

**RESPONSES TO THE ECONOMIC CRISIS AMONG IMMIGRANTS
IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC:
IMPEDING AND INHIBITING FACTORS FOR STAYING ABROAD****Marketa Rulikova****Abstract:**

This paper concerns the impact of the most recent global economic crisis on immigration in the Czech Republic. Developments during this economically troubled period suggest that the 'immigration-inexperienced' Czech Republic, which has attracted significant numbers of people seeking economic opportunities only in past decade, has repeated historical mistakes made by Western European countries during the 1970s oil crisis. Initially, promising economic growth at the beginning of the decade allowed the Czech government to ignore issues of immigration, including controlling inflow and immigrants' integration into majority society. The reality of disappearing jobs, many in economic sectors dependent on foreign guest workers, however, caught the country unprepared. In an effort to level the unemployment rate and dampen societal unrest, it offered financial assistance to immigrants who opted to depart voluntarily, but overestimated the willingness of foreign laborers return home even if gainful work vanished.

This paper, based on research conducted among participants of the government-assisted Voluntary Returns Program and a follow-up ethnographic study in the Vietnamese, Ukrainian, and Mongolian communities in Prague, shows that most immigrants decided to stay despite often extreme decline in their living conditions. While the motivations of immigrants to leave or stay are multifaceted, this paper offers an alternative to the "pull-push" model that takes into consideration both economic and cultural factors that both impede and inhibit migrants from returning "home".

INTRODUCTION

This paper examines how immigration to and the conditions of immigrants living within the Czech Republic (especially the most recently arrived guest workers) have been affected by the recent global economic crisis, which effectively hit the country in the fall of 2008.¹ Foreign guest workers were adversely affected by the

¹ While I use the words 'immigrant' and 'guest worker' somewhat interchangeably in the text for better readability, there is a clear distinction between how the global economic crisis has affected settled immigrants and recently arrived guest workers. The temporary position on the labor market and conditional residence status of the guest workers shape their living situations and future prospects (i.e. their position within the social and health systems, salary level, continued

economic failure to a disproportionate degree compared to the domestic labor force, since the former constitute a significant share among manual workers in the depressed export-oriented manufacturing sector and, as temporary workers and foreigners, were the easiest to dispose of. Despite astronomically high commissions immigrants paid for getting a guaranteed and legal job in the Czech Republic reported to be up to \$ 12,000, thousands of guest workers mostly from post-socialist countries lost their jobs, incomes, and even shelters practically overnight, with only a few being compensated for their loss. Every affected person has tried to face their plight according to their means. Nearly everybody has had to lower their expectations and often they have had to employ savings to sustain themselves abroad. The most desperate were coerced into forced labor or resorted to prostitution, with some engaging in criminal activities.

Even if the world recession severely depressed the booming Czech economy - and exports of manufactured and assembled goods were a huge component of its GDP - I will argue that the current disconsolate situation of most recent immigrants to the country has been *accentuated* and *accelerated*, rather than *caused* by the global recession. In other words, the glut in the guest-worker market was likely to cause a "burst" in the bubble anyway. Clear failures of the state to control immigration are often attributed to the country's lack of experience with immigration. Still, significant blame for the current state of affairs also rests with the government's inability to effectively enforce existing immigration policy measures and prevent corruption in the issuance of visas. Especially in relation to more recent arrivals, it was particularly harmful that the government neglected oversight of private worker recruitment agencies, which have prospered through corruptly penetrating the immigration administration and also developing a so-called "client system" characterized by total, feudal-like

employability in case of job loss, freedom of action). Where the context requires, I will emphasize the distinction between permanently residing immigrants/settlers and more temporary immigrants, mostly guest workers. I further use the term 'migrant' in a generic sense when I refer to 'people in motion' without putting importance on place of origin or destination.

dependency of laborers on their middlemen.² The paper further discusses the government's controversial attempt to respond to the quickly emerging tragedies of numerous abused guest workers by assisting them in their return to their home countries. The Voluntary Returns Program (VRP), loosely inspired by similar experiments elsewhere in Europe, however, failed as it turned out that the program attracted only limited (and arguably specific) categories of applicants and most immigrants opted to overstay the crisis in their host country.

Inspired by findings from my field research, the final section of the paper tries to briefly outline what are the major motives why immigrants decided to stay in the Czech Republic despite lost jobs, exploitation from employers and/or recruitment agencies and the threat of potential deportation.

METHOD

This paper draws on research conducted in a variety of settings. While trying to gauge the effect of the economic crisis that began in 2008 on immigrants in the Czech Republic, I decided to focus part of my research on the Czech government's Voluntary Returns Program. The backstage preparations for this program, not only its drafting and execution, but also problems encountered in its implementation, were revealed to me by several officials from the Czech Interior Ministry. During the intensive period of data collection (February - June 2009), I regularly visited the departure center in Velké Přílepy, a former asylum-seekers facility strategically located close to the Prague airport at Ruzyně. There, I conducted interviews with twenty-one departing migrants.³ I also participated in several organizational sessions where departing immigrants were informed about details of their journey, rights and obligations. At the center, I had the opportunity

² For a detailed explanation of how the Ukrainian-based client system works in the Czech environment see Černík (2006) or Čermáková (2008).

³ I would like to express my gratefulness to Aliaksandr Sudliankou who helped me with translations from/into Russian, Ukrainian, and Belarusian languages. He was also a priceless resource in translating many of cultural cues that would not attract my attention otherwise.

to talk to center employees, return organizers from IOM,⁴ and native speaking interpreters who provided me with priceless cultural cues to otherwise incomprehensible attitudes and behavior. I took part in one trip to Ruzyně airport and followed a group of Mongolian migrants up to their plane. While I had this immediate exposure to people who decided to return, I also heard from them about friends, family members and acquaintances who decided to stay in the Czech Republic, even if it meant moving into the sphere of illegality as their legal work disappeared.

Interesting but insufficient information about those who decided to stay brought me eventually into communities of Vietnamese and Mongolians in Prague.⁵ I had an opportunity to interview representatives of these communities and participate in several of their events. I confirmed my observations with colleagues who study the respective cultures. In spring and summer 2010 I also conducted interviews with social workers who provide assistance to immigrants and were in position to reflect on their experience from past two years of severe economic downfall and its consequences to immigrants.⁶

CZECH IMMIGRATION POLICIES IN THE PAST TWENTY YEARS

It has only been within the last decade that the Czech Republic shifted from being a country of population emigration, to being a transitory land for foreigners heading westwards, and finally to becoming a destination for various foreigners seeking improved economic opportunities. This rapid transformation, inspired by promising economic developments in this post-socialist country since the advent of the new millennium, however, caught the Czech government (as well as the

⁴ International Organization for Migration (IOM) was officially partnering with the Czech government in organizing and carrying out departures (finding flight connections, instructing returnees before the journey, transporting them to the airport, organizing luggage check-ins, and eventually distributing the financial fees.

