

# We want foreigners to integrate but we do everything to see them fail

If foreigners feel left out, it will become more and more complicated for them in the future but also for common coexistence, researcher says.



Elena Gallová Kriglerová (Source: The Slovak Spectator)

In Slovakia we often say that foreigners should adapt, but it does not mean that they should do it on their own, says Elena Gallová Kriglerová, director and researcher in Centre for the Research of Ethnicity and Culture, who deals with the support of immigrants' integration within the KapaCity project.

## **The Slovak Spectator (TSS): Are foreigners invisible for municipalities?**

**Elena Gallová Kriglerová (EGK):** Yes, in the long term. We have been trying to open the topic of integration of foreigners since 2008 but municipalities are not aware of the need to integrate foreigners. They almost always say they do not have any problem with foreigners, so they don't need to pay special attention to them.

## **What is KapaCity?**

KapaCity is a project focused on the support of immigrants' integration in four areas in Slovakia– the Bratislava, Trnava, Banská Bystrica and Košice self-governing region. It is conducted by four Slovak NGOs – the Human Rights League, Centre for the Research of Ethnicity and Culture, Foundation of Milan Šimečka and the Marginal civic association.

We had one project a few years ago where five out of seven municipalities wanted to adopt integration policies. However, it was at the time of the migration crisis and municipalities became scared. They think that if they adopt those policies, more immigrants or refugees will come to their town. They became allergic to this topic. So now we are trying again.

**TSS: Is there any town or area that is better at dealing with this issue than others?**

**EGK:** I cannot say that some town would be more advanced regarding integration policies. Also, towns that adopted integration policies in the past do not really implement them.

**TSS: You have mentioned that Trnava already has a problem with immigrants.**

**What is that about?**

**EGK:** Many foreign investors came to Trnava and to the surrounding region, big companies open their plants there. The self-governing region, the municipality and also the state realise that they need foreigners to come here to work. But there was no mechanism implemented on how to accept foreigners and in a relatively short time, many workers from Serbia arrived. There were conflicts among citizens and between municipalities and state, too, because the process was not managed at all.

They came to Trnava, accommodated in hostels, with no mechanism on how they should function or spend their free time and integrate, especially in cases where they arrived with their families. Workers often live in small villages near to Trnava and the inhabitants of these villages may feel threatened.

Suddenly, everyone is shocked and there is a need to solve this situation. Another problem is that there was no cooperation between the state and municipalities and self-governing regions. Nobody explained to the Trnava inhabitants what it means having immigrants here.

**TSS: What about other foreigners in Trnava?**

**EGK:** Foreigners who have been living in Trnava for a long time are not considered to be foreigners because they are not causing any problems, they are not visible. But it does not mean that those people are not facing any barriers at the level of the municipality. They are often integrated because they have their own communities and networks. They would not be able to live here without them. If the foreigners are integrated, it is because they help each other, or NGOs help them but not because the municipality is doing their job right.

**TSS: What about Bratislava? How are foreigners perceived here?**

**EGK:** This is the biggest mystery for me. About 35,000 of foreigners live in Bratislava and the municipality does not respond in any way. Some boroughs had some activities and projects but not necessarily within a system. Also, when the mayor spoke about foreigners, he referred to tourists.

### **Number of foreigners living in:**

- Banská Bystrica: 2,500
- Trnava: almost 5,000
- Bratislava: almost 35,000
- Košice self-governing region: 12,500

These numbers comprise more than half of all the foreigners living in Slovakia. (Data from the beginning of 2018.)

Bratislava authorities have always declared that it is an open city but we see no specific activities to welcome new inhabitants. Foreigners make up 7-8 percent of the city's population, which is a crucial number and we do not even know what communities of foreigners live here. We told all the towns we cooperated with how many foreigners live in their areas. They had no clue before. They don't know their communities, they don't know the barriers they are facing, often they don't even know their competences. So, there is a big space for us to improve things.

