

CENTER FOR THE RESEARCH OF ETHNICITY AND CULTURE

SLOVAKIA AND MIGRATION. FINDING PATHWAYS TO COEXISTENCE

Summary

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Published by the Center for the Research of Ethnicity and Culture, Špitálska 10, 811 01 Bratislava, www.cvek.sk

2021



This publication is a part of a project "Integration of foreigners - researching barriers, instruments and attitudes that was funded by the European Union from the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund. Funds for Internal Affairs.



Translation of the publication was funded by the Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development Canada through Office of Embassy of Canada in Bratislava.



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**SLOVAKIA AND MIGRATION.
FINDING PATHWAYS TO COEXISTENCE**

INTRODUCTION

Slovakia has potential that is not being exploited sufficiently

Slovakia has been a member of the European Union for almost 18 years, it is one of the richest countries in the world and unemployment is relatively low. We are a country with great potential for further intensive development. Although we still have population groups suffering from poverty and social exclusion, compared to the rest of the world, we are among the more successful countries. Moreover, Slovakia is a relatively safe country, where most people can live peacefully without worrying about their lives or life necessities every day. This is one of the reasons why more and more foreigners are looking for and finding their place to live here.

On the other hand, it can be said that we are still not developing our potential sufficiently and are not opening ourselves up to different development opportunities as much as we could. We are still a relatively closed country that resists increasing diversity, or more specifically, a country that does not see its existing diversity sufficiently and does not recognize it as a potential source of development. There is still a view that Slovakia is a country of Slovaks only. However, this does not correspond to the fact that there are people living in Slovakia who belong to 13 national minorities and they represent almost 20% of the population. We do not see cultural diversity as an opportunity, but rather as a threat to us. This is one of the issues addressed in the publication that you are holding in your hands right now.

Our closed nature and unwillingness to take notice of and respect people from different backgrounds also has an impact on our very low level of social cohesion. By rejecting various forms of otherness, we close ourselves into our own social or other (ethnic, religious) groups. At a society-wide level, this means that we lack the measures and support to involve different - and especially vulnerable - groups in society. We live in different parallel worlds that can hardly understand, respect and support each other.

This also affects the trust between people. Unlike Western Europe, and Scandinavia in particular, we are among the countries with the lowest trust among people. Only 20% of the population believe that people in general can be trusted. Everyone else thinks we need to be vigilant when in contact with others. This means that we cannot rely on others and are always suspicious and afraid of people who are different from us. When this feeling is also fuelled with negative political or public discourse which, for instance, depicts minorities as a threat¹, social cohesion and trust cannot be expected to improve.

Insufficiently functioning institutions also increase people's overall sense of mistrust and insecurity. In this area, we are also among the worst countries in the European Union. We don't trust the police, judiciary or health system. People in Slovakia feel that the institutions that should be there for them operate on the basis of corruption and nepotism, and that they are too bureaucratic.² If you find

¹ Gallo Kriglerová, E. - Holka Chudžíková, A. (2020), *(Ne)spojená krajina*, Bratislava, Centrum pre výskum etnicity a kultúry.

² Gallová Kriglerová, E. - Chudžíková, A. - Kadlečíková, J. (2017), *Kvalitatívny výskum hodnôt na Slovensku*, Bratislava, Centrum pre výskum etnicity a kultúry.

yourself in difficulties that you cannot overcome on your own (or with the help of your friends or family), you cannot rely on the help of institutions set up for this purpose.

The above facts can be seen as an important framework for creating conditions for the integration of foreigners living in Slovakia.

Foreigners in Slovakia are still invisible

The number of foreigners in Slovakia is constantly increasing. Since 2010, their share in society has more than doubled. Given the demographic changes, ageing of the population as well as labour shortages that are beginning to manifest in some areas (e.g. gastronomic services, construction as well as health care and social services), it can be assumed that their number will continue to increase. The newly adopted Recovery and Resilience Plan of the Slovak Republic also assumes that, due to demographic changes, it will be necessary to attract talents and workers from abroad to Slovakia. This poses a challenge to the public policies aimed at integration but also to the aforementioned social cohesion and coexistence.

Nevertheless, the topic of inclusion of foreigners remains greatly underestimated. Political discourse on migration usually begins and ends with the depiction of migration as a threat and with the rejection of refugee quotas. However, migration is a very complex issue, and involuntary migration (refugees) makes up only a small part of it. Refugees certainly also need to be given adequate attention, especially because, given our international obligations, we should provide international protection to those who have left their homes because of political or other persecution. It is another area where we lack an honest discussion about our real possibilities of helping these people and their integration into society.

However, there is a lack of public – expert, media and political – discussion on how to integrate the more than 150,000 foreigners living in Slovakia, whether temporarily or permanently. Of course, many of the foreigners do not need special help with inclusion. They have sufficient cultural, social and financial capital for a successful life here. However, this is by far not the case for everyone.

Many countries with a much higher proportion of migrant population compared to Slovakia (such as Germany, the United Kingdom, France) have long understood that underestimating integration policies means creating potential problems in the future. These problems can take the form, for example, of social exclusion and the creation of parallel social structures on which the state has very little impact. Moreover, addressing the involvement of socially excluded groups is associated with high economic costs.

There is a lack of institutional coverage and adequate policies

The fact that this topic is not given sufficient expert or political attention can best be illustrated by the fact that the topic of migration and integration does not have a “single master”. We lack an umbrella

institution that could both analyze and predict migration developments in the context of demographic change, follow the existing migration trends and manage migration policies and especially integration.³

The Migration Office, whose name indicates that it should fulfil this role in Slovakia, has very narrowly defined powers, namely in the area of the assessment of applications for asylum or other forms of international protection. As aforementioned, this is only one part of the migration topic and concerns several hundred people who apply for such protection in Slovakia every year.

Another institution that plays a role in migration is the Border and Alien Police Office, which is responsible for border control, registration of foreigners, granting residence permits and expulsion of foreigners who are in Slovakia illegally.

No institution deals with the topic of migration more comprehensively. The Migration Policy of the Slovak Republic with a view to 2025, adopted in 2021, is only very vaguely defined and does not set out more detailed principles according to which migration should be managed in the future. It does not project development trends, analyze the country's demographic and economic development or model the opportunities, needs and challenges for future migration.

The most significant impact of the absence of a separate office is the lack of integration policies. In 2014, the Integration Policy of the Slovak Republic was adopted under the aegis of the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family of the Slovak Republic. However, this policy is not applied in practice at all and is not reflected in the development of systematic and effective policies for the integration of foreigners. Integration concerns not only the labour market integration but also many other sectors (education, health care, housing as well as cultural activities, political participation and many others). Since there is no coordination of individual government departments, the integration policy in Slovakia is failing. We are thereby repeating the situation of other countries which became aware of the need for integration policies only after the rise of various social problems related to the exclusion of migrant communities.

Municipalities are gradually changing their approach to foreigners

Municipalities are the institutions of public administration closest to their inhabitants. The aforementioned Integration Policy of the Slovak Republic also defines their role in the integration process as irreplaceable.

Nevertheless, perhaps due to the lack of coordination of activities on the part of the state, municipalities are not yet sufficiently aware of the need to create local integration policies. They do not have statistics on the number of foreigners on their territory, and if they do have them, they do not work with them systematically. The topic of foreigners is not reflected in the strategic development documents of cities, despite the fact that the share of foreigners, especially in larger and regional cities, is increasing.

³ Gallo Kriglerová, E. (2020), 'Téma migrácie potrebuje zjednocujúci prístup', *Menšinová politika na Slovensku*, 2/2020, Bratislava, Centrum pre výskum etnicity a kultúry, dostupné na <https://mensinovapolitika.eu/tema-migracie-potrebuje-zjednocujuci-pristup/>

Thanks to the activities of NGOs, some municipalities have gradually started to address this topic. Some of them have started to carry out at least basic activities aimed at informing foreigners about the activities of municipalities, mapped the situation of foreigners and are looking for ways to deal with this topic in the future. These are just the first signs of action that will need greater and more systematic attention in the future.

We believe that this publication will contribute to a deeper understanding of this topic and that the research findings will make it possible to formulate policies which respect the specifics of Slovak society, respond to the current needs and barriers as well as contribute to the creation of a more cohesive society.

METHODOLOGY

The Centre for the Research of Ethnicity and Culture has been dealing with the topic of the integration of foreigners since 2008. We have carried out a number of studies on this topic, we analyze public policies and formulate recommendations for public administration. At the same time, we strive to raise awareness of both the professional and lay public in this area.

This publication is another contribution to this discussion. As part of the research project *Research on the Integration of Foreigners – Barriers, Tools, Attitudes*, we tried to comprehensively look at this topic from different sides.

In this project, we focused on a comprehensive mapping of the topic of integration of foreigners. Therefore, we have designed the research to cover **various thematic areas of the integration process**, such as the problems and obstacles faced by foreigners, the availability of assistance and support in the process of integration, the creation of relationships and contacts between foreigners and the majority population, opinions on the presence of foreigners in Slovakia and increasing cultural diversity in society, perceptions of opportunities and threats in connection with migration, support of integration policies, and institutions' response to and experience with foreign migration and foreigner integration.

