
We Keep Overlooking the Processes That Divide Our Society

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The Charles University Faculty of Science and the Ministry for Regional Development of the Czech Republic have just released a book called Residential Segregation. The book aims to introduce the key issues of segregation to civil servants, non-profits, academics and the general public. Dr. Luděk Sýkora, one of the co-authors, shares the details.

The book was supported by the Ministry for Regional Development. Does it address current issues?

The issues of residential segregation started to be addressed when the Czech Republic was preparing to join the EU. Back then, the questions of social cohesion and the integration of disadvantaged social groups, which had been already discussed in the European context, entered our public debate. These issues are in the remit of the Ministry of Regional Development, and therefore they asked us to help them define segregation, its causes and implications.



One of the things the book is trying to stress is the fact that segregation, that had been previously connected with the Roma minority and later with foreigners in general, also happens in the majority society, be it the people in the poorer neighbourhoods like the housing projects in Northern Bohemia, or well-off people living in apartment complexes surrounded by fences and watched by security guards.

What will the implications of segregation be?

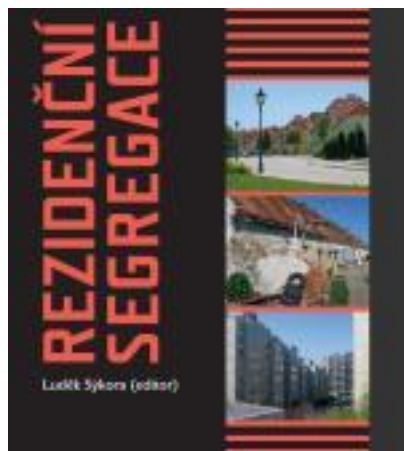
Unless we focus on segregation both on national and local level, we will see socially excluded neighbourhoods, as well as more so-called gated communities, grow and expand. Between the two, the ratio of mixed neighbourhoods will diminish. I think that we keep overlooking some of the phenomena and processes that will eventually divide our society, for example the privatization of streets. In the book, we give many examples of neighbourhoods such as Brno-Ivanovice, which one almost cannot walk through, because whole streets are sectioned off by gates and fences. The same goes for Prague. The private streets are less conspicuous here – they might be labelled as public on the map, but if you go there, you'll see gates or "private property" signs. One chapter focuses on the rise of the so-called gated communities. Almost 20% of new apartments in Prague are situated in such communities. A certain group of people therefore obviously separates itself from the rest of the society, demarcating the space for the rest of the society in the process. There is no discussion about how we define public spaces and private spaces and what their roles are, because we are afraid of it. In the meantime, people will divide our cities into private residential streets and neighbourhoods.

What's your opinion of the developments in Prague?

For over twenty years, Prague has relied on its being the centre of government, banks, services and the fact that it is the entrance to the Czech Republic. Not much thought has gone into the ways how to use its potential to invest into the neighbourhoods that need improvements. We are interested in how the city works as a whole in which each part fulfils its function. The city is differentiated, but it is also an integrated socioeconomic unit. When the development is uneven,

the functional integrity of the city suffers. Partial and short-term interests have unfortunately prevailed over a long-term vision of the city's development. The city's institutions are not independent of the personal views and preferences of politicians and officials, who set the social rules, oversee them and control the distribution of funds. The stereotypes and prejudices of those who are in power do affect their political decisions. Adjustments to the system, as well as to individual practices of particular politicians and officials may inhibit or support the process or segregation. Some might even use segregation as a strategy of political self-promotion.

P.K.



Sýkora, L., ed. (2010) Rezidenční segregace. Praha, Univerzita Karlova v Praze, Přírodovědecká fakulta a Ministerstvo pro místní rozvoj České republiky, 144 s.

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