

CZECH ARMENIANS: A SMALL COMMUNITY WITH A STRONG POTENTIAL

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The Armenian community in the Czech Republic is small and the number of Armenians living in this country is slightly over 1,000 people. Nevertheless, it stands out as an example of successful development of –the migrant community in the Czech Republic. The members of the Armenian community are active in social life and social ties within the community are strong and diverse. Economic integration of the community members into the Czech society is proceeding quite successfully and the majority of Armenians living in this country run small businesses. One of the main problems of the community is the absence of diplomatic representation of Armenia that could provide legal and other types of assistance to the members of the community. Hence, Czech Armenians often have to solve the arising problems themselves.

The Armenian community in the Czech Republic is far from being the largest one not only in the world, but even in Eastern Europe. As of 2005, only 1,046 Armenians [1, p.86]¹ lived in the country, or 0.42% of the total number of foreigners residing in the country. the Czech Republic does not even have Armenian diplomatic service and Armenians living there fall under the jurisdiction of the Embassy in Austria. Nevertheless, exploring the Armenian community in the Czech Republic is rather interesting due to its specific status as compared to other Armenian communities in Europe.

Although the Czech Republic (unlike Poland where the Armenian community has been big and influential for centuries) was not a country with big Armenian population, over the last 50 years contacts of Armenians (particularly those living in Armenia and those residing in former USSR countries) with the Czech

¹This figure shows the number of persons residing in the Czech Republic and holding an Armenian passport. Ethnic Armenians residing in the Czech Republic, but having citizenship of other countries (Russia, Iran, Turkey, USA, etc.) are considered by the statistical service as representatives of those countries. Unlike Germany where citizenship is granted only if a person relinquishes previous citizenship, Czech legislation allowed to retain the previous citizenship (now there is no such opportunity.) Therefore, official data cited here may still be considered reliable although data on migration from Armenia may be distorted [1, s.86].

Republic have become much easier as compared, for example, with France or the United States. A considerable number of Armenians visited the Czech Republic as tourists and had business and friendly relations with citizens of the then Czechoslovakia. Integration of the Czech Republic into European economic and political system that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union and dissolution of the Warsaw Treaty Organization turned the Czech Republic into a quite attractive country for emigrants from the former Soviet Union. With a rather liberal migration legislation as compared with other countries of Western Europe, emigration to the Czech Republic was more realistic than to France or Germany.

Unlike the migrants to the United States, France or other western countries who were generally people with a vague idea about the country they were moving to, the migrants that were coming to the Czech Republic were those who knew the country. About half of the migrants who moved to the Czech Republic had visited the country once or several times on a tourist visa or on business. About 40% of the Armenians who moved to the Czech Republic had contacts with the country and the Czechs back in Soviet times. Some researchers point out that the integration of the Armenians who migrated to the Czech Republic was quite easy as this country was more «understandable» for them than Western European countries [2, p.8]¹.

It is also necessary to mention a special situation with migratory flows in and out of the Czech Republic that emerged in the 1970's. Czech Republic's cultural closeness with the countries of Western Europe as well as possibilities to emigrate from the country even during Soviet times led to mass migration of Czech citizens to the West. In times of the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic, about 400,000 people, mostly intelligentsia, engineers and artists [2,p.6], left the territory of the present-day Czech Republic. The end of the Warsaw bloc and the elimination of the last restrictions on migration of Czech citizens to Western Europe aggravated the situation. In 1992-1993 1.2% of the Czech workforce left for Germany only [2, p.7]. To bridge the deficit of highly qualified workforce the Czech Republic had to become more liberal in terms of the migration policy than the countries of Western Europe and to invite citizens of the former USSR, offering them better opportunities than they had in their homeland. It was since the early 1990's that the structure of migration flows to the Czech Republic has seen a drastic increase in the number of former Soviet citizens, whereas before 1991 the primary migrants to the Czech Republic were citizens of Vietnam and China.