It was also necessary to plan research activities in such a way so as to find out how topics related to the integration of foreigners are perceived by **different actors**. On the one hand, we focused on finding out the experience with and perception of this topic on the part of various institutions – especially municipalities, employers, educational institutions, state administration and NGOs, which are closest to foreigners at the local level and can, therefore, potentially have the greatest impact on the integration process. In addition, we examined how the topic of foreign migration and integration of foreigners is perceived by public opinion, and last but not least, we asked about the experience, opinions and perceptions of foreigners living in Slovakia themselves.

Throughout the implementation of the research project, we had to balance the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. We had to adapt the implementation of research activities to some extent to the current pandemic situation. Therefore, we carried out these activities at a time and in such a way as to minimize the impact of the pandemic on our research findings as much as possible. In the research phase, whose respondents were foreigners themselves, we were able to obtain data on the pandemic's

impact on the situation and life of foreigners because some time had already passed since the beginning of the pandemic.

The research was conducted in three phases, all of which used a **combination of quantitative and qualitative** research methods. As part of the quantitative part of the research, we conducted a questionnaire survey at the level of district cities and two representative studies – one among the majority (N=1012) and the other among foreigners (N=312). The data obtained by quantitative research methods were processed using the SPSS statistical software. The findings were subsequently supplemented by an analysis of the data obtained by the qualitative research methods.

Qualitative research methods included individual semi-structured interviews with integration actors at the local level (N=58), individual semi-structured interviews with foreigners living in Slovakia (N=50) and focus groups with respondents from the majority (9 focus groups).

FOREIGNERS AS CITY DWELLERS

Cities do not know their foreigners yet

A questionnaire survey between the municipalities of district towns and regional cities, which we carried out in spring 2020, showed that most of them have a basic overview of the numbers of foreigners living in them. This was reported by 61% of municipalities that participated in the survey. However, when we further investigated what data they had about foreigners, it turned out that they **did not have more detailed information about foreigners**. More than 60% stated they did not know the foreigners' countries of origin. More than half of municipalities did not know what type and purpose of residence the foreigners had, and the same applied to information about the age and gender composition of the population of foreigners in individual cities.

More accurate statistics were available mainly to municipalities of cities which are involved in various projects aimed at integrating foreigners or which cooperate with NGOs that collect this data.

Like municipalities, the representatives of higher territorial units did not have this data either and handled this topic significantly less than even the municipal authorities.

The most common source of statistics for municipalities is the Population Register and the Border and Alien Police Office (ÚHCP). Almost a third of municipalities said they use their own statistics (probably from population records). Labour offices, the Ministry of Education and the Statistical Office are currently only a marginal source of statistics for municipalities. A significant part of the data on foreigners is available on request. Municipalities are aware of the existence of these sources of data on foreigners, but as our research has shown, they usually do not use this data further.

Policies regarding foreigners should also be based on data

The provision of statistics on foreigners does not have a clearly formulated mechanism. Actors who work with their own statistics do not share them with the management of municipalities, and municipalities do not ask them to do so.

However, as a large proportion of municipalities stated in the questionnaire research, statistical information about foreigners would be useful to them. **Municipalities would welcome virtually any relevant data sources.** More than 90% of municipalities have reported that information on the total number of foreigners in the respective town or city would be useful to them. This finding shows the importance of establishing a certain mechanism for the provision of statistical data and also a methodology on how to analyze, evaluate and use this data in the work of municipalities. Municipalities would also need other data on foreigners, such as the type of residence granted, the purpose of residence, countries of origin, etc.

The reasons why municipalities need data on foreigners from their point of view relate mainly to **development of public policies as well as strategic and conceptual documents, which need to be based on data.** The second reason why individual actors would need statistics on foreigners is the services provided at the local level. If they are to be provided to foreigners, it is very important to know

the needs that foreigners have based on different characteristics and how municipalities can respond to them.

Integration concerns every aspect of life

Several respondents of individual interviews perceived integration as inclusion in society, **finding a sense of belonging** and learning how to function in new social frameworks. This means not only knowing the laws and formal rules, but also **internalizing how it works in Slovakia** – that is, the unwritten rules of everyday interactions.

Integration is also finding a sense of security, i.e. a sense of well-being that a person experiences when they feel accepted, when they have a circle of friends they can rely on, when they do not experience any significant stress and when they do not feel that something is threatening them. The interest of foreigners in the environment in which they live can also be considered a sign of integration.

Integration was also seen as a **two-way process** by the respondents. On the one hand, foreigners must accept the rules and customs that are established in Slovakia. On the other hand, they have the right to observe their customs and traditions. At the same time, the respondents expected that, in some areas, foreigners would adapt unreservedly, e.g. fully accept our rules and customs regarding behaviour toward women. For this reason, they considered the integration of foreigners from culturally distant countries to be problematic.

Prerequisites for successful integration

For successful integration, it is necessary to create the conditions and prerequisites – the prerequisites on the part of the receiving society and foreigners.

While foreigners are expected to make an effort to learn the Slovak language, the receiving society must ensure available possibilities of language education. **Education among the majority population** is also needed in order for the population to become more open to foreigners and to mitigate or eliminate the negative stereotypes associated with foreigners. The respondents also considered it necessary to create **opportunities for engagement**, especially at the local and neighbourhood level.

The key prerequisite for successful integration is the **availability and clarity of information for foreigners** because it is only in this way that they can know the environment in which they are to learn to live. In addition, the receiving society should **give all foreigners sufficient time** to orientate themselves, fit into society and acquire **enough skills and cultural capital** for living in a new country. The length of this period can be very individual.

Conceptual documents at the local level do not yet count on foreigners too much

Qualitative research at the level of regional cities has shown that municipalities hardly ever address the topic of migration and the integration of foreigners in their mainstream conceptual documents.

Some municipalities say they would be open to the topic if someone brought it to the working groups during the creation of these documents, but they do not expect this to happen.

In a questionnaire survey among municipalities, only **a few municipalities stated that foreigners are the target group of some strategic documents**. Most strategic documents regard foreigners as the general public. However, this raises the question of whether their specific needs and their situation resulting from their different residence statuses, cultural differences or language barriers are reflected in this form. Some district cities also stated that strategic documents (including social and economic development programmes, and, probably as the most important ones, community social services plans) do not concern foreigners at all.

In most municipalities, the topic of migration and integration did not appear in their strategic documents. Some municipalities that dealt with the topic of integration of foreigners did so **in the form of projects of limited duration** in cooperation with NGOs.

There are several reasons why municipalities do not yet reflect the topic of migration and integration in their conceptual documents. **Most municipalities would initiate the inclusion of the topic of integration only if a problem occurred** that needed to be addressed. There is also a widespread belief among municipalities that all residents should be **approached equally and that it should not be distinguished whether someone is a foreigner or a citizen of the Slovak Republic**. This belief may also result from a **lack of knowledge of the specificities of foreigners**, who, due to their residence status, language barrier and different cultural background, often find themselves in a disadvantaged position.

As for the conceptual document, which would specifically address the topic of the integration of foreigners, **only three of the municipalities that participated in the questionnaire survey stated that they had adopted a separate strategy for the integration of foreigners**. One of them adopted it on its own initiative, and in the other two, this strategy was adopted on the basis of cooperation with an NGO.

The majority of the respondents from among the municipalities either do not consider it necessary to adopt a separate integration strategy or they think the time is not yet ripe for that. Even in municipalities, where the topic of integration is starting to be addressed, they **prefer to incorporate it into more general strategic documents**. Another problem is the lack of institutionalization of the topic of integration of foreigners; municipalities do not have a dedicated job position that would promote and move this topic forward. There is also a lack of financial coverage.

Competences of municipalities in the social sphere and foreigners

In the social sphere, local government has several competences. Municipalities plan their social services through a community social services plan. Of the municipalities surveyed in the questionnaire survey, so far **none has named foreign residents as one of the target groups of their community social services plan**. Municipalities mostly perceive foreigners as part of the general public, or they have stated that the conceptual documents of the city do not concern them.

In the questionnaire survey, we examined whether different types of social services (if provided by the given municipality) are available to foreigners. Responses from municipalities showed that **if some kind of social service is available in the city, then it is significantly more often available to foreigners with permanent residence and less often to foreigners with temporary residence**. The most accessible were nursing service, one-off cash benefits and relief service.

As regards the availability of social services and their use by foreigners, the whole situation is complicated by the overall unavailability of social services and that they are undersized. **A large part of municipalities is also more inclined to the idea of providing social services only to foreigners with permanent residence** (although under the current legislation, a foreigner with temporary residence should also be able to apply for social service). Municipalities also often argue that they have not even received a request for the use of social services by foreigners, but this may be due to the unavailability of information for those foreigners who do not even know that they could apply for some form of assistance. Some local government officials also stated they lacked methodical guidance on how the topic of integrating foreigners should be grasped and incorporated into the community social services plan, for example.

According to several respondents, it would help in the exercise of social competences if **more information was available** to foreigners – not only translated into foreign languages, but also **simplified and presented in such a way that foreigners understand it**. Communication between municipalities and foreigners would be helped if there were **cultural mediators** working in municipalities who would facilitate communication on an individual level, but also toward communities of foreigners as such.

