

## Re-emigration and integration of Volhynian and “Chernobyl” Czechs in the Czech Republic

EVA JANSKÁ, DUŠAN DRBOHLAV

Charles University, Department of Social Geography  
and Regional Development, Prague

**Abstract:** This paper deals with an integration process of re-emigrants – the Chernobyl/Volhynian Czechs from Ukraine and Belorussia who returned to their mother country (the Czech Republic) within two migratory waves: 1945–48 and 1991–93. The analysis is based on two questionnaire surveys within which 140 and 345 re-emigrants were successfully contacted, respectively. The paper starts with the historical background of the two re-emigrant groups. Then methods are described and hypotheses are designed. The outputs are structured in three parts: the characterisation of both waves in terms of geographical, demographic, economic, psychological, socio-cultural and ethnographic parameters, testing of the hypotheses and formulation of the policy implications/recommendations.

**Keywords:** migration, integration/assimilation, Volhynian Czechs, Chernobyl Czechs, policy recommendations

### Introduction

The Czech Republic, along with other post-communist Central/Eastern European countries has been going through a deep transition/transformation process. Great political, social and economic changes have contributed to a free population movement. In this regard, the current Czech Republic has quickly become a country of transit migration and immigration. Immigrants in the Czech Republic, so far, represent a rather marginal component of the whole population (probably 4%, including illegals) and, in addition, most are only short-term circular labor migrants. Despite this, questions regarding issues of immigrant adaptation/integration are topical and pressing. This study deals with two waves of re-emigrants from nearly the same place of origin – Ukraine and part of Belorussia, who came to the Czech Republic at two different periods: the end of 1940s and the beginning of 1990s. Now, these Volhynian and Chernobyl immigrants are only one group of Czech reemigrants in a country, which is “homogenous” and large enough in terms of its quantity. The study of the re-emigrants (both waves) was done in the framework of the Charles University Grant Agency (43–203214), thereby reflecting the importance of the contemporary problems of the immigrant/re-emigrant integration process in the Czech Republic.

## Background – An Historical Overview

*Conditions in the Czech lands and Russia as 'pull' and 'push' migratory factors (reasons for migration)*

When specifying 'push' factors, one must mention above all: a free movement which was included in the constitution of 1867, lack of employment and a shortage of land, abolition of serfdom in 1861 and the American Civil War (1861–1865) which stopped the main migratory stream to the USA. On the other hand, good quality and the low cost of the land<sup>1</sup> (in Russia), food for the families accompanied by a desire to increase their living standard were the most important 'pull' factors which propelled migrants eastward.

*Development over time*

There was one main target destination: the Volhynian province<sup>1</sup> (Western Ukraine) during the years 1868–1874. In the population census of 1897 there were 27,660 Czechs living in Volhynia, whereas in 1912 the number was estimated to have reached some 30,000–50,000. Legal restrictions limiting the maintenance of national identity, like abolition of the self-government (1891) and 'russification' of schools, contributed to the decreasing quality of education, loss of national identity and the whole stagnation of the Czech ethnic group. Only the higher economic level (the living standard) prevented the Czechs from being totally assimilated into the Ukrainian majority. After the creation of independent Czechoslovakia in 1918, some of the Volhynian Czechs returned to the Czech lands. A division of the Volhynia province into two parts, the Soviet Ukraine and Poland (1920), caused significant changes in the lives of the Volhynian Czechs. Since then, both areas have developed in fairly different ways. While in the Polish part the former model of farming was preserved, in the Ukrainian part collective farms were established (so called *kolkhoz*) and industrial plants were nationalized. After the invasion of Poland by the German army, the USSR incorporated Western Volhynia into Ukraine. Nevertheless, the USSR was also invaded by the Nazis (June 22, 1941) and thus, both parts of the Volhynia suffered during the Second World War under German rule.