This period marks the beginning of Armenians' migration to the Czech Re-

¹Jan Cernik notes: «in the Czech Republic emigrants from the former USSR and Yugoslavia found a legacy of socialism similar to the situation in their countries. This made it easier for them to enter a new life» [2, p.8].

public. Among nations of the former USSR, Armenians rank fourth by size of their community after Ukrainians, Russians and Belorussians. Thus, Armenians are the largest non-Slavic nation of the former USSR residing in the Czech Republic. According to recent data published by the Czech Statistical Research Institute (2004) the structure of the Armenian community was as follows: 645 Armenians resided in the country on visas issued for the period of more than 90 days which is not considered to be a full permanent resident status, however, is quite close to it [3]. In addition, 405 Armenians resided in the country with long-term residence permits [4]. The percentage of Armenian migrants residing in the country on the basis of residence permits issued for a long-term period (61.4%) is one of the highest as compared to other ethnic groups. Only Romanians (75%) and Croatians (67%) have higher percentages [2, p.11].

The two main groups of Armenian migrants were subsequently broken into the following subgroups in terms of the grounds for permanent residence permits:

Table 1

Grounds on which Armenians received the Czech permanent residence permit in 2004, number of cases (source: Czech Statistics Institute)

Born in the Czech Republic	Humanitarian reasons	Family reunification (one of family members is a Czech citizen)	Family reunification (one of family members is not a Czech citizen)	Permanent resident status granted after 10 years of permanent residence in the country	Permanent resident status granted after 8 years of permanent residence in the country	Other
2	44	169	404	8	2	16

Table 2

Grounds for receiving long-term Czech visas (more than 90 days) by Armenians in 2004, number of cases (source: Czech Statistics Institute)

Business in the Czech Republic	Share in capital registered in the Czech Republic	Employment	Study	Family reunification (one of family members is a Czech citizen)	Family reunification (none of family members is a Czech citizen)	Refugee status applicants	Other
75	62	118	15	2	108	16	9

Migrants seeking asylum and applying for refugee status in the Czech Republic deserve special attention. As far as Armenia is recognized as a democratic country with rapidly growing economy, its citizens may not count on obtaining refugee status in the European Union. Thus, in 1991-2003 out of 3,093 Armenians who applied for refugee status in the Czech Republic, only 149 (4.8%) were granted it [1, s.48]. Nevertheless, although the likelihood of obtaining refugee status is rather bleak, in 2005-2006 the percentage of Armenians among foreign nationals seeking such status in the Czech Republic increased from 1% to 2%. Anyway, Armenians constitute a very small number among foreign asylum seekers, which is clearly seen in the tables below:

Table 3

Main nations whose citizens seek asylum in the Czech Republic¹

Percentage of foreign nationals applying for refugee status, 2005		Percentage of foreign nationals applying for refugee status, October 2006	
1. Ukraine	25%	1. Ukraine	16%
2. Slovakia	18%	2. Iraq	11%
3. India	9%	3. Russia	11%
4. China	7%	4. Belorussia	8%
5. Russia	6%	5. Nigeria	6%
6. Belorussia	5%	6. China	5%
7. Viet Nam	5%	7. Kazakhstan	5%
8. Mongolia	3%	8. Mongolia	4%
9. Nigeria	2%	9. Cuba	4%
10. Moldavia	1%	10. Sri Lanka	3%
13. Armenia	1%	13. Armenia	2%

Unlike refugee status, many Armenians have successfully acquired Czech citizenship. In 1999-2003 over 10% of Armenian migrants obtained Czech citizenship. Although since 1999 the number of cases when citizenship was granted has been declining, it is necessary to understand that the peak of the Armenian migration to the Czech Republic was in 1990-1992, whereas the peak of granting Czech citizenship to Armenian migrants in accordance with Czech laws was 8-10 years later, that is in 1999-2000².

