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## Brno's grocery cosmopolitanism: ethnically owned food stores as important places of migrants' space negotiation and belonging

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**Research proposal for course SOC 585- Migration and Transnationalism**

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Brno, 16.1.2014

## Introduction

Little China, Little Italy, SoHo, Bricklane, Kreuzberg... the names of the predominantly ethnic districts in today's global cities have become well-known. With their vibrant cultures and restaurants serving traditional food, they have become favourite tourist destinations. They constitute favourite dish on tourists' checklist when "consumption of elsewhere" is desired. But not only for visitors, also for the social scientist are these specific meeting spots usually very appealing. They can see (or at least try to understand) what dynamics and mechanisms are hidden under the daily modus operandi of such multi-ethnic neighbourhoods. Despite inexistence of clearly bounded ethnic districts in Czech cities, we would like to propose a research that aims to elaborate on the daily practices established in groceries and bistros owned by people with migrant background.

Even though before 1989 Czech Republic hasn't been a traditionally migrant destination, since the Velvet revolution the trend is changing and the number of foreigners living in Czech towns and cities is increasing annually (Czech statistical office 2010). The migrant communities, usually concentrating in greater cities, struggle to find their way of earning a living and also day to day cohabiting within the Czech society. Despite Czech Republic being defined as the ethnic state rather than the civic one, the country offers some inclusive and supportive policies. However, still the great part of an immigrant's success in host society depends on individual factors such as the initial social status, access to social and economic capital, personal features like creativity and endurance, but also supportive networks on national and transnational level. Migrants' access to the mainstream national labour market is often impeded by bureaucracy, language or cultural barriers or eventually also prejudices from the side of majority. Therefore many migrants decide to start the business on their own. This happens predominantly in gastronomy and merchandise sectors.<sup>1</sup> The so called ethnic entrepreneurship, previously known predominantly from global metropolises of Western Europe and the USA, pop-out also in nowadays "globally less connected" central European cities (Glick Schiller & Caglar 2013:2).

We believe that these ethnically owned enterprises in Central European context deserve scholarly attention. We understand them to be important spaces of one's negotiation

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<sup>1</sup> Everts (2010) however points out, that even though the majority of ethnic entrepreneurs engage in their businesses with food, it is not something they would naturally do if they had a chance to pick something different. In most cases it is also not the sort of business activity they would do in their home countries. According to Everts research, their decision is strongly influenced by the overall social setting in host countries that favours the "consumption of elsewhere". Moreover, it is also due to the specific networks and channels established in their home countries that enable them to start business in food industry and through which they are able to acquire ingredients such as e.g. exotic spices.

of belonging, may it be the shopkeeper or seller with migrant background or a customer. We assume that these enterprises enable people with migrant background not only to support their living financially, but that they also constitute an important space of gaining visibility and negotiating their place in the society through daily encounters and practices. These daily interactions constitute the lived reality of particular streets and city districts and could help to dissolve symbolical barriers between ethnic groups and enhance tolerance in the society. However, taking into account e.g. the results of European Values study (2008) which has shown that almost one third of all Czech citizens had stated that they would prefer not to have migrants or gastarbeiters as their neighbours, we may reasonably assume that also the opposite mechanism could be in place.<sup>2</sup> Instead of being the ladders towards upward mobility, it could also be the case that ethnically owned enterprises are the places of prejudice, exploitation and discrimination.<sup>3</sup>

## Literature review

When we want to talk about one's negotiation of belonging through daily practices, inclusion, but also about migrants in general, we first need to understand what the overall society structure and attitude towards migration is. Bartoš (2011) elaborates on Czech societal climate and abilities and willingness of Czechs to include "those that differ". While demonstrating on European Social Survey data, he proposes that Czech society is still characteristic with rather reserved attitudes towards anything that is foreign, be it the colour of complexion, culture, language or ethnicity of the person. The attitude is not openly xenophobic; it is generally tolerant, but not welcoming and including. He also touches slightly upon the comparison with countries of Western Europe, where the difference is being incorporated in a better manner. The difference in coping mechanisms is ascribed partly to the lack of the experience of being a receiving country as well as to the still relatively small number of migrants. Bartoš refers to Jeffrey Alexander's (2006) concepts of solidarity and civil society and concludes that Czech society is, or at least had been at the time of the research, typical with reluctance to extend the core solidarity so that it would include migrants. Their presence in society is accepted and tolerated, but as a rule they tend to remain

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<sup>2</sup> See Kusá & Tížik 2009.

