



“She is Simply a Woman for me” – For Immigration Law she is a Foreigner above all

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Abstract:

Nowadays, international marriage is regarded as a commonplace social phenomenon. The development of tourist industry, international business chains and communication technologies – these all and a lot of other things help create both personal contacts and also the media-linked ones.

This is how Elena met Milan during their one-month summer school in Germany. They both studied German, but then each of them went back to their home country – Milan left for the Czech Republic and Elena for Russia. However, they kept in touch through email and Skype. This way they got to know each other better and fell in love. After some short visits, they decided to get married. Therefore, Elena moved to live in Prague with Milan.

People meet, fall in love, make couples, thus building up international relationships, and no national borders or distances can create obstacles. Meeting someone from the other side of the Earth on the Internet is not an exception any more. This causes an increase in co-called ‘transnational closeness’ (creating closeness regardless of national borders) as it was coined by a British social scientist Russell King.

According to the Czech Statistical Office, in 2011 nearly 9% of all marriages were international; the most common being the Czech-Slovak ones. Apart from these international marriages, women often choose to marry residents of western parts of Europe, for example from Germany (nearly 11% of all foreign bridegrooms) and Great Britain (10% of all foreign bridegrooms). On the other hand, men tend to choose women from Ukraine (22% of all foreign brides) as well as from Russia (7%).

Not all people can feel happy about the overall social situation or demographic profile of their country, so the opportunity to look for a partner abroad might not come amiss. For example, in Russia there are 10.7 million more women than men (according to the 2010 census). What is more, people tend to create stereotypes about others just on the basis of one’s place of origin. People from the West are considered to be more ‘emancipated’ and those from the

East, conversely, more 'traditional'. So, the simple fact that a foreign partner may shape particular family or gender expectations just because of which corner of the globe they come from.

Czechs as Good Fathers

Russian-speaking Internet forums often serve migrants as a platform for discussions about their life in a new country as well as discussions regarding international marriages and impressions of Czech men and women.

The Czech men, for instance, are described on Russian speaking forums by some women as people who treat a woman equally and with respect, they are family-oriented and assume their father's role accordingly.

This fact is also confirmed by a story of Irina, a woman who has been living in the Czech Republic for 4 years.

"When I arrived to live in the Czech Republic, I was very surprised by how many Czech men there were with their children in the playgrounds, swimming pools, etc. In my opinion, Russian men are more career-oriented or focused on social status than on family life, and children upbringing is often considered a women's job, i.e. mums' and grannies'."

In the course of time, the ideas about national traits are sidelined. Again, it is illustrated by Irina's quotation, who lives with a Czech partner: *"I primarily look at my partner as a personality regardless of his national traits. Even if we are trying to solve a problem or misunderstanding in our relationship, it doesn't differ from those typically solved by non-mixed couples. Generally, I think it matters more what family the partner comes from, how they are brought up and what family model they adopt from their parents. These factors are more likely to affect a new relationship than any nationality specifics"*.

What is her partner's response?

Tomáš comments on it: *"At the beginning there might have been some feelings of intercultural differences. And I have never seen it as an obstacle, quite the opposite! In my view, when people want to make themselves understood even the language barrier doesn't matter. For example, now I don't notice my partner's accent anymore and I sometimes forget she is from Russia. She is simply a woman for me."*

An international marriage is a bridge between cultures which often helps to break the stereotypes. Both positive and negative prejudices can be confronted and eliminated, and we can just see just how unique every person is.

The Czech authorities, however, do not consider a foreign partner to be an individual personality, but primarily a citizen of a foreign country. Therefore, a relationship is always affected by immigration law, suspected of fictional marriages and subjected to various inspections. It is confirmed by a story of another Czech-Russian couple – Tatyana and Marek. To be able to apply for a temporary residency status for family reunification purposes, they had to present their personal photos, correspondence and their relatives' and friends' statements that they were truly in a close relationship.

Nevertheless, that was not the end. After some time, they experienced a visit from the police, whom they had to show their wardrobe to see whether there were really clothes for two people, the place where they slept, etc. Then the police inspection continued at their neighbours' home, they walked around the building with Tatyana's photo and asked people whether they knew her.

Tatyana got her temporary residency in the end. However, the experience of having their family's privacy invaded left a bad taste in the mouth of both partners.

*This article is one of the migrants' contributions to the project Migration to the Centre and was created with the cooperation of the organization **People in Need**. The article has been written with support of the Europe for Citizens Programme of the European Union and the International Visegrad Fund. The article reflects the views only of the author, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.*



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