both of which ally with my close study of human rights, European politics, and anthropology at university, confronting the pressing current issues of the EU as a body, its hurdles and successes, asylum seekers, Roma and Sinti, state policing, institutional discrimination, the cycles of poverty, the welfare state, state borders; as well as more subjective topics like culture, political recognition, selfhood and nationality. These panels dug deep in to the heart of where we belong, how do we politically belong, how human rights protects and complicates migration (and even the contradictions found within human rights and their practical implementation), the legal status of individuals, how can social friction be created, what is the current position of stateless communities; who are they and what can be realistically done.

We also addressed how bodies can gain reliable statistics on migrants, asylum seekers and "invisible" or "floating" populations; whether the Universal Declaration of Human Rights has essentially failed these communities or does it urgently require reform; what is the legal process accompanying human rights violations and how can they be brought to justice and most eminently, to what extent can European countries as abiding members of the EU retain internal influence over their borders and immigration laws and reject supranationalism?

The conference was part of an extensive, long-term project *Migration to the Centre*, partnered with expert organisations that monitor and document the issues raised including the Human Rights League, the Institute of Public Affairs and People in Need. The project predominantly specialises such debate on European identity, borders and immigration to the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland, Hungary and Slovenia through cross-country comparisons, research in to internal laws and through facilitating a forum for the voice of migrants and minorities in these countries, all of which have undergone large social changes since joining the EU and have had historical political problems concerning identity, liberation, human rights, sovereignty and integration.

The Migration to the Centre scheme foremost focuses on work and residence permits in central Europe-migrants' rights, how supranational policies are changing and impacting them, what the Declaration of Human Rights does for immigrants and workers, and what violations are occurring such as illegal pay and unfair working conditions. It moreover, highlights family reunification – the movement of families as units of migration, cultural and language issues, the law on permanent residence, housing, state benefits, healthcare – and lastly, studying and working as a migrant – the importance of integration through studying; education rights; Islam, religion, religious students and tolerance in central European schools and universities; asking whether migrants are a "burden" or a valuable "contribution". I thoroughly enjoyed the depth, scope and speciality featured at the conference, which approached migration in central Europe through analysis of the job market, state security, citizenship, law and general social attitudes, presenting hardline problems that migrants face and posing a refreshing, positive, liberal aim of how society and government should go about celebrating Europeanism, shared commonality, multiculturalism and that migrants should be recognised as first-class citizens: something that is simple in the classroom but evidently quite different in the real world.

All in all, I thought the conference held an ideal equilibrium of academic research, testimony and politics through encompassing public opinion, headlines in the media (both of which are interconnected of course), expert input, guest speakers and partnerships. It caught my eye particularly as someone interested in current affairs relating to immigration and the subsequent public and political hysteria correlating with them: racism, panic over jobs, mass scapegoating concerning the economic recession and high unemployment rates, fear over shortages of housing, national loss of identity, religious differences, Islamophobia. The sensitive matters discussed at the conference were made tangible through my experience of growing up in Britain, a nation which is multicultural in its historical roots but remains deeply occupied with intergration difficulties, racism, prejudice, Islamophobia and media scapegoating; all of which many activists are trying to halt through educational means. I truly believe that this – education – is the key, and workshops such as *Beyond Borders* is a wonderful example of congregating people together to learn, listen, become empathetic and communicate – something which communities arguably lack when judgement and intergration are societal partitions. I came away from the event with a positive feeling that something very simple is missing – spaces where groups of disconnected people can become connected.



Poppy Gerrard-Abbott is an Erasmus student studying BA Humanities at the Faculty of Arts, Charles University and her home university is the University of Essex in England. She chose to write for the iForum to build on her journalism skills and meet other aspiring journalists; to grow closer to the social and creative life of Charles University and to learn more about Czech culture and life in Prague through attending local events and researching Czech issues and current affairs. Poppy saw the iForum as an exciting opportunity to pursue her interests in politics, culture and history whilst meeting other Erasmus students. She thinks it's a very worthwhile and fun experience that has brought some exciting opportunities her way, extended her writing skills and her knowledge of the Czech Republic, and hopes Charles University continues to offer such placements to future students.