Integration at work

Municipalities have very limited competences when it comes to the integration of foreigners at work. As for the other actors involved in the integration process, it is **mainly employers that are depended on regarding whether a foreign employee has support and assistance in the integration process**. Employers often deal with the process of obtaining a work permit and a residence permit (in the case of foreigners from third countries), communicating with labour offices, often also dealing with housing and other aspects of their employees' lives that are not necessarily related to their involvement in the work process.

From the point of view of employers, **employing foreigners is relatively expensive and demanding** on processes, resources and time. The process of obtaining a work permit for a foreigner from a third country and subsequently a residence permit for the purpose of employment is very lengthy from their point of view.

From the point of view of labour offices, which have well-defined competences in this area, the whole process is often made more difficult by the fact that foreigners or their employers do not submit all the necessary documents, thus prolonging the whole process of obtaining a permit. However, the **availability of information is low from the point of view of employers** because the labour offices provide information only in the official language, which is Slovak. According to employers, the legislation governing this area is often unclear, so they do not know the exact conditions they have to

meet to employ foreigners. However, research has also shown that there may be significant regional differences in this area, as in some regions it is easier for employers to access information because there is good cooperation and exchange of information between the labour office, employers and the foreign police branch.

The most difficult situation is experienced by those foreigners (employees, sole traders) who are not covered by any employer that would help them in their communication with the authorities.

Housing and foreigners

Housing is an important aspect of the integration of foreigners and often a condition for granting residence, so we looked at the availability of some housing-related services in the questionnaire survey among municipalities.

The most accessible for foreigners were city rental apartments. 30.9% of the surveyed municipalities stated that they are available to permanent residents, while 21.8% of municipalities stated that they are available for both foreigners with a permanent residence and those with a temporary residence. Slightly less affordable were rental social apartments (29.1% for foreigners with permanent residence, 9.1% also for foreigners with temporary residence). Other housing-related services such as crisis housing or housing allowances were significantly less available. In part of the surveyed municipalities, these services in the area of housing were actually used by foreigners, especially the mentioned city rental apartments.

Housing of foreigners is a relatively new phenomenon for cities, whereas survey respondents mentioned several problems occurring in this area. ***Private owners of apartments and houses are often reluctant to rent them to foreigners***, which may be caused by prejudices against foreigners. However, a lack of information may also play a role, as many owners are concerned that foreigners want to declare permanent residence while residing in their property (as required by law). If foreigners do manage to find housing, they often pay a higher price than the domestic population.

A relatively new phenomenon is various **accommodation facilities and hostels for foreigners**. Some cities do not see this form of housing as a problem and have not experienced any problems with hostels that they would have to deal with. Elsewhere, however, the construction and existence of hostels for foreigners is now perceived as a topic that needs to be addressed at the city level.

Overall, the availability of city rental and city social apartments is **significantly limited by their low number and the rules** established by each city through generally binding regulations. In addition, foreigners applying for residence must provide proof that they have a place to live, so the possibility of applying for a city rental or social apartment is often unrealistic for them. Rather, in a crisis situation, they turn to NGOs, charities or their employer, or they look for housing on their own.

In order to improve housing and housing-related services, some respondents to our qualitative research (especially employers) expect a **stronger involvement of municipalities**, especially in cases where a larger investor comes to the city. Municipalities should **define their approach**, i.e. whether they will allow and support the housing of newly arriving employees (of whom not necessarily all of

them are foreigners) to be dispersed in different places in the city, or whether they are more inclined to create a residential district where these workers will live (employer). At the same time, if foreigners are expected to comply with the rules on the use of accommodation facilities, **these housing rules should be translated into other languages and made available to foreigners** so that they can familiarize themselves with them.

Schools and education play an important role in integration

The topic of education is very important for the situation of foreigners, especially for those who come to Slovakia with children. Compulsory school attendance applies to them as well as to Slovak children.

Municipalities participating in the questionnaire survey often did not provide an answer (on average one third of them) to the question of whether nurseries, kindergartens, leisure centres, teacher assistants or other education services are also available to foreigners. This points to the long-term problem of **municipalities not knowing exactly what competences they have in relation to the children of foreigners and to what extent they provide individual services to them.**

The most accessible for foreigners are kindergartens and leisure centres, which according to about 40% of municipalities are available to all foreigners (with both permanent and temporary residence). In some cities, they are only available for foreigners with permanent residence (kindergartens – 20%, leisure centres – 14.5%). Nurseries and teaching assistants were slightly less available, although it should be noted that children are entitled to a teaching assistant if they are diagnosed with a disorder and not because they do not speak the language or come from another country.

According to the respondents, the situation of children of foreigners in schools is complicated for several reasons. The problem is the language barrier that many foreign children experience and the limited possibilities for the school to help them overcome this barrier and learn a new language. In addition, various cultural and social specificities can make it hard for the children to adapt to in school and can later lead to poorer educational outcomes. There is also a problem with communication between the school and the family. Better methodological support would be needed for schools that educate foreign children, the exchange of experience between schools and better communication and exchange of information between the municipality, school and other actors.

Integration services for foreigners are rare

In order to integrate successfully, foreigners need other specific services to facilitate this process, especially in the beginning. These services should help to make their life in Slovakia stable and more predictable. Such services may include the provision of translations and interpretations, accompaniment when visiting the authorities, social and legal counselling, etc.

Some municipalities gradually begin to reflect this situation. Of the municipalities involved in the questionnaire survey, **14.5% stated they already provide some kind of service specifically targeted at foreigners.** In particular, they provided social counselling (5 municipalities), Slovak language classes (4), assistance with translation and interpretation (3), legal advice (2) or some other services (1).

In some of the cities approached, it is rather **NGOs that are active in this area**; for example, they carry out cultural and educational activities, work with children, deal with human rights, provide translations and interpreting, carry out legal and social counselling, provide Slovak language classes, do social work fieldwork, etc.

Overall, however, specific services aimed at helping foreigners are rather inaccessible. In many cities, they are not provided by the municipality or any NGO. Other actors, such as the state administration, have too narrowly defined competences and do not provide such services either.

The basis of integration is the good availability of various information for foreigners

One of the important prerequisites for integration is the availability of different information for foreigners. Overall, the **availability of information about the city, various official information as well as information about cultural and sporting events in a language other than Slovak is low**. Some municipalities provide information in another language on their websites (10 municipalities out of 55 surveyed) or through an information centre (11 municipalities out of 55). Even more rarely, information in a foreign language appears in city newspapers as well as on social networks, information boards and bulletin boards.

Even if information was available in another language, it was most often only in English; other languages such as Russian, Serbian, German or Polish appeared rarely. However, even so, it was just basic information about the city. **There is no information specifically for foreigners in different life situations**: social services, instructions and procedures, where and what to do, what conditions to meet and where to turn for help.

At authorities and institutions (labour offices, foreign police, first contact points, social departments in cities, doctors), which are also visited by foreigners, information and materials in other languages are also absent, and the language skills of their employees are insufficient. Foreigners often must come with a companion, or they are dependent on the willingness and openness of the office worker they encounter.

Efforts to improve the availability of information for foreigners are mainly being made in cities and self-governing regions, where municipalities are involved in various projects, or cooperate with NGOs dealing with the integration of foreigners. As suitable channels of communication with foreigners, respondents primarily identified schools, foreign police and employers.

Cultural and civic participation improves the lives of everyone, including foreigners

The involvement of foreigners in cultural and civic activities is currently very insufficient. The same is true of municipalities' knowledge of the existence of cultural, civil society or other NGOs focusing on foreigners in their city. Only 6 out of 55 (approx. 10%) municipalities reported that there is an NGO targeting foreigners in their city. The municipality only established cooperation with that NGO in a few cases.

Interviews with those working toward the integration of foreigners at the local level showed that there are several types of organizations that focus their activities (also) on foreigners.

Foreigner associations and associations of national minorities usually unite groups that belong to national minorities in Slovakia. These are mainly various Polish, Czech-Slovak or Ukrainian associations that are mainly devoted to cultural activities and meetings of people from these communities. Foreigner associations that include migrants (such as Serbian or Ukrainian) also try to help newly arrived foreigners, e.g. by helping them deal with authorities and by trying to involve them in the community. These associations usually have established cooperation with the municipality.

Organizations that specifically engage with foreigners bring the topic of integration to the attention of the public and municipalities and cooperate with them in various activities. Some organizations are engaged in social work fieldwork, defence of the rights of foreigners or educational activities. They often substitute the role of other institutions and help foreigners to orientate themselves regarding the requirements of authorities, help them obtain documents from the authorities or provide various other activities (such as tutoring children, carrying out cultural activities, etc.).

General NGOs without the direct targeting of foreigners operate in areas such as organizing cultural activities, leisure activities for children, providing various forms of counselling or social services. Various charities (such as Catholic Church charities or the Red Cross) are also active in cities. However, the activities of these organizations assisted foreigners only very marginally, but they saw room for establishing cooperation on this topic with municipalities or other actors.