*Return of the first wave – Volhynian Czechs (1945–1948)*

After the end of the Second World War the governments of Czechoslovakia and USSR signed an agreement about common repatriation<sup>2</sup> (July 10, 1946). The Volhynian soldiers from the First Czechoslovak Army Corps were mostly those who were repatriated and, consequently, who stayed in Czechoslovakia after the war. The Ministry of Agriculture along with the Office for Resettlement selected several districts in North Western Bohemia (Žatecko a Podbořansko). Only these areas, with their agricultural character and especially their suitability for hop growing, resembled those in Volhynia. The Volhynian soldiers also received social assistance and enjoyed certain concessions related to subsequent repayment of state granted loans for acquiring property. After the signing of the agreement, about 33,000 persons came to Czechoslovakia, where they were granted Czechoslovak citizenship. The last organized group of re-emigrants came at the

---

<sup>1</sup> Czarist Russia was, in that time, divided into 78 provinces.

<sup>2</sup> The first reemigration occurred in 1918, when Czechoslovakia originated.

end of April 1947<sup>3</sup>, but the Volhynian Czechs were allowed to individually arrive until the end of 1948.

#### *Return of the second wave – ‘Chernobyl’<sup>4</sup> Czechs (1991–93)*

In 1989, three and half years after the Chernobyl disaster, the Soviet press released that the radioactive threat to the population even beyond the 30 km zone around Chernobyl was much higher than the official version had admitted. In such a depressing atmosphere, this information created an impulse for out-migration from the afflicted area where Czechs by origin lived (mostly in Mala Zubovshczina and Korosten). Based on a request for resettlement into their mother country, the Czech Government confirmed the resettlement of these persons by the Resolution No. 340/90, and the Federal Government by the Resolution No. 905/90. During the Program of the humanitarian aid 1,812 persons were resettled from the Ukraine and Belorussia. The crucial criteria for registering as a re-settler was: Czech origin of at least one person of a married couple and permanent residence status for at least two years in the region where the catastrophe occurred. For humanitarian reasons, elderly people who wished to resettle were allowed to migrate with their children’s families even if they were not directly hit by the catastrophe (they lived outside the disaster area). As a part of the resettlement program, Czechoslovakia, for example, provided the re-emigrants with free transport, introductory health examinations, a permanent residence permit with an opportunity to obtain Czechoslovak citizenship, assurance of a job for at least one able-bodied member of the family and accommodation.

This collective humanitarian program was the solitary one. The reason was that, it stimulated an interest for re-emigration of other, relatively stable Czech communities abroad. A solution was found by launching a special re-emigration program organized by NGOs only on an individual basis (individual assistance for compatriots who live in selected remote areas or regions in jeopardy – e. g. people of the Czech origin in Romania or Kazakhstan).

### **Main Goals of the Study**

The main goals of the study are formulated in the following way:

1. Analysis of the two above mentioned groups which differ from each other as to why they return, i. e. specifically voluntary versus forced migration movements. Description and explanation of the living conditions in the place of the origin and the destination, mechanisms of the arrival and structure of immigrants.
2. Verification of hypotheses stemming from selected migration theories.
3. Comparison as to how successfully re-emigrants of the individual waves were adapted to Czech society, including a formulation of the policy implications/recommendations.

---

<sup>3</sup> Altogether 33,077 persons (including 3,566 children under 6 – Vaculík, 1986) came. The re-emigrants originated from 407 localities. Only 2,837 persons lived in towns, whereas 30,240 lived in rural areas. 32,237 re-emigrants were of Czech nationality.

<sup>4</sup> The name “Chernobyl” Czechs is used in order to distinguish the second immigrant wave, which came to the Czech Republic after the Chernobyl disaster.

## Hypotheses

Five basic hypotheses were designed and tested:

A) Migrants tend to have, in line with expected improved conditions, a similar living style in the country of destination (urban elements, economic activity, cultural and religious aspects) as they had in the country of origin.

B) Both waves used the existence relatives and friends (network theory) in the Czech Republic. On the one hand, the first wave has tighter relations, thanks to earlier arrival. On the other hand, the second wave could utilize more frequent contact with the Czech Republic, thanks to the first wave, before they came.

