

‘It Seems to be Impossible to Think Outside the Box’

Vít Novotný calls for a deep and thorough reflection on the consequences of demographic change. He adds, “we’re miles behind where we should be in debating how we can reshape our economy and our society.” And immigration cannot be the main solution. Politicians unfortunately keep thinking only about the next elections, according to Novotný.

*The interview was conducted by Dr. Dirk Bornschein**

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Vít Novotný is an expert for migration and demography at the Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies. He holds a Ph.D. in Government from the University of Strathclyde in Glasgow, an MPA from California State University East Bay, and an MA in European Studies from the Central European University in Prague. He is a regular contributor to international media.

Dirk Bornschein: Mr. Novotny, the topic of migration is viewed from many perspectives. From which perspective do you observe migration or immigration in Czechia?

Vít Novotný: I work for a European-level political foundation. In that capacity, I've observed migration from all possible viewpoints—economy, security, culture, identity, housing, everything—and the same goes for when I look at migration developments in Czechia. For me, migration is a multidisciplinary field.

Like any other country, Czechia has a specific history. Could you help us place the country between emigration and immigration?

Vít Novotný: Let me shed light on the last 30 to 35 years. In the first years of the post-communist transition, Czechia was mostly a country of emigration. Very quickly, it also turned into a transition country for migrants to come and then continue further on. At some point it became a country of immigration, certainly by 2022.

Do you refer to the war in Ukraine?

Vít Novotný: Yes. We received hundreds of thousands in a matter of weeks.

Societal debates very often change in time. Which were the dominant debates in these last 10 years in Czechia? And what were the deeper roots of these debates?

Vít Novotný: The economic aspects of immigration were always there. Ukrainians, Slovaks, and others started coming early in the 1990s, especially for jobs, but Ukrainian immigration in that time numerically was nothing compared to what it is now.

The economy was definitely present in the debate. The other aspect has been culture and identity, and that's been there constantly, most prominently in 2015–16 and in the following years when the debate became almost hysterical with regard to culture, identity, and security. It's calmed down a little bit since then, but the culture and identity aspects are still there quite strongly.

The economic debate exists, but it's not as prominent as it deserves to be.

In any country we have done interviews, the deeper roots of the discussion are somewhat different. Very often one layer of the roots comes after another. May I ask you to develop your idea a little bit more?

Vít Novotný: There's a strong historical determinant here. Czech linguistic nationalism was formed in 19th century in Austria-Hungary. And it became a dominant force in politics and society. And it was always formulated as a defensive movement vis-à-vis the German-speaking element in the Empire.

Our nation is based on language, certainly not on genetic characteristics. At that time Bohemia and Moravia were mixed Czech, German, Jewish, Polish, Hungarian, etc. Individuals sometimes even chose their language. Then in 1918 Czechoslovakia was created, a multinational country, but ethnically dominated by the Czechs.

And how did the situation develop after that? In 1933, the National Socialists came to power in Germany.

Vít Novotný: The Czech-German rivalry, was an important characteristic of the Czechoslovak Republic, and of course the Nazi occupation as of 1938–39 turned the conflict into a brutal and ruthless one. Even today the idea of protecting our own language, culture and nation is very strong. The original ethnic Germans are no longer there, but Czechness and defence of the Czech culture has become a defining posture vis-à-vis the rest of the world. Consequently, you have these protectionist attitudes towards migration.

But because Czech is a Slavic language, welcoming other Slavs is less of a problem than welcoming other groups. Ukrainians, Russians, Poles and Slovaks are not seen as threatening.

This is interesting. In some other Eastern European countries—for example, in the Baltic states—Russia, as the successor of the Soviet Union, is seen as an important factor shaping people’s views on migration. All three Baltic countries have significant Russian minorities. So, in your country, can you identify any influence of Russia at a deeper, more historical level?

Vít Novotný: Russia has had no noticeable influence on how migration is perceived by Czechs. There were Soviet troops liberating Czechoslovakia in 1945, but they left shortly after. And then they came back in 1968, and they stayed for another 20 years. But the occupation as such was actually not so intrusive with regard to people’s daily lives. The Czechoslovak communists were in power. And the country was never part of the Soviet Union and during the Soviet times, there was close to zero immigration from the USSR.

Thamires Herzing (Policy Researcher, European Diplomats): Mr. Novotny, you mentioned earlier that the main discussion is about culture, but the economy isn't given as much attention as it should be. Why do you think that, and why do you believe it should be a point of more discussion right now regarding migration?