The political participation of foreigners is minimal, although it could bring many positives

Political participation of foreigners at the local level means not only the possibility to vote and be elected to self-government bodies, but also the possibility to participate in the administration of the local community and to influence events in the city or region.

In the questionnaire survey, 27 out of 55 municipalities stated that foreigners voted in city council elections, 10 stated foreigners did not vote and the remaining municipalities did not respond. Of the surveyed cities, only two reported that a foreigner had run for city council in recent years (in one case successfully). A foreigner ran for the position of mayor in only one city, but they were not elected.

As the interviews showed, integration actors at the local level did not have much awareness of the possibilities of the political participation of foreigners. However, a large part of them said that **they see a clear contribution in the political participation of foreigners, which would consist mainly in new proposals or ideas for institutions or for the city**. The participation of foreigners could also help break down stereotypes and bring a new perspective on the needs of foreigners living in the city.

Undefined role of municipalities in the integration of foreigners

The municipalities involved in qualitative research interviews could not fully name their role in the integration of foreigners. There may be several reasons for this. Municipalities have little information about foreigners living in their area and they are not active enough to obtain, process or evaluate this information. At the same time, they do not even know what the needs are of foreigners who come to their cities or who already lives there. Likewise, they often do not have sufficient knowledge of migration and integration, and they do not know their competences in relation to foreigners.

Moreover, municipalities often perceived the integration of foreigners as an extra agenda, which, if they were to tackle it at all, they should do so within some projects and not within the normal exercise of their competences. Some respondents from among the municipalities perceived this topic as part of the social affairs agenda. Therefore, if some municipalities begin to tackle this issue, they usually place it organizationally under the section/department of social affairs. Recently, the shift in the topic of the integration of foreigners has been slowed by the COVID-19 pandemic, as municipalities had to devote a large part of their personal and financial capacity to cope with the situation.

Several respondents from among the municipalities (local or regional) perceived their role in integration as supportive, with integration measures being implemented by NGOs or other actors.

What, therefore, can municipalities do to integrate foreigners?

The actors addressed named several tasks that could be performed by municipalities in relation to the integration of foreigners.

On the one hand, municipalities should **map the needs of foreigners** living in their area because they can be in very diverse situations and their needs can also be very different.

Municipalities could play an important role **in improving the awareness of foreigners and providing advice**. The **establishment of a cultural mediator** would be of great benefit in providing advice. This would help the municipality overcome the language barriers, but also the cultural differences that may arise in when contact with foreigners. Following the mapping of needs, the municipality could **provide individualized advice** at least in the areas related to it.

The municipality exercises many competences **in the field of education**. Self-governing regions could, for example, support language learning through language schools, which they can set up. City municipalities could at least play a supporting role in the field of language education, for example by providing premises for Slovak language courses for foreigners. Overall, municipalities could support the teaching of Slovak as a foreign language for children from other countries in schools that they set up.

A **systemic framing of the topic of integration by municipalities** in the form of its good strategic planning could also contribute to creating a positive climate in cities. This would create good conditions for the performance of daily work with foreign clients (e.g. by social workers) so that they can be treated openly and without prejudice (by local government representatives).

Other actors also have a role and importance in the process of integrating foreigners

The respondents to the qualitative interviews stated that the **state should play a more active role in the topic of integration**. It has a lot of relevant information and data at its disposal. It should set system conditions for specific integration activities, such as Slovak language courses or socio-cultural orientation courses.

NGOs are already the most active player in the integration of foreigners. In the future, they also see their role in creating a **communication bridge between the city and the public**.

Employers are currently engaged in many activities to help integrate their employees from other countries. **However, not all employers provide foreigners with an equally wide range of support and assistance**, so the integration of foreigners cannot only be based on employers; other actors should also participate.

Schools can work more in the future with the fact that it is **in their environment that the domestic population and foreigners come into contact**. Schools can also serve as a source of information for foreigners about the various aspects of life in a new country.

Municipal police saw their role mainly in **self-education and preparation for intercultural clashes**, for example through the exchange of experience with the police from other countries.

Other state institutions, such as labour offices and foreign police, could in particular **participate in communication and the exchange of information** between different actors. Furthermore, they could **improve the services they provide**, e.g. by improving the provision of information to foreigners. However, they stated that they already have difficulty securing their normal agenda because of insufficient capacity (especially personnel).

Integration of foreigners cannot work without cooperation

District cities stated in our questionnaire survey that they work **most often with schools (29.1%) and labour offices (25.5%)** to integrate foreigners. In addition, they cooperate with NGOs (16.4%) and employers (9.1%), and less often with language schools and job agencies. At the same time, however, 28% of the surveyed district cities said they did not engage in the inclusion of foreigners at all.

Furthermore, interviews with integration actors at the local level have shown that **cooperation between different actors in the field of integration is the exception rather than the rule in Slovakia**. Interviews with various actors at the local level have shown that **institutions and organizations are more likely to cooperate within their sectors**, but cooperation across sectors is rather exceptional.

The **mutual cooperation of non-governmental organizations** dealing with the topic of migration or directly providing integration services to foreigners can be considered relatively developed. **Employers usually deal with the integration of their foreign employees rather on their own**. Some employers

communicate with each other and share information, e.g. about changes in the legislation concerning the employment of foreigners. Cooperation between the municipality and employers in the field of integration of foreigners was not present in any regional city. At the local level, there are also examples of cooperation between different actors (educational institutions communicate with each other; municipalities cooperate with NGOs), but it is an ad hoc cooperation that is not officially established and institutionalized.

Cities should communicate the topic of migration and integration

Cities play an important role in establishing good relations between residents at the local level. Appropriate communication can help people from other countries to be seen as full members of the local community.

However, cities communicate on migration and integration very little, sporadically and rather occasionally. Only 11 (20%) of the district cities participating in the questionnaire survey reported that they had at some point reported on foreigners living in their city through the city media (newspapers, TV, radio). Six of these cities reported that they had published an interview with a foreigner, five cities had published an article about the activities of foreigners and foreigners had been mentioned in regular reports in eight cities.

Integration actors at the local level consider the topic of migration and the integration of foreigners to be quite sensitive, as it can also provoke many negative reactions. Therefore, the **focus should be on presenting positive examples and facts in order to prevent disinformation.** Some actors stated that consideration should be given to how to ensure a balanced communication on this topic, whether to choose proactive or reactive communication and whether the communication should be led by the municipality or someone else.

The future will bring new challenges that will have to be dealt with

Integration actors at the local level fully agree that in the future the **number of foreigners moving to Slovakia will increase.** Cohabitation in the future can be greatly affected by how the rules will be set up and whether foreigners will be allowed to become a full part of society. For this to happen, it will be necessary, among other things, to **work with public opinion toward greater openness to and acceptance of foreigners.**

Furthermore, **municipalities would need to be more proactive on this issue** and to see the support of integration as a prevention of potential conflicts in the future. They could start by mapping the situation and needs of foreigners living on their territory. Based on a good knowledge of the situation, they can then plan possible interventions and activities.

More systemic measures would also be needed, such as setting up the process of permitting residences, methodological guidance on the integration of foreigners, setting up and introducing a cultural mediator institute.

Last but not least, **access to different types of information for foreigners should be improved** in the future. It is also necessary to **improve the offer of Slovak language learning opportunities** for different categories of foreigners.

WE DON'T WANT STRANGERS; WE WILL PROTECT OUR OWN – ATTITUDES OF THE MAJORITY POPULATION TOWARD MIGRATION AND FOREIGNERS

CULTURAL DIVERSITY

Slovakia is still perceived as a country of Slovaks. Many do not feel comfortable among people who are too different

The Slovak public has quite reserved attitudes toward cultural diversity. Of the nine pairs of dichotomous statements that we used in the quantitative part of the research, this attitude is mainly fed by the inclination to the opinion that “Slovakia is a country of Slovaks and so it should remain”. This statement was preferred by a little more than 70% of the respondents. At the same time, people do not seek out contacts and interactions with foreigners too much, and a large proportion of the respondents prefer people of the same cultural or ethnic origin in their immediate surroundings. 66.8% of the respondents chose the statement “I prefer to have fun with people who are not very different from me”. The third statement that indicates a stronger inclination toward cultural homogeneity is “I feel good among Slovaks; other nationalities do not suit me”. This statement was chosen by 59% of the respondents.

In the case of statements that measured a more general view of cultural diversity, respondents turned out to be more tolerant of difference; for example, they were more inclined to say “In order to coexist with other nationalities, it is necessary to learn as much as possible about them” (81.7% of the respondents) as well as to say “It does not matter what culture people come from, different cultures can live together if they want” (63.6%). These statements regarded more general views on cultural diversity. However, when a pair of statements were set in a more specific context (presence of cultural difference in Slovakia, adaptation of culturally different people to life in Slovakia), or when the statements talked about possible interactions with culturally different people, the respondents were more likely to prefer cultural homogeneity to cultural diversity.