⁵ For information on (the most numerous) Ukrainian and other post-Soviet national communities, I relied on my informants from these groups and less systematic but continuous and frequent encounters with representatives of these ethnic groups.

⁶ I am particularly indebted to employees and volunteers from the non-profit organization Inbaze.

ethnically homogeneous Czech society) unprepared for dealing with foreign newcomers, many of whom, it turned out over time, have settled in the country with the intention of staying permanently.⁷ Until the mid-1990s, immigration policies did not constitute a high government priority. The *laissez-faire* approach that held sway immediately following the collapse of the socialist government and that allowed almost anyone to enter the territory might have reflected “the libertarian spirit of the (post) revolutionary era,” as Baršová & Barša propose (2005: 221), but the fragmented and short-sighted scope of their policy also gives testimony to the lack of vision in this sphere of policy making. A more coherent immigration and asylum framework was set up in the Czech Republic as a part of the process of preparations for EU membership.⁸ Yet, time pressure for legal implementation of *acquis communautaire*, along with the fact that the post-communist countries seeking EU membership were left with little space for formulating their individual needs in the area of immigration, resulted in an environment of inertia where migration policies were somewhat “created by themselves” (Drbohlav in Baršová & Barša 2005). More complex and farsighted immigration and integration policies, which would be coordinated across particular ministries, remain mostly underdeveloped or fail to address the actual needs of both immigrants and majority society (Baršová & Barša 2005, *Poradna pro občanství* 2007). A resolute and consistent stance on which immigrants, in what numbers, and under what conditions should be admitted into the country in order to sustain a stable labor market and create a smooth-functioning multicultural society has been missing, and consequently the decisions of

⁷ I am aware of how unreliable it is to state anything definite about migration in this post-modern era of migration when intentions and behaviors are often reconsidered by migrants over time (Castles & Miller 2003). My commentary here is based on the numbers of permanent residence permits that have been issued. It is reasonable to assume that foreigners who attempted to change their status from long-term residence permit (renewable every year) to permanent residence have the intention to stay in the country. Interestingly, while permanent residency is relatively easy to obtain, it is extremely difficult (with the exception of those who enter into marriage with a Czech national) to get naturalized in the Czech Republic.

⁸ The Czech Republic had to abide by the EU regulations as defined in *acquis communautaire*, i.e. in the area of visa and Schengen system.

successive governments have reflected only the immediate situation (and mostly the immediate needs of the labor market) and not any more far-ranging set of policy considerations.

Thus, the favorable economic environment, enhanced by the country's successful attraction of foreign direct investments in the late 1990s, most of which concentrated in the manufacturing and assembling industries which offer semi- or non-skilled, low paid jobs that are generally unattractive to the local labor force, compelled the government to develop more or less structured attempts to seek 'guest workers' from abroad. While the government attempted some active recruitment activities abroad,⁹ it was mostly private worker recruitment agencies that effectively managed to draw thousands of foreigners to Czech companies, along with the natural process of informal recruitment through chain migration.¹⁰

The liberal admission of (the most vulnerable) foreign workers, accelerated by the tenacity of under-regulated,¹¹ profit-seeking private work agencies, and by corrupt behavior among Czech police officials and Czech

⁹ Starting in the mid-1990s, some bilateral agreements were signed with traditional labor supplying countries, including the post-Soviet successor states, and also Vietnam, Mongolia, and Bulgaria (Malynovska 2008, Kocourek 2008, Mošňjaga and Lupták 2008, Janeba & Jelinkova, unpublished), with the list of targeted countries having been gradually extended. In 2003, the government expanded its effort to attract more foreign labor by starting the Project for Active Selection of Skilled Foreign Workers. In 2008, it introduced a system of green cards, a fast-track for distributing long-term work and residence permits for citizens of selected countries who would be directly channeled into the most needy sectors of the economy, including both desirable high-tech jobs requiring specialized training and stigmatized jobs that the Czechs themselves refused to take up. These government-initiated recruitment endeavors have brought only moderate success.

¹⁰ The exact impact of work agencies is hard to state with certainty. For example, Rákoczyová *et al.* (2007) found in their extensive survey among companies employing foreigners that three quarters of these companies have never used services provided by such agencies. However, their study does not reveal the actual number of foreign guest workers who found employment in the remaining quarter companies through mediation by a work agency. The quantitative impact of work agencies aside, there is a consensus among academics, governmental officials, and NGO personnel about the hugely negative role of these agencies in the current unfortunate plight of many cheated guest workers (Drbohlav & Lachmanová 2008, Pechová 2007, Saková & Martínková 2009). Their pseudo-feudal, so-called "client" structure where job, accommodation, and 'security' are exchanged for high fees and often accompanied by limitations on freedoms and other forms of exploitation has been extensively described (Černík 2006, Čermáková 2008).

¹¹For an overview on the insufficient regulation of work agencies and unwillingness to control and sanction their malpractices, see Saková & Martínková (2009).

consulates abroad,¹² eventually outstretched the needs of the labor market. This unsustainable trend became especially apparent with the onset of the global economic crisis of 2008/09. The labor bubble, crowded with foreigners who had come to be part of the “Czech dream”, and some among them cheated out of their past and/or future earnings even before entering the country, collapsed in a matter of months. Naturally, the slowdown in manufacturing due to shrinking exports since November 2008 hit immigrant workers the hardest. While these guest workers hold (or held) permission for residence and work, job opportunities disappeared. In the attempt to help these victims of the short-sighted immigration system, and indeed to put a good face on its own missteps and oversights, the Czech government resolved to launch a pioneering and, in Central Europe, unprecedented, program of assisted Voluntary Returns, while also suspending the issuance of work permits.¹³

CZECH RESPONSE TO CRISIS: VOLUNTARY RETURNS PROGRAM (VRP)

In reaction to the worsening situation on the job market, which affected foreign guest workers more than others, the Czech Republic launched its government-assisted program of Voluntary Returns in February 2009. The official justification for launching the program (and thus spending tax money in a particularly sensitive time of economic insecurity) focused on security concerns. The government allocated CZK 111 million (approx. □4,5 million) to cover immigrants’

¹² In the most elaborate study on illegal economic activities in the Czech Republic, expert participants in a Delphi survey unanimously stated that reducing corruption in the police force was the most necessary remedy for reducing unauthorized economic activities of immigrants in the country (Drbohlav & Lachmanová 2008). Serious speculation occurred in the media about corruption in visa issuance at several Czech consulates. For example, the media-reported on Ukrainian investigations at the Czech Embassy in Ukraine, where it is suspected that the then ambassador, Jaroslav Bašta, covered up illegal overcharges for the issuance of Czech visas. In January 2010, Bašta resigned from his position in Kyjev, due to “medical problems”. The Czech Embassy in Hanoi was confronted with similar accusations (Nožina 2010).