Vít Novotný: Besides the massive Ukrainian wave, which was caused by Putin's bombing of Ukraine as of 2022, there's also sizable immigration driven by economic motives. There's also demand from employers who keep asking for more immigrant workers. And governments keep quietly saying, yes, but within limits. For example, we've admitted Uzbeks, Central Asians in general, people from Vietnam, and other groups.

The debate doesn't do justice to the important questions. We're not discussing the mechanisms by which economic migrants can come, the procedures, the bureaucracy. We need to discuss what the country needs and what it doesn't need. I'm not saying this should necessarily be about how to increase labour immigration, but how to shape the economic immigration policy so it's suitable for the country.

Politicians suppress that kind of debate because it doesn't win votes.

Dirk Bornschein: But migration continues.

Vít Novotný: Exactly. Currently immigration happens almost unnoticed. I think the phenomenon should be more in the public light. And because of the lack of debate, I'm not convinced you're always getting the right kind of immigrant. And that especially skilled migrants we want actually come and stay, because of the unfavourable conditions they face in the country. So, this isn't discussed sufficiently.

Is there a relationship between immigration and the direction of the political system?

Vít Novotný: I don't think our political spectrum would look much different without immigration, but there certainly is an influence. The current coalition, which is about to be sworn in today, is a collection of far-right parties, and their campaign was strongly—not exclusively—about anti-immigration attitudes, and that got them votes.

I don't think it won them the election; that would be an exaggeration, because there were many other issues. But it added some votes that otherwise would have gone to someone else, so it's a factor. And, as everywhere in Europe, the political rhetoric about immigration is quite different from immigration realities. Czechia is no exception.

Is there an integration policy in your country? And how far does it extend?

Vít Novotný: Yes, there's an integration policy. It was created about 20 years ago. The policy is run by the Interior Ministry. They opened integration centres across the country, focusing on language, getting people into Czech culture, and the realities of life. My impression is that it works relatively well. But the hundreds of thousands of Ukrainians arriving since 2022 have been a shock to the system. You can't integrate or provide policies and practical help to so many people at the same time.

Cultural closeness helping a lot—Ukrainians assimilate relatively easily and many try to enter the labour market quickly. Of course, we have issues with schooling for children, especially the language—they suddenly have to integrate into a foreign environment. And recognition of qualifications is a problem.

Could you quickly share some basic data about Czechia, such as unemployment, the retirement age, or other relevant figures? For example, do you see a very developed social system in the country?

Vít Novotný: Where do I start? In Czechia the economy depends on exports, so prosperity follows exports. Our geographic location is advantageous: we've benefited from neighbouring Germany as an economic engine, which has pulled in many suppliers from Czechia, including car production (Škoda, part of the Volkswagen group).

And the social system?

Vít Novotný: The social system is quite well developed and culturally ingrained in the sense that people expect a wide range of services to be provided by the state. People want this. The healthcare system is good, pensions are decent, there's a social net. But housing is becoming a big problem, unfortunately. It's difficult not only to buy a house, but in some places it's hard to find a rental, especially in big cities like Prague or Brno. This is quite different from peripheral regions in the north and northeast where there's more poverty. Unemployment is extremely low, one of the lowest in the EU. If you want to work, you can work.

And the retirement age, and its relation to demographic change?

Vít Novotný: This has been a big political issue. Not only the state pension age but also the structure of the pension system. Although necessary, reform has been impossible for 30 years. The problem is people don't save enough for retirement. A lot depends on the state system. Like many places in Europe, money will eventually run out.

It seems politically impossible to implement proper reforms. The incoming government parties have campaigned on stopping some increases in the retirement age. The political pushback against hiking the age of retirement is not like in France, but there are elements similar to what's happening there.

Thamires Herzing (policy researcher, European Diplomats): I've read that companies are asking for more migrants. Why do you think that is? Is it because migrants accept lower wages, or because there's a lack of workers of a certain age or in a certain sector?

And secondly, you mentioned reforms toward immigration. Would bringing in more skilled workers be positive for the retirement discussion and investment in taxes and the social security state to sustain this process, or would it, in your view, not necessarily be positive?

Vít Novotný: I'll start with the second question. The answer is that immigration is not the solution to the age structure of society. The flow of immigrants you would need in Czechia, but also anywhere else, to offset the changing age structure is politically impossible to accept. It would have to be hundreds of thousands every year, so that's clear—that's not the solution.

Dirk Bornschein: So, there is a lack of labour force?