Opinions on cultural diversity are shaped by mediated information rather than by people's own experience

The fact that the public has a rather reserved attitude toward cultural diversity is influenced by a number of facts. Only a part of the population comes into contact with foreigners regularly, has positive experience with them or has their own migration experience with living abroad. All of these facts can greatly shape the perception of whether cultural diversity is a normal part of life and an opportunity for development and new knowledge, or whether it is perceived as something unusual, undesirable or even threatening. People's opinions are often shaped by mediated experiences, political discourse and information from the media and other information sources. There are significant differences in perceptions of cultural diversity among different categories of people in the population, with the most pronounced differences in opinions being shown between people of different education, age and preferred values (liberals/conservatives). More inclined to cultural

diversity are younger people, those with higher education, especially university education and people who prefer liberal values.

Slovak culture is perceived as immutable and there is still a fear that foreigners can “take it away” from us

Slovak culture is perceived quite statically as a phenomenon that does not change. According to most people, culture must be preserved in its original form, essentially preserved. More than 56% of people think that foreigners must not change our culture because it is immutable. The perception of migration as a potential enrichment of culture can be seen especially in people who maintain at least some contacts with foreigners or have some kind of relationship with them.

For example, 42% of people who have foreigners among their relatives think that foreigners are an enrichment for the country (for those who do not have foreigners among their relatives, this was only 11%). It was similar for those who have foreigners among friends (39%) or neighbours (37%).

Our qualitative research has shown that people in Slovakia perceive several aspects of potential enrichment of Slovak culture through foreign migration. Foreigners can bring a new view of our country, new ideas, a kind of “new wind” into stagnant waters. Similarly, other cultures are enriched by Slovaks who migrate abroad. Most often, however, cultural enrichment is perceived through cuisine, which for people is the most visible element that foreigners bring here. On the other hand, there is a fear that foreigners will interfere with Slovak traditions, culture and customs and will try to change them. Many people are afraid that if we allow foreigners to maintain their identities, cultures and customs, we will lose ours. The essentialist perception of culture is thus manifested in the fact that cultures do not complement each other, and that one must always conquer the other.

PERCEPTION OF THE ISSUE OF MIGRATION AND OWN MIGRATION EXPERIENCE

Interactions with foreigners do not increase much despite the increasing number of foreigners in Slovakia

The number of foreigners in Slovakia is constantly increasing and has more than doubled compared to 2010. However, this fact was only slightly reflected in the increase in contacts, interactions and experiences with foreigners. Almost a third of the respondents (30.7%) said they do not currently come into contact with foreigners at all. Almost half of the respondents (48.4%) have only occasional contact with foreigners, and only about a fifth (20.8%) come into contact with foreigners regularly. When we compared the data with the findings of 2009, a certain increase in contacts with foreigners could be observed in the work area and slightly more respondents also come into contact with foreigners in their neighbourhood.

Although it turns out across various topics in our research that regular contact with foreigners in particular has an impact on more tolerant public opinions and attitudes toward foreigners and foreign migration, personal experience with foreigners, due to the low frequency of contacts and deeper personal relationships, is currently not the dominant factor shaping public opinions.

More than a third of people think foreigners are preferred in Slovakia

Foreigners have a specific status in society due to their residence status, but also to linguistic and cultural specificities. The respondents reflected this specific status, and many also mentioned specific examples where foreigners were in an unequal position compared to the domestic population.

Nevertheless, more than a third of the respondents (34.6%) said that foreigners were preferred in Slovakia, and this perception mainly concerns the work area and the employment of foreigners. Intensive labour migration in recent years and the conditions and practice of employing foreigners might have significantly influenced public opinions in this area, as in 2009 significantly fewer respondents (12.1%) thought that foreigners were preferred in our country.

Rather few people have their own experience of migration, but most of them see it as enriching

Personal experience of living abroad (more than 3 months) was reported by 17% of the respondents. Compared to 2009, the proportion of respondents who have such a personal migration experience increased slightly (from 14.1% of the research sample). Of those who had lived abroad for at least three months, a significant majority (72.1%) stated the experience was positive for them. At the same time, these people were significantly more likely to report a prevalence of positive experiences with foreigners. Personal migration experience can significantly shape openness to cultural diversity, willingness to accept cultural diversity in one's immediate or wider environment as well as the attitudes toward foreigners and migration.

However, given only a slight increase in the part of the population that has such personal experience, we can say that public opinion is not predominantly shaped by personal migration experience but rather by other factors. They are more likely to be influenced by information from the media, political discourse, contacts and interactions with foreigners, mediated experience with migration, etc.

People do not know much about foreigners, yet they judge them

People in Slovakia have rather distorted ideas about foreigners in Slovakia. About half of them know how many foreigners live in Slovakia. Those who overestimate the number of foreigners living here think that foreigners are a threat to Slovakia and that migration worsens the security and economic situation in the country.

This is most evident in the issue of refugees. Only 10% of the respondents to the survey knew how many asylums Slovakia had granted. Most people overestimate this number. These people think that we should guard our borders much more strictly or admit only foreigners who are culturally closer to us. Overall, as many as 85% of people think that we should not accept more refugees than we have so far.

ATTITUDES TOWARD FOREIGNERS

We perceive positively especially those foreigners who are highly qualified and are from culturally close countries

Migration takes different forms, and foreigners living in Slovakia also differ in what countries they come from and for what purpose they come to Slovakia. This evokes very different emotions in people. More than two-thirds of people think that we should only support the immigration of people who are culturally close to us and who are highly qualified. This has also been reflected in the fact that positive emotions are associated mainly with foreigners who are, for example, foreign students or doctors, or employees from other EU countries.

The prevailing securitization political discourse of recent years has been reflected in the fact that foreigners who come as refugees as well as Muslim families are perceived very negatively – about two-thirds of people associate negative emotions with these categories.

Openness to diversity and own experience with foreigners are reflected in more positive emotions toward them

When people are open to cultural diversity, maintain relationships with foreigners or at least come into regular contact with them, they also associated significantly more positive emotions with various types of foreigners. Ethnocentrically attuned people and those who feel good only among Slovaks perceive foreigners significantly worse and consider them a threat.

Many, especially younger people who have their own migration experience, are already beginning to see migration as a natural process and reflect it in all its complexity. If people know specific foreigners as their colleagues, neighbours or friends, they usually rate them much more positively based on their own experience. When making statements about whole groups of people, they tend to generalize and perceive these groups rather negatively.

Social distancing toward foreigners has deteriorated in recent years

Over the past ten years, social distancing from foreigners has increased significantly. We are less and less willing to accept them in our private or public space. While in 2009 only 17% of people would mind foreigners living in their town or village, in 2020, it was almost 40%. The rejection of foreigners as part of the family increased by 10 percentage points from 30% to 40%. At the same time, in 2020, more than half of people would be bothered if foreigners held political positions in the country.

Just as it is with attitudes, when it comes to social distancing, the more regular contact people have with foreigners, the less they mind them. For example, half of those who have no contact with foreigners would be bothered if they became members of their family. From those who have regular contact with foreigners, only less than a third would mind.

Migration is especially associated with concerns about security deterioration and an increase in crime

Migration and the presence of foreigners are mainly associated with a sense of threat, which is probably the result of the strong securitization rhetoric of Slovak politicians. According to more than two-thirds (64.8%) people, the presence of foreigners worsens crime in Slovakia and according to 62% of people also security. These feelings are associated with a strong ethnocentric feeling. Those who consider Slovakia only a country of Slovaks and feel good only among people who do not differ in any way perceive migration as a security threat and require stricter border guarding or support discriminatory practices against foreigners.

However, in the qualitative part of the research, foreigners were also perceived as victims of crime in terms of security. The respondents pointed to the strong xenophobic and hostile attitude of the Slovak population toward foreigners, arguing that verbal or physical attacks on foreigners are a topic that should be given adequate attention.

RELIGION

Different denominations are not perceived as equal

People in Slovakia do not feel that all faiths are equal. Only about a fifth of people think that foreigners should be able to practise their faith (if it is not the Christian faith), e.g. in their own prayer rooms.

Others either argued that other religions should not be allowed in Slovakia at all (28%) or they should only be practised in private (53.9%). A stricter attitude toward the practice of religion is also related to opinions on the state's approach to migration. People who reject equality in the freedom to practise religion think significantly more often that the state should more strictly guard the borders and only let people into Slovakia who are culturally close to us.

Equality of conditions for the practice of faith is also not very supported in Slovakia. Only 13% of people think that foreigners should have the same conditions for practising their faith. More than half agree that these conditions should be stricter (51%) and 34% think that the conditions themselves should not be stricter, but their compliance should be more strictly controlled.

Islam is seen as a potentially dangerous religion

In Slovakia, different religions are often automatically associated with Islam, which was reflected mainly in the qualitative research, where any question about different religions automatically led to a discussion about Islam.

Islam is perceived very negatively, as has been shown on other questions, such as feelings associated with the term "Muslim family", where almost 70% said they had a negative feeling associated with the term.

Less than a tenth of people think that Islam is a religion like any other and that we should respect it.

Almost half (43.4%) of people think that Islam is dangerous for us and should not be allowed in Slovakia. The concerns associated with Islam are mainly related to the potential increase in radicalization and terrorism (due to high-profile cases of terrorist attacks abroad and lack of information about Islam as a religion). At the same time, there is a concern about the loss of the “Christian” character and the “atmosphere” of the country.