¹ Data obtained from reports of the Statistics Institute of the Czech Republic.

² Czech Law establishes that a person can qualify for Czech citizenship if he/she has been living in the country for no less than 5 years, but no more than 15 years (as a rule during the first 5 years a foreigner lives on a temporary visa which later can be replaced by a permanent residence permit), has not been convicted and has a satisfactory command of Czech language.

Meanwhile, the percentage of Armenians among the migrants who were granted Czech citizenship is considerably lower than that of Armenians in the total number of migrants residing in the country. The table below shows that more Armenians were granted Czech national passports as part of a routine procedure and not as refugees.

Table 4

*Dynamics of receiving Czech citizenship by Armenian nationals in 1999-2003,
number of cases [2, p.16]*

1999	2000 total	2000 refugees only	2001 total	2001 refugees only	2002 total	2002 refugees only	2003 total	2003 refugees only
40	36	28	20	9	8	2	18	7

Czech researchers point out that Armenians are one of the most loyal ethnic minorities living in the country [2, p.43]. Most Armenians like other ethnic minorities are in Prague where 80% of the Armenian community resides. Another center of the Armenian community is Brno with 200 people followed by Usti-nad-Labem, a small town on the border with Germany, where only 5 Armenian families live [6, p.3].

The families that moved to the Czech Republic in 1990-1993 are the bulk of the Armenian community. Eighteen per cent of Armenians polled by the expert from the Czech Ministry of Interior Jaroslav Marousek who specializes in ethnic migration, stated that the main reason for their migration was the difficult social situation in their homeland. Sixteen percent stated that they wanted to raise their children in a developed country; eight per cent admitted that emigration was chosen to escape military service and the same number stated political persecutions¹ as the main reason for moving to the Czech Republic. Two per cent of migrants stated mixed Armenian-Azeri marriage which was not accepted in Armenia. The rest of those participating in the poll were either unable to state any reason for migration, or mentioned several reasons.

In his report, Marousek notes that for many migrants from Armenia the Czech Republic is a country where they do not plan to stay for a long time. About two thirds of Armenians who settled in the Czech Republic initially made futile efforts to move to the United States or Western Europe. Their final decision to settle in the Czech Republic was made considering that the country's imminent

¹ [6, s.9]. Percentage of foreign nationals who cite «political persecutions» as the main reason for leaving their countries is traditionally high in Europe independently of the country from which a person arrives as well as the validity of his/her claims. Often following thorough scrutiny these claims turn out to be false, however migrants tend to believe that political asylum seekers get residence permits easier and quicker.

integration into the European Union will make it easier for them to move to the countries of their final destination. In the majority of cases, Armenians indicated Austria, Belgium, Germany, the Netherlands and France as the countries of their final destination.

Economic integration of the Armenian community into Czech society is quite unique (see table below.) The overwhelming majority of Armenians run their own business, primarily small food stores, shoe-making and dress-making shops. Jewelry business is also very popular in the Armenian community. The percentage of the unemployed among Czech Armenians is below 5%. It is interesting that only half of the Armenians who are hired employees work for Czech companies. The rest of the Armenians who are hired employees work either for foreign companies or formally Czech companies, however, with predominantly Armenian management or staff. [6, p.22].

Table 5

Occupations held by Armenians in the Czech Republic

Private entrepreneurs		41%
hired employees	in a Czech company	13%
	in a foreign company	4%
	in a company with predominantly Armenian staff	9%
Students		8%
Unemployed		5%
Housewives		5%
Pensioners		10%
Children		5%

Interestingly, according to statistics, the occupation structure of the Armenians prior to their arrival in the Czech Republic was diametrically opposite to that of after their arrival from Armenia.