<sup>3</sup> It is especially Vietnamese non-stop groceries that have provoked massive internet discussion in the past few years. These ethnically owned enterprises are seen as a serious threat to the „healthy Czech labour market“, with their cheaper and presumably lower quality imported food as a „threat to the health of Czech people“ and more general also as a threat to the „Czech culture“. Internet with its eternal democratic space therefore provides a platform where ethnocentric and xenophobic opinions could cherish and enter public discourse. See e.g. Janský's contribution to [eurabia.parlamentnilisty.cz](http://eurabia.parlamentnilisty.cz).

members of out-groups. The reluctance to include is strengthened when it comes to the migrants of so called third countries.<sup>4</sup> Rabušic (2005) suggests that rather than to support and appreciate difference through inclusion, Czech society calls for assimilation.

This is, however, not only Czech case. It touches upon the issues typical for whole region of Central Europe. When we compare past multicultural and multi-ethnic Central European milieu from the beginning of 20th century with present strong nation states with deficient minority policies, we might wonder how this paradox has come into life. Vašečka (2009) demonstrates this trend on the case of Slovakia and explains the mechanism of “othering” which is in place in countries that build their nation on the conception of primordial identity. The minorities and migrants serve as those “others” towards whom the Slovak nation should make itself distinct and through this process of differentiation build and strengthen their identity. The more the identities and cultures differ the easier is the process of differentiation and the harder the integration is. Strong differentiation gives rise to prejudices. In this context, Allport helps us to understand what ethnic prejudice means. He explains it as a generalization and simplification based on the perceived characteristic of a certain (ethnic) group. Prejudice can be directed against the whole group or a member who represents it (Allport 1958).

It is also important to pay attention to the structure of “the others”<sup>5</sup>. The respective migrant groups are not homogenous and differ among themselves as well as inside themselves, when it comes to their integration strategies. Factors like country of origin, culture, but also social strata and different forms of capitals are important factors. In Czech setting the biggest attention has been directed on Ukrainians and Vietnamese migrants. Hofirek & Nekorjak (2010) focus on Vietnamese minority and their economical behaviour and bring into attention several particularities of this group. Even though Vietnamese are the third biggest ethnic group, after Ukrainians and Slovaks, with over 40% they constitute the biggest part of all entrepreneurs with migrant background. 91% of economically active Vietnamese run their own business. So called Vietnamese migrant economy is relatively strong and independent from the major labour market. As such, it plays significant role in Vietnamese integration strategies as they don’t need to fully rely on the opportunities offered to them by the Czech society. As authors believe, this behaviour shouldn’t be understood as a way of defying integration through official channels and attempt to keep distance, it should

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<sup>4</sup> Not from European Union or other countries of the developed countries.

<sup>5</sup> Overstressed like this we would like to emphasize how this category of otherness is being socially constructed. Many scholars note that race, ethnicity and nation are sole social constructs. However, still, these categories serve as a map of distinctions that enable people to make sense of their daily lives.

rather be understood as a logical consequence of Vietnamese migrant experience in Czech Republic and other factors such as their culture, family networks and spatial set up. Hofirek & Nekorjak (2010) also make terminological contribution when they suggest the use of term immigrant economics as opposed to ethnic economics as used in e.g. United States. With this distinction they want to underline the fact that while in West ethnic economics usually includes also second and third generation of migrants, in Czech setting it most often concerns new comers. With accent given on the word immigrant, the authors want to bring into attention all set of issues and potential hardship that the migrants need to address upon their arrival to new country.

One's perception of belonging could differ depending on whether he lives in a rather big or a rather small city or in countryside. Vašečka (2009) suggests that inhabitants of bigger cities keep lesser distance towards foreigners and more often consider them to be beneficial for society. Glick Schiller and Caglar don't agree with such simplified view on the interaction of city scale with social inclusion. They rather understand cities of various sizes and importance to be on an imagined scale where not only the number of inhabitants plays role, but the cities are posited on the scale according to their different political, cultural and economic importance and as a result they could be understood as up-scale migrant friendly, down-scale rather unfriendly or anything in between. They stress the importance of digressing from the global cities and paying attention also to the cities of lesser status where interesting migration mechanisms could be revealed. As the authors believe, "scalar approach to migrant dynamics enables us to incorporate the uneven character of globalisation and its dynamics into our analysis" (2009:196).

In our understanding of daily practices in shops, global dimension plays significant role as well. Regarding the effects of transnational practices and ties on one's ability to integrate into the host society, Snel, Engbersen & Leerkes (2006) negate the assumption that transnationalism impedes integration. They propose that actions leading to transnationalism and integration are two independent set of behaviours that don't hamper each other and could even mutually influence and strengthen each other. Portes et al. note, that transnational ties and from them arising access to resources and networks does not necessarily mean competitive pay-off (2001 in Jones, Ram & Theodorakopoulos 2010).