MIGRATION IN THE CONTEXT OF THE LABOUR MARKET AND DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGE

Migration is commonly seen in expert debates as one of the solutions to the demographic crisis. However, the public in Slovakia is heavily reserved toward this approach and is mostly inclined to the government adopting policies to support the birth rate (86.1%). The respondents considered the brain drain to be a more serious problem than the ageing population, and they perceived it literally as a forced departure because Slovakia is unable to provide people with decent living conditions. They also considered this to be the main reason why more and more foreigners are coming to Slovakia and did not perceive it positively.

Slovaks should be preferred in the labour market

The perception of migration in the context of the Slovak labour market has been marked by considerable inconsistency. On the one hand, the public is aware that foreigners come mainly to vacant jobs, thereby helping the economy. On the other hand, half of the respondents to the quantitative research felt that the situation on the labour market was very bad and that Slovaks should be prioritized. This perception was more common in people with primary and secondary education without an upper secondary school examination, who may perceive foreigners coming to low-skilled positions as competitors. It also turned out that the working respondents (because they apparently did not have to worry about their position), those who had at least occasional contact with foreigners, and those who had their own migration experience (because they themselves had been working migrants abroad), were also more open to employing foreigners.

Labour migrants only as temporary and cheap labour

Foreigners in the labour market were mainly perceived as a temporary cheap labour force. The respondents were mainly aware of workers from Ukraine, Serbia or Romania who go to Slovakia to work in low-skilled positions and leave. They viewed this positively and expressed the belief that the government should only allow foreigners to be admitted at a time of economic growth, when they can be useful to us by filling gaps in the labour market. However, when it came to foreigners occupying blue collar positions, the respondents showed some contradiction – on the one hand, they considered it good that foreigners filled vacant jobs, but on the other hand, they felt that they were taking Slovaks’ jobs (48.1% of the quantitative research respondents agreed).

Although the respondents were aware of the existence of scarce professions that employers were no longer able to fill (and these are mostly low-skilled positions), they would prefer to recruit mainly high-skilled foreigners (65% of the respondents agreed). The respondents in focus groups also reported that

the state could also pro-actively attract foreigners to scarce professions. Therefore, the inconsistency in the perception of this topic is considerable.

The presence of foreigners in the labour market was also associated with several beliefs – e.g. that foreigners pushed wages down (62.8% of the quantitative research respondents agreed). Within focus groups, we also noted opinions based on misleads – e.g. that foreigners are favoured in the labour market because employers do not have to pay social security contributions for them. In this area, too, it has been shown that the more contact respondents had with foreigners, the less negatively they perceived the effects of their employment in Slovakia.

The potential contribution of migration to economic development is not being reflected by people

Thus, the perception of foreigners in the labour market was rather negative, as we have stated in the previous paragraphs. Only 28.5% of the respondents to the quantitative research agreed that foreigners also help create jobs. Only 14% of the respondents agreed with the statement that the presence of foreigners improves the economic situation in Slovakia, and almost half thought that the economic situation did not change due to migration. However, the focus groups respondents felt that the presence of foreigners rather improves the overall economic situation because the openness of the economy promotes economic growth and brings new stimuli and ideas from abroad. However, we have seen some reservedness in relation to cultural diversity in the workplace that migration inevitably brings and that needs to be dealt with.

HOW SHOULD THE STATE APPROACH MIGRATION?

We should guard our borders more closely

In several places in this research report, we point out the impact of securitization political discourse about migration on the real attitudes of the population. This has also been demonstrated by the perception of migration policy measures. As many as 83.3% of the respondents to the quantitative research agreed that we should guard our borders more strictly. Less strict in this attitude were those who have regular contact with foreigners, but even in this category, the consent to this statement was very high (69.7%).

In the focus groups, it subsequently became clear that the borders needed to be guarded more strictly especially in order to prevent more refugees from coming here. 85.4% of the respondents would disagree with accepting more refugees. The topic of accepting refugees has also been marked by several myths – e.g. that they receive generous financial support in Slovakia, or that they are mainly young men in designer clothes who are in fact economic migrants. However, the focus group respondents would have no problem accepting families on the run.

According to most people, the state should only accept qualified foreigners from culturally close countries

The public would be in favour of the state allowing the arrival of only (or mainly) selected categories of foreigners. One of them was highly qualified foreigners (65% agreed). Here, too, it has been shown that people with regular contact with foreigners were less sceptical about migration and less likely to agree to accept only highly qualified foreigners. At the same time, respondents with migration experience were significantly more likely to refuse to accept only highly qualified foreigners. This is probably due to the fact that many Slovak citizens who have left or are leaving Slovakia to work abroad do not have high qualifications or have not held jobs abroad that would require high qualifications.

The Slovak public would also support limiting the arrival of foreigners from poorer countries (73.1% agreed), while people coming into contact with foreigners and people with migration experience were again less strict on this issue. The focus groups confirmed these findings – the respondents in them agreed that Slovakia should mainly accept foreigners with high qualifications (doctors, teachers, scientists, medical staff) and socially secured ones. The criterion should be the extent to which the foreigner can be of economic benefit to the state.

The majority of the respondents would also agree to the state supporting the immigration of foreigners who are culturally close to us (65.6%). The focus groups showed that, by this, the respondents meant especially foreigners from the EU, whom they perceived as “adaptable”, rather than foreigners from African and Muslim countries, whom they perceived as “incompatible” with our culture.

INTEGRATION OF FOREIGNERS

Foreigners should mainly learn Slovak and know Slovak culture and history

When determining what the public expects from foreigners in relation to their integration, it turned out that most people (55.2%) expect foreigners to adapt as much as possible to the customs in Slovakia, and only 6.3% think that foreigners should be able to live according to their customs.

In order to be accepted by Slovak society, people first of all expect foreigners to learn Slovak well (and use Slovak, e.g. also in communication with their children), work in Slovakia and know Slovak culture and history. According to the respondents, the needs of foreigners should not be superior to those of the domestic population. It is important that foreigners respect our customs, and at the same time they should not impose their religion, customs and traditions on us.

Almost half of the respondents (48.5%) stated that Slovakia creates enough opportunities for integration, but foreigners do not try to adapt. At the same time, the respondents often did not know what conditions and measures Slovakia was actually taking to integrate foreigners. The real state of integration in Slovakia was reflected the most in the statement that Slovakia does not create suitable conditions for foreigners, although they try to adapt and integrate. However, the fewest respondents (8.5%) agreed with this statement.

The public is inconsistent in supporting integration measures; people support integration but also discriminatory measures

One of the objectives of this research was to identify the population's potential support for various integration measures. This also showed the conflicting perception of the public. On the one hand, they would explicitly support integration measures – support for learning Slovak in the form of free courses (61.3%), support for the integration of children of foreigners in education (62%) and state support for cultural activities of foreigners (43%). On the other hand, they also expressed strong support for measures that are restrictive or even discriminatory – restrictions on the right to vote of foreigners (61.6%), stricter conditions for obtaining social assistance for foreigners (77.8%), tighter control over the business of foreigners (68.3%), etc.

The attitude toward those who should be responsible for integration was also unclear – 45.2% of the respondents rather agreed or completely agreed with the thesis that the state should not help foreigners with integration, as it should be their own responsibility. However, a similar proportion of the respondents rather agreed or completely disagreed with this – 49.3%. In focus groups, however, respondents were more inclined to believe that the state should play a more active role in integration, or should support other actors, such as employers. Within focus groups, respondents expressed the greatest support for Slovak language courses, assistance with orientation and measures to integrate foreign children in education. They would also support brochures and assistance centres for foreigners so that they can get to know the customs and unwritten rules in Slovakia and find out who to turn to when dealing with specific issues.

FUTURE EXPECTATIONS

In the last part of our research, we were interested in how the respondents perceived future developments regarding migration, as it can be assumed that the number of foreigners will continue to increase. The largest share of the respondents (28%) think that the number of foreigners will slowly increase in the future. On the contrary, a quarter of people think that the number of foreigners in Slovakia will not increase and hope that the government will do everything possible to ensure that the number of foreigners in Slovakia does not increase.

As the most significant social phenomena and situations that will influence the increase in migration, the respondents in the quantitative part mentioned wars, crisis situations in the world and climate change. These results can be interpreted as still a large proportion of the population considering migration in terms of refugees. However, in the qualitative part, respondents focused more on the work aspect of migration, stating that foreigners will come mainly for job opportunities.

FOREIGNERS IN SLOVAKIA – SEARCH FOR A NEW HOME

Experience of foreigners with integration in Slovakia

SLOVAKIA FROM THE POINT OF VIEW OF FOREIGNERS – OPENNESS, ACCEPTANCE, RELATIONS

Foreigners see Slovakia as a small and peaceful country. Many of them came from countries with high populations and high population densities, where life goes by extremely fast. In Slovakia, they have found peace that suits them and where they feel they can live a less stressful life. This is also associated with the sense of security that many of them feel in Slovakia, especially compared to the countries from which they came.