Table 6

Occupations held by Czech Armenians prior to their migration to the Czech Republic

Hired employees	62%
Private entrepreneurs	5%
Unemployed	9%
Students	7%
Did not work due to age (child/pensioner)	17%

A specific economic and social problem faced by the Armenian community and pointed out by Czech researchers is the so-called «clientelism» or unlawful relationships within a community. This type of relationships is typical of highly closed communities with disproportionately broad economic and social links inside and their absence outside the community, a high number of illegal deals (e.g. recruitment of employees without a contract, paying cash against big purchases without registration, etc.) «Clientelism» which is widely spread among the migrants from the former Soviet Union is on the one hand a convenient form of life organization for many migrants who appeared in a foreign country («clientelism» guarantees preservation of habitual ties among members of the community and sufficiently high degree of mutual support with minimal interference from culturally alien authorities of a new country) and on the other hand, creates favorable conditions for abuse such as extortions, exploitation of the most socially vulnerable members of community, etc. According to the expert of the Czech Ministry of Interior Jan Cernik, among ethnic minorities living in the Czech Republic, «clientelism» is widely spread within the Ukrainian and Vietnamese communities, and its level within the Armenian community is higher than average [2, p.40].

The second specific problem of the Armenian community is the percentage of violations related to illegal migration which is quite high as compared to other foreign nationals. According to the report by the employees of the International Organization for Migration (IOM) Dusan Drbohlav and Petra Ezzeddine-Luksikova prepared at the request of the Czech Ministry of Labor, Armenians are the fifth among the representatives of ethnic groups apprehended while illegally crossing the Czech border [1, p.49].

Nevertheless, the above mentioned problems cannot overshadow the overall positive picture of Armenians' integration into Czech society. Czechs hold quite positive attitude towards Armenians. The extent to which the Czech authorities value the importance of integration of the small Armenian community into Czech society is proved by the fact that the website «Residences in the Czech Republic» supported by the Czech government has an Armenian version along with the main Czech version as well as versions in English, Russian, Ukrainian and Vietnamese¹. If some conflicts occur between Czechs and Armenians, the cause is often the traditionally cautious attitude of Czechs towards foreigners [see, for example, 8]. Many experts point out that such attitude towards foreigners is frequently prompted by Czech mass media that, unlike Czech society, traditionally support conservative and xenophobic sentiments. For instance, discrimination against foreigners during recruitment for work is described by Czech media

¹ Armenian version can be accessed at <http://www.am.domavcr.cz/>

as something natural, moreover, the majority of articles discussing migration directly or indirectly call for toughening of migration law. Czech journalists prefer to portray migrants as a source of increased crime and a threat to locals in terms of competition for jobs [see, for example, 9].

The living conditions of Armenian migrants in the Czech Republic are similar to those of local population. Almost half of migrants rent an apartment and quarter of them has their own dwelling.

Table 7

Living conditions of Armenian migrants in the Czech Republic [6, p.32]

Have their own apartment	8%
Have their own house	17%
Rent an apartment/house	48%
Accommodation provided under refugee settlement program	8%
Accommodation provided by employer	11%
Hostel	5%
Living with relatives or friends	3%

Integration of the Armenian community into Czech society is yet uneven in terms of language. Although the children born in the country or the ones who left Armenia with their parents at early age demonstrate as a rule excellent command of the Czech language, the elder generation largely has some difficulties in learning a new language. According to the Ministry of Interior, the level of knowledge of the Czech language within the Armenian community is as follows [6, s.28].

Table 8

Level of Armenian migrants' knowledge of the Czech language

High level (fluently)	31%
Middle level	42%
Low level	27%

The fact that Armenian migrants freely speak the Russian language which was a mandatory subject at Czech schools up to the end of the 1980's has particular impact on the language integration of the Armenian community. On the one hand, the knowledge of Russian may make it easier for Armenians to communicate with locals, particularly those of the elder generation. On the other hand, some affinity between the Czech and Russian languages sometimes leads to a situation where Armenian migrants are simply reluctant to study the language,

hoping that the knowledge of Russian is sufficient to understand basic Czech. It is worth mentioning that sociological polls indicate that Armenians living in the Czech Republic are most irritated by the fact that they are often taken for Russians. The Armenians polled during the sociological survey complained that locals regularly ask them questions as to «whether Armenia is part of Russia,» «whether Armenians use Cyrillic letters» and «whether Armenians are a sort of Russians» [6, s.36]¹.