¹³ Governmental voluntary returns programs have been known to Europe since 1970s, with France and Germany having perhaps the most elaborate systems for assisting immigrants and settlers to return to their home countries. During the current economic recession, it was Spain and the Czech Republic that introduced the program at such a scale and explicitly as an immediate reaction to disturbing developments on local labor markets.

repatriation costs and grant them a 'motivation fee' to encourage their departure.¹⁴ Participants in the program could benefit from this offer in exchange for turning in their authorized residence and work permits. In a country with almost 438,000 immigrants,¹⁵ it was safe to assume that tens of thousands were in a vulnerable situation.¹⁶ The program was initially designed for only 2,000 legal immigrants, with a conditional assumption that the program would be expanded in case of positive response. This promise was fulfilled in July 2009 when the program was extended to another 4,000 immigrants, and was accompanied by a program of benevolent repatriations of unauthorized immigrants. Arguably, this eligibility modification represented a significant move towards addressing the most vulnerable immigrants: those who had already lost their legal path to employment.

It is hard to assess the number, among all economically affected immigrants, of those who actually resolved to return to their home country. There are no reliable statistics that would indicate the number of those who have actually left the territory of the Czech Republic.¹⁷ Yet, a brief look into the data on

¹⁴ The sum of €500 per adult person and €250 per child was initially allocated to help the returnees re-establish their lives back home. Given the living expenses in the respective countries, it was estimated that this sum might get returnees and their families through the first several months after their return. In the second phase of the program (between 27 July – 15 December 2009), these granted fees were reduced to €300 and €150 respectively for adults and children. The program was, however, extended to 4,000 persons in this second phase. In addition to assisted voluntary returns of authorized foreigners, the government also embarked on repatriation of undocumented immigrants (Source: Ministry of Interior website.)

¹⁵ The official data as of December 31, 2008 (last official data collection before the VRP launched) registered by the Czech Statistical Office (which is informed by the Directory of Czech Alien Police) was 437,565 persons, out of which 405,631 possessed residence permits for 12 months or more. These numbers, however, do not take into account the number of unauthorized immigrants, which is extremely hard to estimate. The most extreme accounts estimate an additional 300,000 foreigners living in the Czech Republic (Drbohlav 2008).

¹⁶ The Czech Ministry of Interior indicated that the visas of 68,000 immigrants expired in August 2009 (Pecina 2009). Many of these immigrants would not have had their work contracts extended. Not all of these visa holders will get into serious economic problems, but it is reasonable to assume that a substantial number could encounter difficulties surviving under current conditions.

¹⁷ Estimating departures is further distorted by the fact that a significant part of the most numerous ethnic group of immigrants in the Czech Republic – the Ukrainians – practices pendulum migration. Thus, it is expected that these workers who come to the Czech Republic on tourist visas and, during their stay, find employment mostly in the informal economic sector, will adjust the length and

authorized foreigners residing in the Czech Republic does not reveal any dramatic declines in immigrant numbers (among officially registered immigrants) in the past two years (see graph 1). Additionally, the statistics of VRP suggest that the program's designers overestimated interest among immigrants in assisted returns. The first phase of Voluntary Returns, prepared for 2,000 persons, concluded with 1,781 registered applicants and 1,744 realized repatriations. What is more, in the second phase, program participation dropped enormously: only 218 documented and 169 undocumented foreigners had registered for the next phase of the program.¹⁸ Consequently, the total number of Voluntary Returns participants proved to be much lower than the number of those immigrants who were likely to have gotten into serious economic difficulties due to unemployment during the recession.

While talking to informants who had decided to take up the unexpected and “generous” (as many perceived) governmental offer, it became clear that they could be roughly divided into two types of cases. The *first group* included those who encountered serious problems in the Czech Republic, even if not as appalling as cases brought up in the media and other studies, and could not figure any possible remedy. In my sample, practically everybody arrived to the Czech Republic and got a job through an agency. The typical fee for such service ranged between \$ 700 – 2,000 (including plane ticket).¹⁹ While these are significant sums for most economic migrants, they are relatively low compared to the often quoted recruitment fees of \$ 10,000 - 13,000 (Pechová 2008, Komárek

frequency of their “tourist trips” based on job availability. It is inconclusive, though, whether informal jobs disappear during an economic crisis in the same way and with the same frequency as jobs in the formal sector. Just the opposite, they might be actually on the rise given that employers might perceive commitment to legally well protected workers as too binding and risky.

¹⁸ Source: Czech Ministry of Interior (<http://www.mvcr.cz/clanek/projekt-dobrovolnych-navratu-uspesne-ukoncen.aspx>). For more comprehensive statistics, see Table 1 in the Appendix.

¹⁹ Only one informant indicated that he had paid \$12,000 for job mediation. This informant was an atypical case in many respects as he came from India (a country which generally does not provide labor to the Czech Republic) and came to the Czech Republic through England where he was recruited by a Ukrainian middleman (!).

2009, Krebs 2010). Several of my informants developed major medical problems in physically demanding jobs. Typically, the participants had rather minimal social ties and little or no support group in the Czech Republic. Or, alternatively their entire group was insulated from majority society, did not have language skills, and seemed to be unable to orient themselves in the host society, its job market and legal environment. Based on the accounts of several of my informants, these insular groups of mutually interdependent guest workers (many from Mongolia) who faced similar difficulties departed *en masse*, including hundreds by the route of VRP.