Slovakia is also perceived as a dynamically developing country that has great potential for further development and good quality of life for its inhabitants. On the other hand, it is still a relatively conservative country, where people try to maintain the status quo and not open themselves up too much to new things, especially cultural diversity.

Slovakia is more economically prepared than psychologically prepared for migration. However, the situation is gradually changing for the better.

Almost 60% of foreigners think that Slovakia is not yet sufficiently prepared for the cultural diversity that migration brings. According to them, Slovakia is prepared for migration economically rather than psychologically. The population also lacks the respect that would allow the country to become more open to diversity. However, this situation is gradually changing and, especially in larger cities, our respondents are faced with increasing openness.

Friendliness toward foreigners is shown especially by more liberal people, who generally have a positive view of any changes in society. These people also travel abroad more often. They are often younger people, living in larger cities and working for international corporations that employ a lot of foreigners. However, most foreigners stated in interviews that it is impossible to find any clearly specified group of people that would be more open to foreigners. It depends mainly on what experience people have with foreigners, how much contact they have with them and whether they live or work in a more multicultural environment.

Foreigners feel accepted especially in their immediate surroundings – among neighbours, friends or co-workers

If foreigners have established relationships with Slovaks, whether at work, in the neighbourhood or in the community, they feel greatly accepted. They positively evaluate their relationships with co-workers, with whom they are often friends. In friendly relations, they especially appreciate the fact that Slovaks sometimes invite them to their homes, spend holidays with them, etc. However, there is also the opinion that Slovakia is a country that is very family oriented. If someone who is not born here and does not have a family here, and they fail to establish such relationships in order to be accepted “into the family”, they can feel very lonely, especially during the holidays.

On the other hand, almost half of people at least sometimes feel like an outsider in Slovakia. About a third experience this feeling occasionally, another 14% always or very often. The fact that a person did not grow up in a given country and does not know all the rules can lead to them feeling as if they are constantly catching up. It takes them longer to orientate themselves in certain situations. Some say they don't understand the local humour, innuendos or ordinary interactions, and then they feel like outsiders. It takes them longer to adapt to new rules, customs and traditions.

For acceptance among the population of Slovakia, language is particularly crucial

It turns out that language, i.e. the Slovak language, is a very important factor that has a strong influence on how foreigners in Slovakia are accepted by other people. Those who quickly learn Slovak, whether because they come from linguistically close countries (such as Ukraine) or they had good conditions and opportunities to learn the language, are accepted much better than those who do not speak the language. If a person does not speak the language, they will usually remain isolated because they can form no social ties, or they are dependent only on communication in their own community.

Language also has the function of symbolic acceptance. It is not necessarily just an important condition for communication. According to many foreigners in our research, the very effort and willingness to speak Slovak (albeit imperfectly and with errors) causes Slovaks to accept foreigners much better.

Slovaks are introverted and, therefore, getting to know them requires extra effort

Through establishing relationships, foreigners become members of society and can acquire a sense of acceptance, and they create a sense of home and belonging.

Many foreigners whom we interviewed considered Slovakia to be a country where it is quite difficult to make closer friendships. It is easier for extroverted foreigners, for whom it is easier to overcome this cultural setting. However, they also saw this aspect of integration as a kind of barrier.

Several respondents stated that they would like more opportunities to spend time with Slovaks, but they lacked possibilities to get to know them. A barrier for many is also the lack of Slovak language skills, but also, for example, older age.

In neighbourhoods and workplaces, foreigners often operate in a predominantly Slovak environment. However, in the case of closer relationships, such as friendships or family relationships, there are increasingly more answers according to which foreigners establish such relationships either mostly or exclusively with people from other countries. This may be related to the relatively significant closeness of the population in Slovakia.

Foreigners socialize with Slovaks especially in environments where they do not form very close relationships. You could say that rather than seeking out the company of foreigners, Slovaks meet them in the environment in which they live and work (workplace, neighbourhood). Foreigners more often build close relationships with other foreigners. Whom foreigners meet and spend time with seems to depend on the age, but also on the purpose and circumstances in which they came to Slovakia.

Feelings of incredulity prevail toward foreigners, rather than open expressions of hostility

Many foreigners perceive Slovakia as a safe country, and none of the respondents in the qualitative research indicated that they encountered a physical attack on their person. Verbal or other attacks were not very common either. Nevertheless, strangers do encounter, at least occasionally, certain manifestations that they perceive as negative toward themselves.

Overall, there is a feeling that Slovaks are initially distrustful and suspicious of foreigners. Negative manifestations tend to take the form of grumpiness and unpleasant remarks or inadequate questions posed to foreigners. Most often, negative manifestations are reflected in the **expression of various stereotypes** related to their ethnicity or the country from which they come.

People with a different skin colour are met with suspicion and not very friendly behaviour more often than others. Most often, they attract attention on the street, people look at them for a longer time and turn behind them.

Even if strangers do not have their own negative experiences because of their skin colour, they know many stories of their acquaintances or friends who are foreigners too and who have such experiences. It often happens to them that they are not allowed into a nightclub or face unpleasant comments about them by taxi drivers.

Some foreigners also perceive as negative manifestations a certain impatience and reluctance to help if they have a problem. This is especially true of **language**. If foreigners do not speak Slovak, they encounter much more unpleasant (rather reserved) behaviour from Slovaks who make no effort to make themselves understood. They tend to avoid these situations, leave or go silent. This applies in particular to institutions or also to service workers (supermarket, restaurant, hotel, etc.). There is a lack of openness and the effort to do more.

Self-identity and adherence to their traditions is important for foreigners, but they are aware of the need to respect the rules of society

The differences between cultures are manifested in different areas; they are felt in the different weather or food, for example, which surprised many upon their arrival in Slovakia. Another common difference is the spending of holidays and adherence to different customs and traditions.

Other differences relate in particular to the rules of mutual communication, such as handshakes, taking off shoes, ways of communicating between people, and in some cases a certain type of temperament, the manifestations of which can be respected or interpreted differently. However, foreigners do not consider these differences significant enough to significantly affect feelings of acceptance in the country.

Maintaining one's own identity is very important to foreigners – 85% of them said it was important for them to maintain their customs and traditions, and about 65% considered it important to be able to practise their religion. Most of them feel that no one is stopping them from maintaining their customs, and there is a need to be able to open up more to the domestic population and to “introduce” them to their world view and their own identity. However, there is not much room for this in Slovakia.

On the other hand, most respondents considered it important to adapt to the new culture they came to. If they were to keep only the customs and traditions from their country of origin, they need not have left it. It is important, first of all, to follow the rules that are laid down in the country and not to try to change the customs and way of life of other people.

Identities are not exclusionary; customs and traditions are stacked on top of each other

According to the research, foreigners try to respect the rules and do not question the customs and traditions that persist in Slovakia, although they may seem strange to them. They realize that if they want to become part of society, a certain balance needs to be struck between where they came from and the culture they moved to.

In practice, they do this by combining different cultural elements and creating a new identity. If the holidays in the country of origin take place at a different time, they celebrate them twice. They combine dishes and rules as well as look for the optimal way of balance.

The same goes for language. Maintaining one's own language and using it in everyday family life is basically important and natural for everyone. Almost all the respondents reported combining the languages they use according to the environment in which they are. In multilingual families, it is important for many that, for example, children also speak the native language of their parents, whereas the language in which they communicate between themselves may be different. Therefore, it is often the case that they use three or four languages in parallel.

FOLLOWING THE DEVELOPMENTS IN SLOVAKIA

Most foreigners are interested in what is happening in Slovakia

Following the developments in the country where a foreigner moves to is also a way to get to know the country and understand its functioning and unwritten rules. The research has shown that 24% of foreigners regularly follow political and social events, 55.8% follow them occasionally and 20.2% do not follow them at all. This also corresponds to the findings of the qualitative part of the research.

Social media is often the only source of information

A large proportion of the qualitative interview respondents used social networks where they follow the pages of various media as a source of information. However, they also consume information shared by their friends and acquaintances on social networks. At the same time, they draw information from various foreigner groups that have formed in different cities on social networks (especially Facebook) and function as online communities. On Facebook, there are groups that bring together foreigners as such and groups that bring together foreigners according to their nationality or the language they speak.

For many, foreigner groups on social networks were the main source of information – one where they can also proactively look for information that they cannot find elsewhere (e.g. they post a question in the group, and other members answer it).

Traditional media is followed by foreigners mainly in English

In addition to social networks, many foreigners also follow traditional media, especially those that provide news in English, i.e. Slovak Spectator and RTVS English radio broadcast. RTVS thus also performs its public function in relation to foreigners and provides them with at least basic information about what is happening in the country.

Availability and comprehensibility of information

Only a very small proportion of foreigners considered information to be completely unavailable and incomprehensible (1.6%). Another 11.2% of the respondents said that foreigners have very few opportunities to get information about what is happening in Slovakia. More than a half of them (53.5%) said that the information was available, but not sufficiently for those who did not speak Slovak well. However, several respondents to the qualitative research reported that there were already tools that allowed them to overcome the language barrier such as Google Translate, which foreigners used, even though they provided a lower quality of translation.