Such attitudes towards Armenians are caused by the fact that the Armenian community is small and Armenians often establish contacts with migrants from other ex-Soviet republics mostly due to their ability to freely communicate in Russian. Nevertheless, experts point out that of all representatives of ex-Soviet countries, Armenians are the least participating in the life of the «Russian-speaking» community, preferring to develop social ties within Armenian groups or integrate directly into Czech society [2, p.44].

As was mentioned the children of Armenians living in the Czech Republic demonstrate a high level of knowledge of the Czech language. Successful language integration of the Armenian children forces their parents to seek additional ways of stimulating children's interest towards the native language. The Armenian school established at the Department of Philosophy of the University of Prague is the main tool for upbringing children within Armenian cultural values. The school provides classes in Armenian language, literature and culture. Classes are given (on pro bono basis) on Saturdays by the employees of Prague-based Armenian service of Radio Free Europe. About 40 children age 6-14 attend the school which, however, is not certified as an educational facility, but registered as a public association [1, s.51].

Armenians living in the Czech Republic are well educated which can be seen from the table below.

Table 9

Education level of Armenians (including children) residing in the Czech Republic [6, s.31]

Higher education	36%
University student	13%
Secondary education	31%
Secondary school student	3%
Primary school	7%
Primary school student	10%

¹ In fact, according to the same polls, Czechs often take Armenians living in Czech Republic for Greeks, Spaniards, Italians, Yugoslavs and even Roma. In this case, apparently, the small size of the community creates such attitudes.

It is interesting that the Armenians who have been living in the Czech Republic for a long period admit that although Armenian families still prefer their children to obtain higher education, the subject of education has changed. Along with traditional areas such as economy, law and medicine, there is an increasing number of Armenians who opt for sociology and philosophy. There are almost no Armenians among the students of Oriental Studies, in particular Iranian Studies, so much popular in today's Armenia.

In general, as some surveys indicate, the participation of Armenians in the scientific and cultural life of the Czech Republic is much higher than one could expect given the size of the Armenian community. «The involvement of Armenians in various areas of cultural and social life of the Czech Republic is quite high. Armenians are working as volunteers in a number of NGOs, teach at Universities and participate in the majority of cultural festivals organized in the Czech Republic. Sociological surveys show that Armenians persistently and successfully struggle for recognition of their high education level in the Czech Republic as well as readily and enthusiastically enroll with Czech universities» [2. p.43].

Despite its small size, the Armenian community of the Czech Republic leads more than active social life. The first attempt to establish a centralized organization within the Armenian community was made in 1995 when Armenian entrepreneur Sergey Grigoryan set up the Czech-Armenian Society. Initially it was planned that the organization will unite all Armenians living in the Czech Republic and deal with issues pertaining to the relationships between Armenians and Czech society, including information dissemination, protection of the rights of the Armenian minority, etc. Yet the work of the Society hardly yielded any tangible results. Two years after the establishment, the organization had to limit its activity area to Prague only due to lack of members. Although the Society regularly holds memorial events devoted to the Genocide of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire, the rest of the time it shows no activity. Yet in 2001 the Society managed to organize a meeting of Czech Armenians with Armenia's Consul in Vienna following which a number of problems on cooperation between the Government of Armenia and the Armenian community of the Czech Republic were resolved.