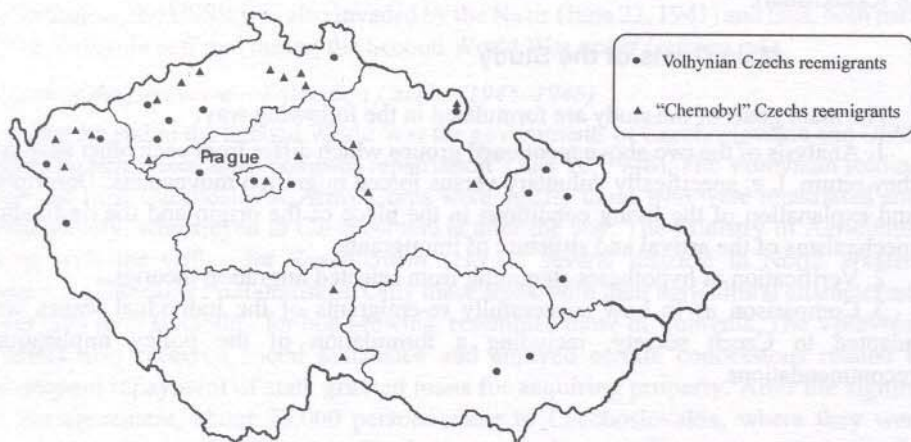
C) With increasing distance since the time of arrival in the Czech Republic, relations with the place of origin are decreasing.

D) Despite distinct primary departure motivation, the resettlement of the two waves are organized collectively (e. g. transport, accommodation, employment) by relevant institutions (institutional theory), and compared with other types of migration (excluding the asylum seekers) their adaptation into the new society is easier.

E) Adaptation/integration of migrants from both waves into Czech society is easier from the point of view of the common Czech origin, than the adaptation/integration of some other group/individual – immigrants/immigrant.

## Methods

Based on a questionnaire survey,<sup>6</sup> the analysis of the data was done using the SPSS software program. A quota sampling method (a selection of the respondents) was based on the following characteristics: age (older than 18), sex (balanced sex ratio) and place of settlement in the Czech Republic. Regarding the first wave, leaders of the 23 respective



Map 1 Dislocation of the respondents from the both waves in the Czech Republic

<sup>6</sup> The questionnaire survey (face to face method) was carried out by the students of the Faculty of Science, Charles University, Prague, in June 1998 (the second wave) and in June 1999 (the first wave).

regions in the Czech Republic were contacted<sup>7</sup>. Out of the 200 questionnaires distributed, 140 were returned. The respondents who participated in the survey represented 17 regions (see map No. 1), males slightly dominated over females (53% versus 47%). Because of the long time period that elapsed in terms of respondents' arrival time (53 and more years), it was not possible to get answers for all of the age categories. Regarding the second wave, out of 500 questionnaires which were sent out to potential respondents, 345 people (about one quarter of the all re-emigrated persons) from 16 localities in the Czech Republic responded (see the map No. 1). In this case the female share was higher than that of the male share (54% versus 46%).

## Outputs

**A) The characterization of both waves based on geographical, demographic, economic, psychological, socio-cultural and ethnographic parameters.**

### I. Group

Due to the above mentioned reasons, 80% of the respondents who came within the first wave after the Second World War were in their post-active age when the survey was carried out.

All of them came within the mass resettlement program between 1945 and 1948, mostly from the Western Volhynia region (77%) and the Eastern Volhynia region (23%). Almost 90% of them were married, mostly having either 2 (49%) or 3 children (25%). Most of the respondents completed a basic educational level or a specialized secondary school without exit examination certificate (85%). These facts fully correspond to respondents' type of employment: working in agriculture was their most important activity (60%).

Because the re-emigrants' inflow can be characterized as voluntary, logically, "return to home" was the most frequently stated reason for the re-emigration. Often, it was accompanied by another reason: "escape from Stalinism" (71%). 40% of respondents considered a possibility of re-emigration before the Second World War started. When analyzing the question of religion 53.6% choose the Orthodox Church, 30% the Roman Catholic Church and only 9% atheism. 84% stated that their knowledge of the Czech language is "good" or "very good". Only 10%, after their arrival to the country, made use of optional Czech language courses. All of the respondents registered themselves as having Czech nationality when entering the country. Consequently, immediately after they came they were provided with citizenship of the Czech Republic. They feel they are fully integrated into Czech society.