Moving from the rather general theory closer towards the main interest of the research, we may state that the issue of ethnic entrepreneurship has relatively good coverage. Since 1980's, when the term came into life, there has been number of researches trying to unmask different aspects of the complex issue of integration through business related practices. This is

however mostly the case for historically immigrant destinations such as e.g. US, Netherlands, Great Britain or Germany. Similar studies, although with important exceptions (see e.g. aforementioned contribution of Hofirek and Nekorjak (2010)) are rarely conducted in Czech conditions. Therefore despite context being different, we need to base our research on experience from abroad. Among the others, research with thematically closest focus to ours conducted Everts (2010) in Germany. He draws on his qualitative data acquired from ethnic entrepreneurs of different nationalities and offers several interesting conclusions that could serve as springboard informing our research. He touches upon the issues of ethnicity fetish, importance of belonging, remembering and shopping habits and socialising. Using ethnographical approach he tries to understand how the relationships between the vendors and customers are being established through daily practices and how do the people involved make sense of it. Everts also asks an important question and problematize his research interest. He tries to deconstruct our perception of what is and what isn't ethnic entrepreneurship. Does the ethnicity really play role when it comes to the daily shop interactions? He concludes that this ethnic perception is not universal to every situation. Among other such contradictory examples we might mention that some of Everts' respondents claimed not to visit the shops because of their social ties, specific assortment or ethnic vertone, but simply rather because they prefer smaller entrepreneurs to the supermarkets. Be it ethnically owned shop or not, they come for regular visit, ethnicity of the shopkeeper doesn't inform their choice at all. We may expect this to be similar in Czech Republic therefore we need to be aware of orientalisation of the expected researched reality.

### **Research focus**

In the research we focus on the enterprises owned by the people with immigration background. With Everts (2010) we understand under this classification persons who either came into Czech Republic from the foreign country, or come from the family where at least one parent has such a background. We understand the differences and particularities of the respective enterprises (e.g. street vendors, shops selling clothes, non-stop and regular groceries, restaurants, fast food bistros). We want to focus on groceries and fast-foods that enable people to sit inside. This decision was made because both forms are distinct with relatively high fluctuation of customers, physical space of the shop, provide opportunity to sell ethnic food and are frequent places of small-talk.

In Czech conditions, we expect these businesses to be owned predominantly by Vietnamese (mainly groceries, but also bistros), Turkish, Iraqi and Syrians (mainly bistros). In

Brno as compared e.g. with Prague there are not so many Indians in the food industry. When there are some, rather than working in a bistros, they can be seen in restaurants.

The research takes place in the city centre of Brno, in the 1 km radius from Naměstí Svobody. It is a space with highest concentration of bistros and few groceries. Example of Brno is interesting because the city can't be considered global, e.g. in comparison with Prague or Vienna, and therefore the processes of migrants' incorporation are shaped by different forces than in other ethnically more diverse cities. Census in 2011 confirmed that the highest migration flow was typical for Prague and Central Czech Republic, whereas in South Moravian region was relatively low.<sup>6</sup> Therefore also in accord with Glick Schiller and Caglar (2009), unmasking migrant dynamics and coping strategies in Brno could be interesting due to its distinct political, cultural and economic importance.

Based on the preliminary literature review several research topics could be specified. We don't want to focus predominantly on the institutional setting, even though it can't be omitted. We rather put into the focal point of our interest the daily life of the vendors and customers. Their daily life is constructed through practices and micro interactions with their surroundings. We try to understand how they make sense out of it. Therefore our broadest research questions are as follows: **What kind of social processes and daily activities are taking place in the enterprises owned by the migrant groups in Brno? What does it mean for them to own or work in such a store?** More specifically we would like to address different integration strategies and therefore we ask: **What can the interaction with customers reveal about shopkeepers' modus operandi within the Czech society? Does their ethnicity play role in these interactions?** We assume that these enterprises could serve also as important contact point when it comes to the co-patriots community ties in the host society. Therefore not only the impact of shop ownerships on distinction what is in- and out-group is important, but also within the migrant communities. Through the specific ethnic food and supplies the links with native culture and practices could be sustained. **Does shop ownership stimulate one's involvement in transnational networks?** And finally, we also would like to inquire **if there are any differences between the shops' type different ethnic groups.**<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> See Census 2011 results available on [www.scitani.cz](http://www.scitani.cz).

<sup>7</sup> Even though frequently used in this research proposal, category of ethnicity and ethnic is not understood as a static overwhelming classification. Under this category we undeWe admit, that different ethnic origin and accompanying distinctions does not necessarily need to be the most

## **Methodology**

The research is based on inductive qualitative approach. Despite being grounded in the literature review, the starting point is broad and open ended. Rather than having a strict research question we have specified research focuses and therefore the reformulations and specification of research questions are expected throughout the research.