The *second group* of program beneficiaries, which was smaller in my sample, included people who were similarly disillusioned but who meant to leave the Czech Republic anyway, typically with somewhat clear plans for what to do next. In quite a few cases this plan included another move in search of employment, – most commonly to Russia where (in their words) it was easier to get a job without formal permission.²⁰ Participation in VRP for this second group was, thus, a 'rational' use of a public allowance, and as such, a pleasantly unexpected "gift". In one or two cases, the eligibility of my informants in the project was highly problematic. For example, one of my informants, from Moldova, admitted that s/he was leaving with €2,000 in savings, which was against the rules of eligibility. I also talked to one middle aged woman who came to the Czech Republic from Ukraine after the program had already been implemented:

Initially I applied for the visa together with my husband. I received it and he didn't...I didn't want to go anywhere...I cried. You know, I never did anything without my husband in my entire life...But the whole family insisted on me going. They told me that the visa cost so much money that I have to take advantage of it...that I shouldn't be worried about anything that I will be living with my cousins. And after all, I can always come back through the

²⁰ Another popular, hoped for next destination for job migration that became apparent from my interviews was South Korea. My informants were aware of work permit quotas and difficulties to realize their trip there. Several informants had previous experience with working in South Korea and contrasted the fair and generous treatment by Korean employers with the exploitation and cheating among Czech employers and work agents who "offer/rent" these workers to manufacturers.

program... When I couldn't find a job after three months, I decided to take up on the opportunity to return through this program...

When asked about whether they would come back if the labor market situation improved, a third of my informants indicated that they would. Some of them added the qualification that they would never come via an agency again. During their stay in the Czech Republic they had made contacts with employers or other acquaintances that they could take advantage of for a return trip to the country after the crisis is over. So, an identifiable portion of those departing represented well-connected, independent, entrepreneurial workers who could contribute constructively to the Czech economy. In a sense, this would seem to indicate that the self-selection effect of migration, which was once celebrated in the literature on migration, works in reverse here, by sending home some of the most desirable laborers. Such an observation also suggests that resourcefulness enhances further mobility. This impression then invites a question whether this generalization is valid for the entire population of departing immigrants. If so, it would suggest that the host society has to face the harshest consequences of job losses among immigrants of losing at least a portion of the rather productive immigrants while retaining some of the least productive and most dependent. (It will become clear in a later section of this paper, however, that while guest workers who remain often represent the least resourceful population it would be erroneous to think that they are passive and resigned individuals.)

CONSEQUENCES OF THE ECONOMIC CRISIS FOR IMMIGRANTS WHO STAYED AND THEIR STRATEGIES FOR 'SURVIVING' IN THE HOST COUNTRY

Officially, 53, 842 foreigners lost their job in the course of 2009, which means that every eighth foreigner, including professionals and permanent residents of foreign origin (Czech Ministry of Work and Social Affairs), became unemployed. If one only takes into account guest workers, it appears that between a third and a fourth in this category of foreigner lost his or her job. The fact that the majority of guest workers who lost the jobs for which they were originally recruited stayed in the country has not surprisingly brought some negative consequences. While the government early on anticipated security risks for the majority society as the primary consequence of the crisis to worry about, it has become apparent that individual immigrants have borne the heaviest burdens of the adverse economy on their shoulders. Even if no good evidence exists, it can arguably be assumed that if any crisis-related increase in crime were recorded, more often immigrants would be the direct victims of crime (human exploitation, usury, usury-like job recruitment) rather than the perpetrators of the increased crime (drug dealing, marihuana plantation workers).²¹

As narratives of my informants in Velké Přílepy suggested and some studies later confirmed (Krebs 2010), significant numbers of recently arrived guest workers were personally hit to a greater or lesser extent by the distorted economic environment in the Czech Republic in 2008-10. Luckier ones were relocated to jobs with different firms, which were accompanied by lower pay and/or reduction in contract terms (e.g. part-time contracts, short term contracts without benefits, etc.). These practices were known previously, but their extent escalated during the period of crisis. Domestic companies became reluctant to commit to costly employment contracts. In addition, work agencies and middlemen reacted to lost profit from importing foreign labor due to government's decision to freeze work visas²² by coming up with ways to charge extra or

²¹ However, some evidence shows that exploitation is often perpetrated by mafia-like networks composed of foreigners (Nožina 2010, Krebs 2010, Drbohlav 2008, etc.).

²² In response to the economic crisis accompanied by an increasing unemployment rate, the Czech government ceased issuing work permits for immigrants from Vietnam, Ukraine, Moldova, Mongolia and Thailand on April 1st, 2009.

otherwise cheat those guest workers who were already in the country. (One such method was demanding higher charges for assistance with visa adjustments as will become clear below).

Jobless temporary immigrants have to face multiple challenges, some of which are shared by all unemployed individuals, but some of which are specifically attributed to (and complicated by) their uncertain legal status. Most fundamentally, they have to preserve whatever income they produce to survive in the host country, where they typically do not have family to lean on, materially or psychologically. Oftentimes this imperative coincides with phone calls from home asking them to send money so that the family back home can survive (or follow through on investment plans that have been made) and, in case of debts incurred, to pay installments. The situation is particularly strained if the debt was advanced from private creditors, who do not hesitate to threaten the indebted family with steep penalties or even physical harm if their usurious terms are not met.

Overall, frequent changes of employer and reduced, deferred, or never paid salaries have become a common reality for most guest workers in the Czech Republic in 2009-2010. In some cases, this has led to guest workers being placed in a position of near vassal-like dependency on their employers and middlemen. The following narrative seems to represent a very common story among recent arrivals to the Czech Republic:

...Then they stopped paying me...Actually they gave us a deposit of CZK 2000 a month for food...then I started using my savings...and now I have nothing left...that's why I am leaving. But I will try to get this money back from those bastards, even at the cost of going to the police...They promised to send the money to me in Kazakhstan or to leave it with my brother who came here with me [and is staying] but I am not trusting them...But I will get the money back... (a middle-aged Kazakh man)

During this period of 'accepted exploitation', immigrants, mostly Mongolians, Moldovans, Uzbeks and citizens of other CIS countries, exhausted their savings, which for many of them constituted the fruit of many years of hard

work. These trapped migrants could not even apply for the last-resort VRP assistance because they were not formally unemployed and thus did not qualify for participation. (In a few cases, informants in Velké Přílepy revealed that foreign police were flexible and responsive to their plight and incorporated them into VRP despite their lacking a letter of employment termination.) Unemployment among guest workers is precarious due to the fact that, unless they are permanent residents, temporary immigrants do not qualify for unemployment benefits, despite paying taxes.