Vít Novotný: I would say there's a lack at all levels. It starts with cleaners and receptionists. If you visit Prague today, you'll go to a hotel and between 50 and 80 percent of the staff are migrants—Ukrainians, Russians, Slovaks (less and less), but also Asians now. Some of them don't even speak Czech. It shows that the company probably couldn't find receptionists, waiters and cleaners from the local population. And immigrants are happy to accept lower pay, unfortunately. Many Ukrainians work outside the formal labour market. They don't understand the system, and they allow themselves to be exploited.

But the country also needs IT engineers, AI specialists, doctors as well, because many local doctors get educated and then leave for Germany and other countries.

Thamires Herzing: What is your current view on the makeshift migrants coming to Czechia? Can you identify groups that contribute more or less to the development of Czechia?

Vít Novotný: Motivations are very different. The primary motivation of Ukrainian refugees to leave their country was not to be killed by Russian bombs. They are by far the biggest group. Some had previous experience of working in Czechia. Others had relatives or friends already living and working in Czechia.

The second biggest group, around 100,000 Ukrainians living in the country before the large-scale invasion, arrived with economic motivations.

Another important group comes from Vietnam. They arrived in the 1960s–70s as part of an exchange between socialist countries. They also came to work in factories, mostly, for economic reasons, like more recently Mongols and then Uzbeks and Kazakhs who came as construction workers and taxi drivers. Today, the Vietnamese diaspora is expanding through family reunification, and they are increasingly getting into the restaurant business.

Dirk Bornscheim: And the asylum seekers?

Vít Novotný: There are some, not too many, because Czechia isn't very generous with asylum. There have been Georgians, Armenians, Uzbeks applying for asylum, many of them on a speculative basis, without solid grounds.

Then there are skilled migrants from all over the world. They come on their own, sometimes with their families. Some wealthy Russians have come to Czechia as well, mostly to enjoy their money here.

People come for many reasons, but the question of how they are received is very important. And that, in turn, depends on political discourses and their deeper causes, as well as on how migrants are perceived regarding social issues: questions like pension funding, housing, etc.

Let us discuss the mass media in this context. What role do private and public mass media play in regard to the immigration discussion?

Vít Novotný: I think the debate has become more informed over the years. It wasn't very good in the 1990s and 2000s. With the Ukrainian wave in 2022, there's been a lot of debate about their economic contribution.

But the media is quite polarized—in the case of Ukrainians you have pro-Ukrainian and anti-Ukrainian stances. I'd say they emphasize the economic benefits, which is visible in the data. Despite being motivated by escaping bombs, many Ukrainians assimilated into the labour market very quickly. So, the economic contribution is positive.

And 2015, 2016?

Vít Novotný: At that time, society and mass media debated cultural threats from the so-called incompatible groups, meaning Muslims. The discussion was blown completely out of proportion. The question was, should Czechia take 100 or 200 people? But even that idea was portrayed as the biggest threat to the country's culture.

On the other side you had the counter-reaction, you know, the human rights movement saying we have to show solidarity, this is our duty, we're part of the European Union.

It was a black-or-white discussion, unfortunately, and there were too many emotions and not enough facts on either side. I would say people, including journalists, are getting more familiar with immigration and with immigrants. The debate is getting slightly better in the official media. But, of course, when you look at Facebook and other social media, I don't have to comment. You surely understand what it's like.

But the discussion in general is getting better...

Vít Novotný: Yes and no. The media is not covering economic, student and family migration sufficiently. And surprisingly, they're not covering some abuses of the asylum system, by Uzbeks and Georgians, for example.

Media are quite often fed by information and studies from think tanks and academic institutions. How do you see academia in Czechia, their role and relationship to either progressive ideas or their relationship to the government?

Vít Novotný: With regard to migration and asylum, between 90 and 95% of academics hold progressivist views. There are some centrist academics. There was one right-wing female academic woman, but she got elected in the European Parliament.

Czechia's academia copies the Western European model. Subconsciously, this is how academics develop in order to fit in with their international peer groups which are also progressive. The distribution of views in the migration field doesn't help the quality of the debate. It becomes all very predictable. You have the bad government on one side and you have the good academics and NGOs who defend the rights of migrants on the other side. It's archetypal, this is how the whole debate goes.

Could you explain this further?

Vít Novotný: There's nothing wrong with having progressive ideas. But if you want discourse to be realistic, grounded, you need a variety of perspectives.

I would like to know how you personally view the current situation in the context of immigration? What should the debate focus on now?

Vít Novotný: We need to give space for several topics. The first is about the future of protection for Ukrainians, by far the biggest issue. Temporary protection is going to expire in 2027, and the outgoing centre-right government has been quite secretive about what is being planned. At some point there'll be a huge dilemma.