### II. Group

76% of respondents came within a mass resettlement program between 1991 and 1993. Only 1% came before 1991 and only 7% did so after 1993. 70% of respondents are married, 4% are divorced. It bears witness to the fact that; despite the importance of atheism a "respect for a family," was and still is, firmly rooted in Ukraine. Most of the families have 2 children (43%). One or no children in a family was mentioned by 20%

---

<sup>7</sup> The figures about the respondents were provided by the Association of the Volhynian Czechs and their friends. The organization itself is composed of 23 spatial-administrative units which are run by their own leaders.

re-emigrants. On the other hand, 12% families had three or more children in a family. 60% contended that they had at least completed a secondary school. Even within this specific case of forced 'ecological migration' it has been shown that, on average, the immigrants' educational level surpasses that which is typical of the domestic Czech population. In 1991, 33% of the Czech population stated that their highest attained educational level was a basic level. By contrast, the same number is 21% among the re-emigrants. Similarly, while only 7% of the Czech population completed university, 15% of respondents mentioned the same<sup>8</sup>. Regarding reasons for re-emigration, 'ecological conditionality has been proven. Among other motives, 53% mentioned "health reasons" as the most important ones. 23% pointed out "respect for children" (also in this case one can deduce a care of children's health). Only 6% of respondents mentioned "better living standard" as the reason for immigration. The fact that the Chernobyl disaster and its aftermath with serious health problems are behind the respondents' motivation, which led to the resettlement, is further documented by another figure: 93% of respondents did not consider resettlement before the Chernobyl catastrophe. 93% of respondents have no problem with knowledge of the Czech language. Furthermore, 73% expressed their desire to fully integrate into Czech society.

#### **B) Testing of the hypotheses**

A. Representatives of both resettlement waves are fairly successful with resettlement in the Czech Republic, especially concerning higher living standard, better and wider supply of goods (food and industrial goods), better public services, health care of the population, social security benefits and other related services and access to information. The expectation that their transfer will improve the situation has, for most of the respondents of the both waves, been fulfilled. The first wave re-emigrants came to an environment that resembled what they left (hop picking region). The re-emigrants that came within the second wave could not choose much in this regard. On the other side, the re-emigrants of both waves preserved their traditional warm mutual relations, culinary abilities from a period spent in Volhynia, celebration of religious holidays and the like.

B. A good knowledge about what was going on in the Czech Republic, even before the resettlement, bears witness to the existence of close relations between relatives in the Czech Republic and their compatriots in Ukraine. There were rather intensive mutual correspondence contacts of relatives and friends between both sides (39% of respondents of the first wave and 59% of respondents of the second wave). Moreover, the first wave of the respondents was also directly informed via soldiers of the First Army Corps. The second part of the hypothesis has been confirmed as well – the second wave was 'supported' by the first wave. Further facts go hand in hand with the formulated hypothesis: while 76% of respondents of the first wave regularly participate in meetings organized by the Association of the Volhynian Czechs and their friends, this type of activity was typical of only 63% of the second wave respondents.

C. The fact that there is a tendency of decreasing intensity of contacts with the "country of departure" over time has been proven. 48% of first wave respondents mentioned current

---

<sup>8</sup> One has to realize a possible difference in terms of the educational system in the Czech Republic and the Ukraine.

mutual contacts, compared to 93% of respondents that came during the 90s. Also, an interest on the side of relatives and friends of those who came within the second wave to resettle now in the Czech Republic has been much higher vis-a-vis the post war wave (58% versus 17%). Apparently, it is caused by more frequent contacts of the representatives of the second wave with their mother country (Czech Republic). Hence, would-be immigrants gain more pieces of information about the potential destination. Moreover, because of these ties, a possible resettlement is generally a less risky undertaking, in many aspects.

D. The individual and specific mass resettlement programs, within which compatriots of both waves returned to their "mother country", was organized due to the state and its governmental decisions. During these programs the respective ministries and, then, also non-governmental organizations helped immigrant families with housing arrangements, social and job-related matters. For example, as compared to economic (work-related) migrants, the possibility of easier access to citizenship of the Czech Republic was an important aspect. It allowed the re-settlers to make joint decisions in the public sphere (e. g. a possibility to vote), to invite their family members within a family reunion process and so forth. Obviously, there is an easier incorporation of immigrants of the Czech origin into Czech society as compared to other ethnicities, for example, Ukrainians or Russians (e. g. Drbobohlav – Janská – Lupták – Šelepová 1999, Drbobohlav – Janská – Lupták – Bohuslavová 1999). Hence, the hypothesis has been confirmed.