While many immigrants "found" themselves in dependence as a result of deteriorating relations with employers and middlemen, some others accepted "voluntarily" this status when their previous arrangements disappeared. In his study of Vietnamese guest workers, Krebs (2010) discovered that some immigrants agreed to work for only food and shelter. While such terms might be intended and interpreted by the employers as generous assistance to fellow countrymen, it is difficult to see it as anything other than labor exploitation. Cases of straightforward human exploitation, i.e. involuntary enforcement of labor, have been recorded as well. Just recently police in Plzeň - a city with significant industrial zone where many guest workers would be channeled during the economic boom until 2007 - discovered a gang forcibly keeping 150 Romanian workers in servitude. They were forced to work 12 hours daily and received a mere CZK 500 (€20) per week.²³ While no official data or estimates are available to me, it is also estimated among social workers who work with immigrants that the number of women who voluntarily or involuntarily offer themselves for prostitution has grown.

On top of economic difficulties immigrants have faced, guest workers who have opted to remain in the country need to make an additional effort to preserve their legal residence status in case they want to keep open their chances for re-employment and avoid deportation. In terms of long term planning, maintaining

²³ <http://www.novinky.cz/krimi/216107-otrokari-v-plzni-drzeli-v-poslunosti-150-vyhladovelych-delniku-z-rumunska.html>. November 6, 2010.

legal residency also allows for potential permanent residency, which for some is their best hope for an eventual family reunion. In order to retain legal residence permits (which are tied to existing work), jobless guest workers often get their status adjusted from "employees" to "self-employed entrepreneurs," "members of a limited partnership," or "members of a co-op," even if their real work position remains dependent or they engage in no gainful activity at all. This practice of legal adjustment is a costlier arrangement since these business-type visas require additional administration fees (e.g. for obtaining a trade license), more expensive commercial health insurance,²⁴ and the filing of independent tax returns. Most of these conditions are unfamiliar to these immigrants - which leaves them at mercy of legal and financial experts. These are addressed through necessary middlemen, often foreigners themselves, who profit from their knowledge of the Czech legal system, personal connections, and linguistic skills. Similar conditions and practices are valid for student visas.²⁵ All these additional and repetitive costs of 'independent' statuses constitute a permanent financial burden.²⁶ The expression "feeding the papers" has been tailored to fit the situation of immigrants who are forced to spend a significant portion or all of their income to assure their continued legal status in the country (Krebs 2010).

STATE OF "STUCKNESS": IMPEDING AND INHIBITING FACTORS TO RETURNS

As mentioned above, available demographic information indicates that the vast majority of immigrants - including semi-settled immigrants and recently arrived

²⁴ Foreigners on business visas without permanent residency are not allowed to take part in the public system of health care insurance. They have an option to insure themselves commercially. This insurance, however, costs more and also does not provide care to the same extent as the public system does (Hnilicová *et al.* 2010).

²⁵ While some immigrants attempt to receive student visas without any intention to ever enter a classroom, studying in the Czech Republic is actually quite attractive for foreigners. Those who are capable of studying in the Czech language are entitled to free education at state universities, just as Czech citizens are. Because of this benefit, it has been observed, for example, that in Kazakhstan, courses in the Czech language are extremely popular since rumors about free education in the Czech Republic have spread there in the past several years (conversation with Nathan Jones).

²⁶ Any work, business, and student visas need to be renewed every year.

guest workers – have opted to stay in the Czech Republic despite their shrinking prospects for decent earnings and quality of life in the Czech Republic. Data from VRP, official statistics on foreign populations, as well as my own inquiries into individual ethnic groups suggest that the degree of reverse mobility is uneven in these separate groups of migrants (see Table 1). While proportionately large numbers of Mongolians and Uzbeks were leaving, Vietnamese and Ukrainians were much more reluctant to do so.²⁷ In what follows, I attempt to address the most salient variables, which seem to explain the different degree of readiness to stay or return among different ethnic groups, as I discovered them in the accounts of my informants.

I generally divide them into two crude categories of impeding and inhibiting variables. *Impeding factors* are usually objective or circumstantial factors that prevent or make it difficult for a migrant to leave, such as the existence or lack of supportive community or cost of return (combined with cost of reentry), debts incurred, etc. *Inhibiting factors* are usually subjective factors, often culturally conditioned, that impact the willingness of migrants to return, such as shame of one's failure to succeed abroad. Circumstantial, often economic variables are more tangible and obvious, and dominate migration literature as the major factors of mobility (usually referred to as 'pull-push factors'); but it is the inhibiting, more nuanced and subjectively experienced, culturally-based patterns that help account for seemingly irrational decisions of migrants to remain "stuck" in a country where opportunities have disappeared (and thus also help us fill a gap in our understanding in migrants' motives). In my research, I discovered that the most salient factors affecting whether or not an immigrant chose to take advantage of the VRP were the existence of *major debt*, *the existence or lack of a supportive community*, and the less tangible factor of what I call the *cultural significance of migration* in particular cultures.

²⁷ This conclusion has been drawn from a combined statistics of total population of a given ethnic group and of its participants in VRP.

Incurred debt

Despite the presumption that the poorest immigrants might want to leave, data suggest an alternative and somewhat complex scenario: it appears that the worse the situation of a migrant is, the less likely they are to seek a solution in return, even when the host government offers financial and logistic assistance for such return. This is especially the case of heavily indebted guest workers (mostly from Vietnam), and also with immigrants who are owed the most money in unpaid salaries. Such a decision should not be interpreted, however, as necessarily a sign of passivity and resignation. Many 'captives' of the client system get stuck because they try to get the salaries they are due and do not want to lose the opportunity to obtain these funds. This 'pursuance of justice' seems to preoccupy immigrants from the CIS countries. Also for people, who have borrowed from their families to pay for their trips, and have often put their savings and houses up as collateral to a private creditor or a bank,²⁸ there is no alternative to return home without sufficient resources to pay off their debts. Consequently, for people from countries like Vietnam where one survives on several tens of dollars a month,²⁹ a five hundred euro bill and a plane ticket would do little to provide relief from the debt trap that they are in and that would have to directly face were they to return home.

Caught between two inauspicious sets of conditions, these guest workers opt for staying in the host country in the hope that the economic situation will eventually revert and they will be able to get back on the planned schedule for earning their way to prosperity. In his extensive study of Vietnamese guest

²⁸ The fact that so many extremely poor Vietnamese were able to collect the tremendously high sums required for paying recruitment agencies can be attributed to strong in-family solidarity and also to active involvement of Vietnamese government to support export of labor by means of its Department for Overseas Labor Management. The incentive to do so for the Vietnamese government was to decrease the country's high unemployment and to increase remittances that constitute a high share of the country's economy (nearly 7% of the country's GDP in 2008). This contribution greatly outstrips the country's financing from FDI and official development aid (Nguyen 2010).