First of all, preliminary research is to be conducted with aim to choose enterprises and establish access to the community. Given the potential sensitivities of investigation of business owners, gaining access and establishing trust is very important step which can't be done in too much haste. It is to be done through informal interviews and observation. Following, chosen shopkeepers are engaged in more depth. As we want to study people's actions and accounts in everyday life, approaches of ethnography and visual ethnography are used. We aim to provide deep understanding of what is going on in the places (Hammersley & Atkinson 2007). The stress is given on how the communication partners make sense of the reality. Therefore method of participative visual ethnography helps to explain the interpretations while providing visual aids in form of photographs.

The size and structure of the sampling depends on how the research will be proceeding. Method of snow-ball is used to contact new respondents as we expect them to have well established networks among themselves.

## **Pre-research**

Up to this date, we have conducted two preliminary observations. One was done in the non-stop grocery on Česká Street which I visited two times and the other in Kebab bistro on Vevří where I had spent over one hour.

In the first case, due to its position on the main communication line the non-stop grocery is frequently visited by people transiting from school or work back home. Therefore, according to my observations, the interaction is usually influenced by the sense of haste and doesn't favour small talks. When I had tried to break this, what I suppose to be a common culture in the store, It didn't seem to be comfortable neither for the seller nor for the people standing in the row in front of the cash desk. However, this shop has another particularity, which is long opening hours. I assume that the overall climate could be subjected to change when it gets late and the amount of customers get smaller. At that time, the interaction could supposedly be more appreciated from both sides. Another factor, that strongly influenced the communication, was seller's inability to speak the language fluently. This could build barriers on both sides.



The interior of the grocery doesn't distinguish itself from other similar stores on the first glance. It is characteristic with piles of assortments typical for all food stores. However, rather in the back part of the store, there are specialized shelves where Turkish and Arabic goods are sold. Tahini, halva, okra, olives, black tea, canned legumes and other edibles typical for Arabic cuisine could be found there. Regarding the music, instead of Radio Krokodýl or similar radio channels usually played in Brno's groceries, the music that was playing in the shop was in Arabic. Upon request I was told it was Egyptian. Together with the specialized shelf this spoke to me of the shopkeeper's attempt to individualize the space a bit while still fulfilling the criteria how a "regular" grocery is expected to look like.

The Kebab bistro seems to tell a different story. It is a bit of a Turkey in the middle of Brno. Despite giving up on a Turkey related name often used for bistros, like Adnan, Istanbul or Izmir, and picking up the name Best Kebab in Brno, immediately after the entrance one might get an essence of how does it look like in Turkey. The wall is full of mirrors that optically make the space larger. Over the mirrors, there are huge poster pictures of Turkey's monuments and famous places. The interior equipment is supplemented with a washing basin for customers, which speaks to me strongly of the clean hands culture typical for Turkey. Besides for Europe already almost native choice of Kebabs, the offer is enriched by choice of bulgur (in the bistro called Turkish rice), Ayran (favourite Turkish yoghurt drink), Turkish soda and Turkish black tea served in small round glasses.

The way the two middle aged boys of Turkish origin communicate with the customers is very cheerful. Their ability to speak Czech almost fluently allows them to make jokes and to be jovial, especially towards female customers. Sense of Turkish tea culture is sustained and all visitors are offered a cup of tea. Ayran is also strongly recommended as a perfect drink to have with kebab. All in all, in the bistro I got an impression that not only the food, which itself is already "ethnic", but partially also images and bits of culture are being offered to the customers.

## **Conclusion**

Due to the limited time, so far the pre-research hasn't brought much analytically interesting material. The sole observation didn't allow getting under the surface of relations and practices that took place in ethnically owned stores. In the future it needs to be supplemented by interviews or by prolonged visits.

The realization of two observations has been however valuable experience which has helped us to understand particularities of different enterprises (grocery vs. bistro) when it

comes to the dynamics between sellers and customers. It also revealed till what extent the specific locality could influence the dynamics itself. Therefore, for the desired research focus it might be better to choose an ethnically owned enterprise which is further from main communication channel and allows more interaction with the customers and people from the neighbourhood. Even though after the first two observations it seems that in the grocery there is not much to be observed when it comes to the mutual interaction, we would like to stick to the format and try to find a grocery which provides more space for this.

The two enterprises distinguished themselves in the extent to which the pieces of immigrants' lived-worlds have been mediated and offered to the customers. Whereas in the first case, while still present, the ethnic food was hidden and subordinated to what is expected to be found in the regular grocery, in the second case the pieces of Turkish dining culture were openly present and cheerfully intermediated to the people. How does this affect the processes taking place in the store? What does it mean for the customers to eat in the place? Does it mean anything at all? This is to be answered later on.

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