We have 300,000 Ukrainians whose legal status is going to expire. What are we going to do? Are we going to put them through the asylum system? Are we going to give them some kind of other permit? Or are we going to push them into something else? So, this really should be debated properly. Maybe it is, but not in the public sphere.

And the second topic?

Vít Novotný: And second is the whole economic migration and how it should fit with the needs of the industry, and of services as well, healthcare and social care. Again, maybe it's happening, but it's not happening in the public, not enough.

As a minor issue we should talk about the asylum system, which is also not being debated in public either. How it should run, you know, how it should deal with so many speculative applications from certain groups.

As you know, we have made quite similar interviews in several European countries. And there are two technical terms popping up repeatedly: populism and polarization. Could you reflect on their role concerning your home country? Do you recognize tendencies in one direction or another?

Vít Novotný: There is a lot of populism here, yes. In fact, the gap between rhetoric on the one hand and policy on the other is quite huge. That gap is filled by populist rhetoric.

There is also some realism with regard to Ukrainians. Everybody understands that many of them are going to stay for good. The Ukrainians are already helping the economy quite a lot. Without them, some companies would collapse. This is generally acknowledged. Additionally, people also understand that after a peace agreement some of the Ukrainians would like or should go back and help rebuild the country.

Even the right-wingers are not trying to kick the Ukrainians out. They just want to toughen the conditions.

European countries suffer similar constraints. They have very low birth rates, some suffer from labour shortages, we talked about it. We talked about the fact that integration takes time and that the social system has come under pressure, as well as the whole political system.

Sometimes these challenges conflict with each other. Which challenges do you consider especially important?

Vít Novotný: The basic contradiction is one where somehow our politicians still assume that society is homogeneous and that there aren't so many immigrants, when in fact, you know, now they constitute more than 10% of the population. So, this is the political assumption on the one hand, and the reality of relatively mass immigration to the country on the other.

And I think the closer the political discourse gets to reflecting reality, the better for the country, basically, to put it very simply. Also, for the future, because if you want to adopt the right policies, you need to accept what is happening.

You remember, at some point you mentioned that migration can't be the solution for demographic change. What would be the solution?

Vít Novotný: I don't know. Nobody knows that. We're suddenly faced with the fact that the number of children per woman in the EU is 1.3, 1.4, and that is not going to change. We're living with the fact that the indigenous are not going to reproduce themselves in the long run in a sufficient manner. We have to accept that immigration now is the only factor of population growth in Czechia and everywhere else in Europe.

But not everything is related to demographic change. We have to figure out what kind of economy we want to develop.

Please explain...

Vít Novotný: As Europe, we're miles behind where we should be in debating how we can reshape our economy and our society to the changing demographic realities. And we are all used to the current model, and it seems impossible for us to think outside the box, but it's going to be necessary.

And we have to rethink the way we work. Is AI, is artificial intelligence, is robots, are they going to help us a lot? Maybe they are going to help us with the lack of workforce and, you know, the old-age dependency ratio, etc. It's a difficult debate because the political cycle is four or five years. And these challenges run in decades and centuries. Unfortunately, you cannot ask politicians to think in the long-term, because it doesn't bring any votes.

Thamires Herzing: Mr. Novotny, you explained that the population in Czechia has not been properly informed and that the debate has been misguided. What do you recommend in this situation? More neutral research, more media coverage, for example?

Vít Novotný: The media do play a very important role, but they are not covering sufficiently the important aspects. For many of them it's more about emotions, being in favour or against. If journalists could ask the right questions, politicians will have to respond in some way.

Dirk Bornschein: We talked a lot about Czechia, your home country, but in fact, you work on Europe and a wider range of countries. So, when you compare these two focuses, these two perspectives, what can other European countries learn or shouldn't learn from the example of Czechia?

Vít Novotný: I would say one positive example is how to integrate hundreds of thousands of Ukrainians into the labour market. When you look at the employment rate of Ukrainian adults in Czechia and Poland on the one hand, and let's say Germany and Austria, on the other hand, you will see that there has been a very generous provision of social welfare in the latter two countries.

In the end that turns out to be counterproductive for successful integration. I think this is something that countries such as Germany, Austria, France should be looking at, you know, but I understand how difficult this is, because these social systems are entrenched, and it's not easy to change them overnight.

And the negative example?

Vít Novotný: I really think that we should bridge the huge existing gap between public discourse and what politicians really do. One example now is the reception of the new migration pact by the incoming government parties in Czechia. I see a lot of baseless conjectures in their comments. And there's not enough knowledge out there to correct this.

Vít Novotný, thank you very much for your explanations.