**TSS: One foreigner living in Bratislava said that she was waiting for the website of the city to be translated to English.**

**EGK:** Yes, but the language barrier is only one problem. There is much more to overcome. They don't have any social capital. For example, when a foreigner's child reaches school age, they don't know where to go, how to enrol the child in school, what documents they need to bring. And this is the case in every area of life. In western countries, they have mechanisms to follow.

Foreigners should adjust, we often say in Slovakia, but it does not mean that they should find out everything on their own. It is not easy, municipalities need to help them. We are waiting for foreigners to integrate but we do everything to see them fail. And when they are not successful, we say: You see, we told you, they cannot integrate.

Interestingly, we haven't encountered negative attitudes towards foreigners. Almost everyone we talked to sees foreigners as an enrichment, someone we would need, part of the town. We didn't see any stereotypes at the level of the municipality. It is important to realise that the number of foreigners will increase and if we set the mechanism now, it can be cheaper than if we do it in future.

**TSS: Is the lack of communication from the local authorities towards foreigners a reason why foreigners do not turn out to vote in municipal elections even if they are eligible?**

**EGK:** A person starts to be politically active when they feel engaged, a part of the community. However, to feel involved, someone has to tell you that you are welcomed, you are our citizen and we care about you. That's the time when you start to care more about your surroundings.

I think it is important to involve foreigners in political and civic matters, because if they feel left out, it will become more and more complicated for them in the future as well as for common coexistence.

One research conducted in the UK explains that immigrants feel integrated when their neighbours recognise them and greet them. But to feel involved is not enough. They should shop in the same stores, their children should attend the same schools, they should have small conversations. To achieve that, they need a helping hand. We cannot expect that they will do it on their own, when they don't have an opportunity. We have to give them space and when we do so, I see no problem with foreigners integrating among us. Nothing is worse than socially expelled communities. If people stay here but they are not involved in society, that is a potential for conflict in the future.

**TSS: Are municipalities aware of this problem?**

**EGK:** No. Municipalities often think in four-year cycles. We see it also before the upcoming elections: they are talking about parking places, public transport, undoubtedly very important

issues. But things like mutual coexistence, social cohesion, the way we feel in a town, are not discussed in political debates. And not at all in connection with foreigners. In smaller towns, they often talk about a small number of immigrants. But in Bratislava or Košice, there is a significant number of foreigners living there and we cannot simply ignore it.

**TSS: Top politicians often do not speak well about immigrants. How are municipal authorities then supposed to implement a useful mechanism when they do not have support from above?**

**EGK:** The initiative has to come from the highest places to support the mayors. Otherwise citizens will not support them either and they will get stuck in the middle. Top politicians are not helping the situation, quite the opposite. We saw that in 2015. Mayors and municipalities who were open-minded, cooperated with us and were coming up with great ideas, suddenly became frightened and tensions started. When you have frightened citizens and top politicians are feeding their fear, it is hard to do anything, especially if you want to be re-elected for another term.

**TSS: You have spoken with several foreigners living in Banská Bystrica. How did they describe their life in the town?**

**EGK:** They were all people who chose to live in Banská Bystrica. They all were referring to themselves as citizens of Banská Bystrica. Obviously, there are barriers which they see. But their view of life in the town is way more optimistic, they feel like they have to take care of themselves.

But you rarely can get in touch with immigrants who failed in the integration process, usually those who are willing to talk and are visible are those who were successful. We know nothing about those who left, for example, because they were unable to integrate without networks and support.

Immigrants living in Banská Bystrica have their own communities, they are usually in contact, especially those from the EU and western countries. However, we also found out that there were people from 52 different countries among the third-country immigrants in the city, which is a large number. So, we assume some of them are also living without any contacts.

**TSS: What about other areas?**

**EGK:** In all other areas where research was conducted, the answers of foreigners were similar. Foreigners were usually grateful to live in Slovakia. Interestingly, the really weak relationship between Slovaks and foreigners is caused by the language barrier and the introversion of Slovaks. Often, it is not about stereotypes, we are just not willing to let anyone into our private zone. But when the ice breaks, many foreigners opined that also great friendships may arise. But first contact is very cold. As soon as you enter the community, you are in, you are a friend.