²⁹ Data on average monthly salary in Vietnam vary. While the usual estimates range between \$30-100, the official source, Vietnamese Department of Labor and in Vietnam, indicates that in early 2010 an average Vietnamese worker earned 150 dollars/month.

<http://www.presscenter.org.vn/en/content/view/1915/89/> Retrieved: February 7, 2010.

workers, Krebs (2010) discovered cases in which indebted families back in the home country sent money to support their family members in the Czech Republic. These '*converse remittances*' are unheard of in migration literature and reflect the degree of despair of migrant households in times when both - sending and receiving countries – push migrants out. Despair then forces many of these immigrants into illegal employment, slavery-like work environments, and sometimes areas of organized crime (Nožina 2010).

Role of community and social networks

An additional factor that appeared to play a significant role in decision-making among crisis-affected immigrants regarding whether they should return or stay was the *availability of an ethnic community (or network³⁰)* in the host country, and it can be surmised that the more geographically, logistically, or financially distant the home country is, the bigger the role such communities play. It has been well documented that through a variety of institutional means, the community helps its members with finding employment and often provides alternative job opportunities within its own immigrant-supplying (third) sector (Light 1972, Bonacich 1973, Massey *et al.* 1998). The latter is especially true of what Portes and Bach called ethnic enclave economies (1985). The authors define these as “strong communities” which are not only numerically significant but also include a class of entrepreneurs who create job opportunities for the others (*ibid*). An ethnic community is also a priceless source of social capital to a migrant: its members share information about legal and social rules and habits in the host

³⁰ By a '*community*' I mean an ethnic group whose members share common cultural and historic heritage. They also reside or gather in a specific location, i.e. a city neighborhood and organize their social life. By a '*network*' I mean a more loose association of individuals – who may or may not know other members in the network – who share some characteristics and interests and who provide each other with emotional support, mutual assistance, and information. While their contacts may or may not be intensive, members in a network do not typically inhabit the same locality, at least not majority of the members.

country, as well as offer moral support and other forms of altruistic help to those in privation.

In the Czech context, the Vietnamese in particular constitute such a tightly organized and industrious immigrant community. The most tangible expression of this vibrant Vietnamese community is its business center, known as Sapa, on the outskirts of Prague. Initially serving mostly as a storage and wholesale site for goods arriving from Asia, Sapa has grown over the years into a thriving market place frequented mostly by the growing Asian population. With the advent of the economic recession of 2008-9, it was in Sapa that jobless Vietnamese workers from Prague and elsewhere could find free food and shelter. Charity was organized around the local temple, and in May 2009 a half dozen of its members prepared over 300 meals daily for pauperized fellow countrymen.³¹ A group of businessmen decided to turn one of their storage spaces into a temporary dormitory for the most desperate Vietnamese homeless.³² Krebs *et al.* (2010) estimate that 7,000 Vietnamese unemployed immigrants found haven in Sapa over the most critical winter of 2008/09.

Ukrainians, who constitute the most numerous ethnic group among immigrants to the Czech Republic and who started arriving in the Czech Republic in the 1990's have not created as tightly linked community as the Vietnamese. The tendency toward looser social connections and less visible Ukrainian communal life is exacerbated by shorter duration and pendular character of Ukrainian migration.³³ Moreover, the absence of racial distinctiveness in relation to the host Czech population and the linguistic closeness of the Czech and Ukrainian languages enable the Ukrainians to better penetrate Czech society.

³¹ Personal interview with Mrs. Vu Thi Thu, a spiritual leader based in the Buddhist temple located in Sapa.

³² Personal Interview with Mr. A. Dat, a local businessman.

³³ According to my informant, Ukrainians typically travel to Ukraine every 2-3 months and stay back home for roughly a period of one month. This description seems to be reliable, taking into account that many informal guest workers from Ukraine come on tourist visa and make sure that even if performing undocumented work they have a legal permit to stay in the territory of the Czech Republic.

While Ukrainian workers tend to share accommodation with their ethnic compatriots, they do not concentrate in certain city neighborhoods.³⁴ Ukrainians in the Czech Republic thus tend to rely more on networks than on physically defined community. For a Ukrainian, a cell phone or internet connection represent a link to her community more than a section of the city and the occasional expressions of communal life are organized on an appointment basis in popular cafés, restaurants, and bars.

While Vietnamese community and Ukrainian networks assist their temporarily (or not so) work-displaced countrymen to stay in the Czech Republic, the absence of “its own” solid cultural and ethnic community seems to have led to more frequent returns among Mongolians or Uzbeks from the Czech Republic. The Mongolians, in particular, represent a hugely detached ethnic group without much social capital, which leaves them with very few opportunities to carry on after they have lost an arranged job. In addition, their linguistic distinctiveness (relatively few Mongolian guest workers speak Russian, not to mention the Czech language) does not facilitate their using the infrastructure of other ethnic communities nor their seeking jobs with Czech businesses on their own.

It needs to be emphasized, though, that the “retaining” effect of ethnic community may be of a negative nature as well. While ethnic community or network is commonly viewed as a favorable source of social capital that can serve as safety net in times of vicissitude, that community assistance is not always offered wholeheartedly (Grzymala-Kazłowska 2005, Nazario 2007, Pai 2007, White & Ryan 2008, etc.). Even if gratuitous patronage for fellow migrants, who often come from the same village, extended family, or group of friends, is commonplace, there is also evidence of job mediators or employers exploiting their countrymen. In the Czech Republic, Ukrainian work agents are notorious for cheating their countrymen and other immigrants, and of coercing money out of

³⁴ One of the reasons for the absence of residential communities is the existing regulated housing market in the Czech Republic, one result of which is limited spatial stratification (Lux *et al.* 2002). A clear advantage of these policies is the minimal ghettoization of Czech cities.

vulnerable immigrants in exchange for promises of employment, visas, accommodations, and “security”. Mafia-like Vietnamese middleman agencies – so called *dich vu* – have been also noted (Burčíková 2006, Martínková 2007, Pechová 2007, Nožina 2010, Krebs 2010). Vietnamese entrepreneurs pay often extremely low salaries to their mostly Vietnamese employees and do not compensate them for working in often harsh outdoor conditions; an hourly salary for selling in a street kiosk can go as low as 30-40 CZK (\$ 2). An anecdotal case of exploitation of countrymen was also recorded during the course of VRP processing when a Mongolian interpreter assisted her fellow countrymen with program applications but misled them about the size of the allowance and retained the difference.