E. Advantages of the re-settlers of both waves are especially represented by the knowledge of the language that is used in the country of destination. Because of a good ability to speak in Czech, after their arrival, immigrants of the first wave had almost no problems with integration into society (all of them feel fully integrated into Czech society). On the other hand, within the respondents of the second wave only 50% confessed their good knowledge of Czech language in connection with arranging for suitable job. 73% of the respondents felt that they are fully integrated into their new society. Only the second wave was, to some extent, characterized by more mixed marriages. As a corollary, knowledge of the Czech language among their children is partly worse.

Generally one can sum up that because of the intensive cultural integration represented mainly by a knowledge of the Czech language, both waves of re-emigrants are significantly more successful in their integration into society than any other type (or ethnicities) of immigrants (see e. g. the experience of Russians, Ukrainians or Vietnamese).

### **C) Policy implications/recommendations**

1. The above integration program/model applied towards the compatriot community was successful. However, it is necessary to point out its specificity which follows from the fact that the immigrants in question who have been integrating are of Czech origin (hence, knowing the Czech language fairly well). In accordance with this, there was a willingness of the state to invest more means to such a type of integration. It has been proven that the applied integration mechanisms (namely, programs targeting housing, job, social and health issues) offered by the state and, in part by selected NGOs, have been found useful. It would be worthwhile to consider how this specific and extraordinary experience could be used when dealing with other migratory types and other ethnic groups.

2. Opportunity to learn and knowledge of the language of the destination country, seems to be a crucial factor in integrating immigrants into a new, majority society. For this reason it is important to systematically arrange basic language courses of good quality for immigrants.

3. Relatives' and friends' presence in a destination country is beneficial for any group of immigrants immediately after their arrival but also in the subsequent years when the 'compatriot community' helps overcome many different problems. It is of great importance for immigrants to take part in compatriot associations/clubs and their activities. (If they do not exist then the state should help with establishing them). Taking part in various charitable or cultural undertakings, which are organized by majority groups for the minorities, is important as well. This helps in understanding each other and in bringing each other together.

## References

- BAUBÖCK, R. (1994): The Integration of Immigrants. CDMG (94) 25E. Strasbourg Council of Europe, pp. 48.
- BERRY, J. W. (1992): Acculturation and Adaptation in a New Society. *International Migration*, Vol. 30, Special issue: Migration and Health in the 1990s, pp. 69–85.
- CASTLES, S. (1995): How nation-States Respond to Immigration and Ethnic Diversity. *New Community*, Vol. 21, No. 3, pp. 293–308.
- DIETZ, B. (1997): Ethnic German Immigrants from CIS in Germany: Migration Patterns and the Path toward Integration. In *International Conference of Central and Eastern Europe: New Migration Space*, Pultusk, 11.–13. 12., Polsko.
- DRBOHLAV, D. (1998): Integration of Refugees and Related Issues – Current Developments in the Czech Republic. Příspěvek přednesený na 4. Mezinárodním sympoziu na téma "Protection of Refugees in the Central European and the Baltic States". Organizováno UNHCR, Bled, Slovinsko.
- DRBOHLAV, D., JANSKÁ, E., LUPTÁK, L., ŠELEPOVÁ, P. (1999): Integrace Ukrajinců v ČR. Přírodovědecká fakulta UK, Praha.
- DRBOHLAV, D., JANSKÁ, E., LUPTÁK, L., BOHUSLAVOVÁ, J. (1999): Integrace Rusů v ČR. Přírodovědecká fakulta UK, Praha.
- JANSKÁ, E., DRBOHLAV, D. (1998): Reemigrace Volyňských Čechů. *Sborník ČSGS*, 90, č. 3, Academia, Praha, pp.106–121.
- OMAN, Ch.: The Policy Challenges of Globalization and Regionalization. In: *Migration, Free Trade and Regional Integration in Central and Eastern Europe*. Wien, Österreichische Staatsdruckerei AG 1997, pp. 29–44.
- Velký sociologický slovník. Praha, Univerzita Karlova, Vydavatelství Karolinum 1996.
- VACULÍK, J. (1984): Reemigrace a usídlování Volyňských Čechů v letech 1945–1948. Univerzita J. E. Purkyně, Brno.
- VALÁŠKOVÁ, N., UHEREK, Z., BROUČEK, S. (1997): Czech Immigrants from the Ukraine in the Czech Republic. Praha, Institute of Ethnology of the Academy of Science, No. 4, 118 pp.
- VALÁŠKOVÁ, N. (1999): Potomci českých emigrantů v Kazachstánu. *Český lid*, 86, č. 3, Academia, Praha, str. 235–270.