LIFE SATISFACTION

Migration is a life experience that can have an impact on both the physical and mental health of the migrants. The quantitative research showed an average life satisfaction rate of 7.15 among foreigners (with 10 indicating extraordinarily high life satisfaction). This means that they declare higher life satisfaction than Slovaks in general who reached an average of 6.2 in 2020.

Factors affecting life satisfaction

In the qualitative research, we also examined the factors that contribute to higher life satisfaction in Slovakia among foreigners. The respondents repeatedly mentioned a sense of security or calmness and a slower pace of life. Their life satisfaction was also greatly influenced by job opportunities – for many, Slovakia was a country that provided them with better opportunities to get a good job for a good wage, but for some it was a country that provided them with few opportunities for career development and growth (especially in the case of narrowly specialized professions). In addition, the respondents highlighted the importance of family and interpersonal relationships as well as the quality of public services for their life satisfaction in Slovakia.

The impact of the pandemic on life satisfaction

The COVID-19 pandemic has undoubtedly had an impact on everyone, although its scope and nature can vary significantly. In our research, as many as 69.9% of the respondents to the quantitative part reported that the pandemic had had a mild or very negative impact on their lives.

The respondents perceived the impact of the pandemic most negatively in the work area, where 60.6% of the respondents reported a moderate or very negative impact. An interesting finding is that as many as 46.5% of the respondents indicated that the pandemic had had no impact on their ability to integrate into life in Slovakia. As the pandemic has virtually suspended social life and social contacts, it is possible that a large proportion of foreigners remain on the margins of society regardless of the pandemic.

A specific challenge faced by foreigners more strongly than the domestic population during the pandemic was limited travel opportunities and, therefore, limited contact with their families in their countries of origin. It was also more difficult for them to orientate themselves in the current anti-pandemic measures. These were often only available in Slovak, they were complicated, confusing, even contradictory and, moreover, they changed frequently.

PERCEIVED EXPECTATIONS FROM FOREIGNERS

Foreigners perceived certain expectations by the majority society. In the quantitative research, they most often stated that, in order for society to accept them, it was especially important that they spoke Slovak, had a job and knew Slovak culture and history. Foreigners themselves believe that the most important thing is to learn at least partially the language that, in addition to being a communication tool, is also a kind of connecting bridge and the first step toward mutual understanding.

The respondents in the qualitative part were very rarely able to name specific situations where something was required of them by the domestic population. Foreigners think that, in order to know what exactly Slovaks expect from them, they need to be in contact with each other. However, sometimes the expectations of the majority population are realized by foreigners only through negative reactions, or they have to guess what is expected of them, as the demands on them are often not clear and understandable. Foreigners often have to try harder and behave better than Slovaks, so that they are not pointed at as bad or non-adaptable.

EXPERIENCE WITH THE INTEGRATION PROCESS

The conditions for the life of foreigners are not ideal, many feel like second-rate residents

Integration in life in a new country depends not only on the particular life situation of the individual and their abilities, but also on the conditions created by the receiving country, the rules governing the status of foreigners, and the various forms of assistance and support that, if available, improve the situation of foreigners and allow them to fit more quickly into the life of society and create a supportive environment.

However, many foreigners think that the conditions that exist for them in Slovakia do not allow them to fully function in society. They then feel like second-rate residents compared to the domestic population (28.8% of the respondents). The findings of our research showed that foreigners from third countries, foreigners with a less stable form of residence (visas, tolerated residence), foreigners who are more likely to experience hostile manifestations by the majority population and foreigners who are generally less satisfied with their lives are more likely to perceive their conditions and position in society in this way.

The findings of our research show that, compared to the domestic population, respondents certainly or partially feel disadvantaged especially in the work area (37.1%), in communication with the

authorities (35%), in the area of health care (26.6%), and also in the area of legalization of residence (25.6%).

In their daily lives, foreigners experience a number of barriers that, on the one hand, arise from legal norms and rules and their application. Some barriers, on the other hand, are due to established customs and patterns of behaviour or prejudices toward foreigners. In the area of housing, for example, foreigners face many prejudices and concerns of landlords. In the field of health care, they are faced with a language barrier that makes it impossible for them to communicate with health care professionals. They again face a language barrier at the authorities, because the prevailing idea is that, when they come to Slovakia, they should speak Slovak.

Communication of foreigners with institutions – lack of information, unclear rules, bureaucracy, unequal access

Communication with various authorities and institutions is rather difficult and complicated for foreigners. The problem is mainly the language barrier and the lack of information in English or other languages available to foreigners. As the foreigners themselves have stated, even if they manage to find translated official information, it is often incomprehensible because the language is too bureaucratic. Foreigners also encounter that the rules are interpreted and applied differently. Some foreigners, especially those from less preferred countries, also experience inequality in the approach to them. A separate topic is the excessive bureaucracy associated with obtaining Slovak citizenship, which is thus an unattainable goal for many foreigners.

All these facts mean that foreigners often do not communicate directly with the relevant authorities or institutions when dealing with specific life situations. They try to find someone through their personal networks and contacts who can help them in their situation. On the example of specific life situations, we found that they often turn mainly to their Slovak acquaintances and friends, employer, school, etc. It is, therefore, quite important for foreigners in Slovakia to have relations with locals, i.e. Slovaks, whether at work, school or neighbourhood, to which they can turn to, if necessary. It can be assumed that foreigners who manage to establish relationships with locals will cope more quickly with different life situations and adapt more successfully.

Many foreigners have not encountered integration services at all

Integration services are a form of assistance and support that should help foreigners in the early stages of integration. These include assistance in communication with the authorities, translations and interpreting, assistance in finding housing, advice on legalization of residence, finding a job, etc. The findings of our research showed that such services are scarce, and many foreigners have not encountered them at all. Some foreigners have experience with the help provided by NGOs. However, it is often limited in some way, e.g. available only to foreigners from third countries. In practice, there are various commercial services that many foreigners use, but they are certainly not available to everyone, as they are expensive.

According to the foreigners themselves, the state places the responsibility in the field of integration mainly on themselves, since it does not provide any form of assistance or support to help them cope with this process. However, foreigners are in a situation where they need a certain amount of help and support for inclusion in society, so the responsibility for integration is shifted to other actors such as

employers, schools, NGOs, foreigners who have lived longer in Slovakia and their communities that help newly arrived compatriots.

If we look at the opinions of the foreigners themselves regarding who should be responsible for integration, they most often think that it is themselves who should be responsible for integrating into society (42.6%). Similarly, a large proportion of the respondents think that the state should create better conditions for foreigners and help them integrate (40.7%). Another 17% of the respondents/foreigners think that the domestic population should do more to help foreigners integrate. Only 3% of the respondents indicated that there was no need for foreigners to integrate into society.

SENSE OF HOME

The foreigners involved in the research consider Slovakia as their home (or second home), and a large part of them are thinking about staying, working or starting a family here. Most respondents associated a sense of home with family. Family also helps them create a sense of home. According to foreigners, in order for them to feel at home here, they also need work, friends, colleagues and a community.

CONCLUSION

Our research has shown that there is still a lack of positive shifts in the perception of migration, whether by the public or by public administration institutions, which could lead to practical changes. The cities and villages in Slovakia basically do not know which foreigners live in their area. Yet in many cities, foreigners already make up a significant part of the population. The same applies to state policies. There is still no uniform approach to managing migration and integration in Slovakia.

If we talk about integration at the local level, foreigners do not appear at all as a target group of policies, so their specific needs go unnoticed. The municipalities often argue that they want to treat all their inhabitants equally and not distinguish them according to where they come from. An equal approach may evoke non-discrimination, but the same approach does not mean equality. Equality requires the recognition of their needs and an adequate response to them.

At the level of the municipalities, migration is seen as a problem. It is similarly perceived by the public, which is related to the overall strong ethnocentric perception of Slovakia as a country of Slovaks. People perceive the presence of other cultures in Slovakia and their potential impact on Slovak culture as problematic. They perceive Slovak culture as superior to others and, therefore, expect foreigners coming to Slovakia to adapt to it unreservedly. Moreover, attitudes toward foreigners have deteriorated in the last 10 years. This shows how much influence political discourse has on the formation of public attitudes and, therefore, on the relations between different population groups.

The integration process is often on the shoulders of the foreigners themselves. They, however, face many barriers – language barriers, lack of or unclear information, bureaucracy, etc. They overcome these barriers either with difficulty themselves or with the help of their Slovak-speaking acquaintances, family members, communities of other foreigners or commercial services. This contributes to their insecurity, but also to the lack of transparency and unfairness of the integration process – not all foreigners can afford to pay for commercial services to get help, e.g. with the handling of official affairs or with tax returns. Not everyone has such networks and social contacts that they have someone to turn to, if necessary.

The integration process and support should be set up in such a way that all foreigners have equal opportunities to integrate into the life of society and that the success of their integration does not depend solely on their personal capacities and characteristics. They should be assisted by various actors in this – the state, municipalities, NGOs, employers, educational institutions as well as their neighbours, friends or people from their immediate surroundings. This would contribute to the better inclusion of foreigners but also to a better coexistence along with increased trust and social cohesion.

SLOVAKIA AND MIGRATION.
FINDING PATHWAYS TO
COEXISTENCE

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2021

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