The vast majority of my interviewees in Velké Přílepy have encountered malfeasance while staying in the Czech Republic; regardless of their country of origin, most of them reported Ukrainians as their ‘clients’.³⁵ “The Czechs are all right, they are civil; it's our own people who create problems for us,” a 45-year-old Uzbek commented, and his fellow countryman of similar age, whom he met in the camp, nodded.³⁶ By “our people” both men referred to Ukrainian clients who deprived them of their salaries. “Our” thus did not strictly relate to their fellow countrymen, but to citizens of Ukraine who used to share the common space of

³⁵ The term “client” can be confusing here to an outsider, because it is applied by foreigners in this context to individuals who would usually be referred to as a “middleman.” This peculiar usage reflects a power structure in which the “middleman” is actually himself a “client” to other higher-ups, be they employers or criminal bosses.

³⁶ According to its officials, the Ministry of Interior is aware of these mafia-like structures; however within the current Czech legal framework, police cannot initiate an investigation without receiving an official complaint, and most immigrants remain silent. They are sometimes unaware of their rights, but - based on what I heard from the departing migrants – they more commonly do not trust the objectiveness or effectiveness of the Czech investigatory and judiciary systems, or they are afraid of revenge from ‘clients’. Commonly, the afflicted immigrants do not want to report against ‘clients’ out of fear that they will imperil their fellow immigrants who opt to stay. Thus, even though one of the major sources of foreign labor exploitation is recognized, very little is actually being done to correct this unfortunate situation. It also appears that the Ukrainian client system works internationally; for example, an Indian informant came to the Czech Republic through a Ukrainian “middle-woman” who also provides jobs in the UK where she resides.

the Soviet Union. "Europe is civilized. I like it here. But that post-communist mentality, it is unfortunate," he complained.

Cultural meaning of foreign migration

Just as "the American Dream" was a shorthand expression associated with immigrant success, today many Vietnamese, Ukrainians, Uzbeks, and Mongolians see Europe as a land of opportunity and are ready to leave their families and go into debt in order to obtain legal employment or get smuggled there. It had not taken long before the Czech Republic became, after its accession into the EU and it began to attract serious foreign direct investments, one of these new dream countries. In Vietnam, rumors spread about *Việt Kiều* millionaires from the Czech Republic vacationing in Vietnam. People living in the former Soviet Union vaguely recall that quality products originated in the communist Czechoslovakia, at a time when Soviet goods were uniformly poor in quality. Many of those who decide to take their chances in the Czech Republic hardly know where it is located on a map, and many arrive knowing little or nothing about actual practices or the economic conditions in that distant country. Nevertheless, they set the goal of working in the host country for several years, remitting their earnings in order to pay back the debts they have incurred, and then improving the wellbeing of their families by building a house or investing in a small business, before eventually returning.

Depending on the level of economy in a sending country, families expect the remittance of cash in order to pay back the debt associated with sending the immigrant abroad, for purchasing basic necessities, investing in house construction, or simply – and as numerous studies confirm (Massey *et al.* 1998) – engaging in ever more sophisticated and expensive consumption. The expectations from migrants' families left behind are entangling. It is well-documented how hard immigrants try to live up to these expectations, sometimes living at the edge of subsistence in order to help their families back home (Ehrenreich & Hochschild 2004, Massey *et al.* 2003, Nazario 2007, Pai 2008,

etc.). Similar stories can be heard among immigrants from different countries who come to the Czech Republic. In the same spirit, most of informants I have talked to have been sending money home. Some informants revealed that they were trying to finance their children's studies, but in the vast majority of cases money was spent on everyday consumption.³⁷ In order to be able to remit money home, they were ready to compromise their living conditions in the Czech Republic. Many live in overcrowded apartments and others in simple dormitories, some of which are located beyond the city limit and require long commutes. Shoplifting sometimes is a method for sending a little present home when cash is scarce.

Failure to contribute the expected financial support makes the migrant feel frustrated and ashamed. The inability to provide for their relatives back home and live up to their expectations is an inhibiting force that requires a migrant to stay on, minimizing his own expenses and scraping by. In case regular work disappears, the despairing migrant is forced to accept any job, including those in which they are outwardly exploited and illegal jobs that could get them in trouble with the authorities. Women, often single-mothers, who engage in prostitution do so despite the fact that they would be endangering their reputations back home should people discover the nature of their employment.³⁸

At the same time, it should be recognized that the meaning of migration takes different forms in different cultures, which translates into different immigrants' "philosophies of life". While exploring this issue among foreigners in the Czech Republic, it was suggested to me that while in more sedentary societies migration represents a huge social and economic cost and thus needs to be compensated with tangible gains, in traditionally nomadic societies migration is treated more routinely, if not fatalistically. Such argument can be supported by the following comment, which was made by a forty-year-old

³⁷ For evidence on the remittances to Vietnam see Nguyen (2010).

³⁸ In other parts of the world noticed by, for example, Ehrenreich & Hochschild (2007) or Pai (2008).

Mongolian returnee who works as computer science professor at Ulaanbaatar University and who took a year off to come and earn some extra money in the Czech Republic: "We should be grateful for having been born in such a beautiful country to return to... And the lost money?... Well...What can you do?...You live on.... This could explain why contemporary Mongolians – whose cultural norms and traditional social structure are organized around nomadism³⁹ – treat spatial mobility and travel in pursuit of opportunities somewhat more easily and experimentally, and accept its attendant risks more readily. As opportunities come and go, so must people pursue them. This admittedly oversimplified picture of Mongolian mentality might, however, represent one reason why Mongolians were disproportionately more frequent applicants for VRP and why disproportionately more of them left the country in general.

CONCLUSION

Earlier studies of the impact of the current global economic recession on migration patterns (which were admittedly based on incomplete data) have suggested that population mobility worldwide, at least temporarily, slowed down in 2008 and 2009. Simultaneously, though, no significant returns of immigrants have been noted in any region (Papademetriou & Terrazas 2009, Wilson 2009). These findings are not at odd with developments in times of previous historical turmoil, e.g. the economic crisis of the Great Depression in 1930's, the oil crisis of 1974-5, or during the periods of the two world wars (Castles & Miller 2003). The same pattern has been confirmed in the Czech Republic in 2008-9, and this fact simply indicates that the country has joined other migration receiving states and will encounter similar issues in terms of the benefits and drawbacks associated with large migrant populations.