Another Armenian organization the «Civil Commonwealth Armenian House» turned out to be more successful. The organization was established in 2000 and today has more than 60 members. What distinguishes this particular organization from others is that both Czech Armenians and Armenians living in

Armenia and, more importantly, the Czechs interested in the Armenian culture can join it as members. Today the organization includes 21 Czechs and 10 more persons who are neither citizens of the Czech Republic, nor Armenia. The «Civil Commonwealth Armenian House» provides legal counseling to migrants, primarily on migration law. Those who wish may take computer classes or obtain other skills that will help them find a better paid job. Since April 2002 the organization has been publishing a monthly magazine «Nairi» (with a circulation of about 800 copies) which also highlights issues pertaining to protection of migrants.

Apart from the «Nairi» monthly magazine, there are at least two other publications issued in the Czech Republic and directly associated with the Armenian community. The first one is the Armenian-language «Orer» monthly magazine (with a circulation from 700 to 900 copies)¹. The «Orer» monthly which has been published since 1999 is also distributed in Germany, Austria, Poland and Ukraine. The main hook of the publication is its reports on the life of Armenians in other parts of the world, from Europe and former Soviet republics to South America. Hakob Asatryan is the present Editor-in-Chief of the magazine.

Another interesting instrument of promoting Armenian culture is the «Armenian Newspaper» almanac which, however, is not released on a regular basis. Published partly in the Armenian and partly in the Czech language, the almanac is developed by Armenian and Czech students of the Department of Philosophy at the University of Prague. The content of the almanac is very typical of publications produced by the Arts students and include news on students' life, travel diaries as well as translations of foreign literature (primarily Armenian) into the Czech language.

The majority of researchers stress the presence of strong and active ties between the Armenian community of the Czech Republic and Armenia. Indeed, Jan Cernik notes in his report: «The Armenian community has much stronger ties with the relatives and friends who remained in the homeland than the other immigrants living in the Czech Republic. Armenians regularly provide financial assistance to both their countrymen living in the Czech Republic and the relatives in Armenia. Strong social ties among Armenians form part of their national identity. Establishment of unions and communes is turning into a method of building new social cells. Many Armenians get irritated at seeing estrangement and indif-

¹ Official website of the magazine is at <http://www.orer.cz/contacts.html>. Unfortunately, the website updates leave much to be desired as there is almost no information except a link to the Armenian Russian-language forum <http://www.openarmenia.ru> as well as brief information about the magazine, including cover pages of recent issues.

ference typical of relationships within Czech society. Unlike the Czechs, Armenians strive to maintain close ties with their countrymen and be abreast of developments within their friends' families.» [2, p.43].

Summarizing the above, one should note that although due to its small size the Armenian community of the Czech Republic is not a key player in relationships between immigrants and the Czech State, its significance should not be underestimated. The Armenian community differs from the rest of immigrants by higher level of education; their willingness to further improve their education as well as their desire to make sure their children obtain the best education is generally even higher and stronger than among locals. All researchers note that the Armenian community demonstrates strong preparedness to integrate into the Czech society, is law-abiding and socially active. Economic activity of Czech Armenians mainly concentrates in the area of private entrepreneurship as the majority of Armenians are engaged in small businesses and are owners or co-owners of small companies specializing in service delivery or trade. The number of non-governmental organizations, publications and cultural unions existing within the Armenian community is much higher than one could expect given its small size. Insufficient assistance provided by the consular service of Armenia (due to absence of Armenian Embassy or Consulate in the Czech Republic) is largely compensated by civic activity of Armenian organizations operating in the country. Indeed, the problems relating to the legal and social assistance to Armenians residing in the Czech Republic are solved by the community itself. Although quite many Armenians are still considering further migration to Western Europe, Czech authorities perceive Armenians as loyal residents and readily grant them Czech citizenship. Successfully integrated into the Czech society, the Armenian community at the same time maintains ties with relatives and friends living in Armenia, thus showing an example of enriching a society of this Central European country with traditional Armenian values such as mutual support, strong social ties, openness and social mobility.

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