Résumé

Príspevek pojednáva o dvoch, od seba nepříliš vzdálených vlnách reemigrantů (1945–1948, resp. 1990–1993) z téměř shodného místa původu – Ukrajiny a části Běloruska zpět do České republiky (viz mapa č. 1). Jedná se o jedinou, kvantitativně významnější „homogenní a novodobou“ skupinu obyvatel imigrantů českého původu, která dnes pobývá na území Česka. Studie integrace obou vln imigrantů byla řešena v rámci grantu GAUK 43–203–214.

Výzkum, na němž je příspěvek založen, proběhl v letech 1997–1999 na Přírodovědecké fakultě Univerzity Karlovy, katedře sociální geografie a regionálního rozvoje. Základním prostředkem analýzy bylo dotazníkové šetření provedené metodou řízeného rozhovoru, který s respondenty prováděli vyškolení tazatelé – studenti geografie Přírodovědecké fakulty UK v Praze, a to v případě první vlny v červnu 1999 (140 respondentů) a v případě druhé vlny v červnu 1998 (345 respondentů). Kvótní výběr respondentů respektoval danou strukturu reemigrantů z hlediska věku, pohlaví a místa pobytu v Česku.

Hlavní cíle práce lze formulovat do následujících bodů:

Deskripce a explanace podmínek života v místě zdroje i cíle, mechanismů příchodu a struktur imigrantů;  
komparace způsobů a úspěšnosti jejich adaptace do české společnosti;  
možná doporučení pro migrační/integrační politiku a praxi.

Analýza byla uskutečněna na základě testování 5 hypotéz (o podobnosti stylu života ve zdrojové a cílové zemi, o využití existujících sociálních sítí, o vlivu státu a daného etnika na průběh integrace a o roli času v integračním procesu) a úzce spjatých vybraných teoretických konceptů (např. teorie sítí, institucionální teorie, „push-pull“ teorie, blíže viz text).

Ze závěrů uvádíme možná doporučení pro českou migrační/integrační politiku a praxi:

1) Aplikovaný integrační model v případě krajanské menšiny volyňských/černobylských Čechů byl úspěšný. Je však třeba zdůraznit jeho ojedinělost, která vyplývá právě z českého původu integrujících se osob – tedy také ochoty ze strany státu investovat do integrace více prostředků. Stejně tak do hry vstupuje specifická schopnost imigrantů komunikovat česky, což opět celý proces integrace usnadňuje. Potvrzuje se, že státem a nevládními organizacemi nabídnuté a reemigranty využitě integrační mechanismy (jako např. programy řešící bytové otázky, zaměstnání, sociální a zdravotní zabezpečení) se obecně velmi osvědčily. Je třeba zvážit, jak těchto ojedinělých zkušeností dílčím způsobem konkrétně využít i u jiných typů migrantů a etnik.

2) Zajištění dobré znalosti jazyka migrační země se jeví jako významný prvek pro úspěšné začlenění imigrantů do majoritní společnosti. Z tohoto pohledu je důležité systematictější zajištění základních jazykových kurzů pro přistěhovalce.

3) Přítomnost příbuzných, známých, ale i již usazené dané etnické komunity v cílové zemi je pro imigranty prospěšná nejenom v prvních fázích jejich příchodu, ale i v následujících letech, kdy „společnost krajanů“ pomáhá imigrantům překonávat různorodé problémy. Pro přistěhovalce je tedy kromě osobní roviny kontaktů rovněž důležitá možnost účastnit se organizovaných aktivit příslušného etnika, a to nejlépe v rámci různých krajanských spolků, (pokud tyto spolky neexistují, stát by měl přispět k jejich vytvoření), případně dalších „nezávislých“ akcí, jež by pomohly k vzájemnému sblížení nejenom imigrantů mezi sebou, ale i vůči majoritní populaci.