³⁹ I am indebted for this observation to Otgonerdene Erdenebat, a Mongolian who provides social assistance services to other Mongolians living in the Czech Republic. Her comment was confirmed in several follow-up conversations with Mongolian professionals and students who live in the Czech Republic.

While stasis rather than decline in the immigrant population could have been expected, the Czech government attempted to send the most unfortunate, crisis-affected guest workers back to their home countries via the Voluntary Returns Program. Motivated by security risk concerns, the word "return" really constituted a euphemism for "disposal," since the government essentially hoped to get rid of guest workers who had ceased to be required as cheap labor.⁴⁰ Such practice was reminiscent of Western European actions from the 1960's and 1970's, when several countries (namely Germany and France) tried to reduce the size of their "temporary-but-not-so-much" immigrant populations. Similar to the situation in Western Europe several decades ago, the Czech VRP, despite some initial interest, eventually failed. It did not manage to fill assigned spots for voluntary returnees, even though the living conditions of guest workers in the country had deteriorated.

My fieldwork modestly suggests that the VRP did not succeed to target those for whom the program was primarily conceived. The program did not attract and assist in departures for the most needy immigrants, especially not the illegal immigrants who are most vulnerable to exploitation, even though the second phase of VRP was redesigned to correct this by extending eligibility to these people. Ironically, the most impoverished immigrants were reluctant to accept the one-way plane ticket and five hundred euro motivation fee. The puzzle of this seemingly irrational decision at least partly disentangles when we examine some structural circumstances of these people's lives (the impeding factors). The world of poverty, which originally pushed them to the Czech Republic, has been replaced by the world of debt, which is even more debilitating. Multi-thousand-dollar debts accompanied with threats to the wellbeing of family members back home who are vulnerable to creditors makes a five-hundred-euro banknote seem like irrelevant pocket money. In addition, inhibiting factors, such as the feeling of

⁴⁰ The wording "return" also conveys the sense that the place where migrants really belong is where they came from and not in the place where they currently reside, whatever the opinion, aspiration, or loyalty of the migrants themselves might be.

shame for failing to provide for family that had invested expectation and hope into their journeys, constitute additional reasons why guest workers resist efforts to get them to return home. Despair inspired by impeding and inhibiting factors forces these migrants to stay, often in a situation of "stuck-ness", in which they are neither here nor there, picking up any job or "activity", which promises income or at least survival.

While the humanitarian aspect of VRP to those who participated appears for the most part beyond question, resources could have arguably been allocated more wisely. Opening the state's safety net to all categories of migrants is one example of a way in which the policy could have been more fair and productive. It is unfair and ultimately unwise to exclude temporary immigrants from unemployment benefits or self-employed foreigners from participating in the public system of health care while, at the same time, demanding that they pay taxes. The state should further utilize means to eradicate organized crime and corruption practices associated with migration, and the society as a whole should come to the realization that immigrants constitute a permanent phenomenon and that, once admitted to the country, immigrants should benefit from the same rights and obligations as every domestic worker. Had the state better managed the inflow of immigrants and their legal and social integration within the majority society, it would have avoided the need to instrumentally and summarily dispense with people who had become redundant and superfluous later on.

The 2008-09 recession created a strain on many economies that rely on foreigner labor and that have more experience with immigration than the Czech Republic. However, the salient problem, which was disclosed at the turn of 2008-09, should not be viewed only as an extremely unfortunate and singular consequence of global forces. In the case of the Czech Republic, the economic crisis only magnified what was already a problem and would have burst out regardless. In this light, the Voluntary Returns Program can be considered a poor effort to relieve a prior injustice committed against guest workers.

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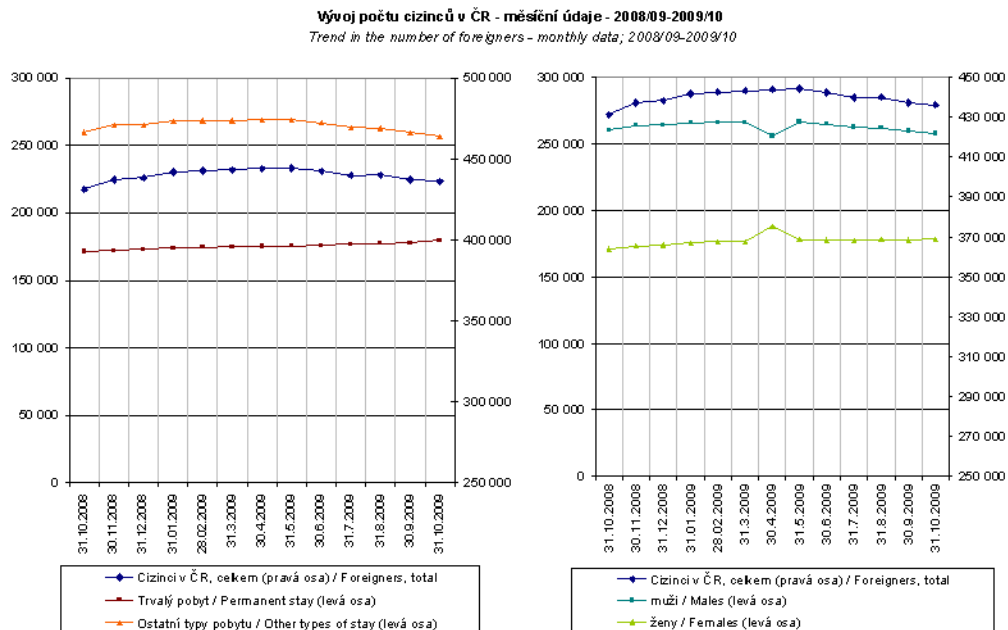
APENDIX

Table 1: Voluntary Return Program

	Foreigners in the Czech Republic (December 31, 2008)	Temporary and long term permits + visa for more than 90 days (December 31, 2008)	Participation in VRP (December 15, 2009)	VRP participants as % of temporary permit and visa holders (rounded)
Total	437,565	265,374	2089	100%
Ukraine	131,921	91,291	60	0,07%
Vietnam	60,255	25,463	283	1%
Moldova	10,636	8,522	17	0,2%
Mongolia	8,569	7,104	1,342	19%
Uzbekistan	2,307	2,191	314	14%
Russia	27,086	15,308	8	0,05%

Source: Personal calculations based on data from the Czech Statistical Office, 2008 and 2009, and the Czech Ministry of Interior, 2010.

Graph 1: Trend in the number of foreigners – monthly data; 2008/09-2009/10



Source: Czech Statistical Office, 2010.