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Good Mongolians - Who makes steering wheel covers in a small Czech town?

Martina Křížková

Apos-Auto, a company based in Blansko, Southeast Czech Republic, has been recruiting workers from Mongolia. They are here, and so are all the dilemmas and problems imposed on Europe since it opened up to foreigners. The locals are now experiencing the reality of life in a multicultural world, while local businesses might be rather too strict when dealing with their foreign employees' uncertain prospects.

Apos introduced the manufacture of leather-wrapped steering wheels in Blansko five years ago. But the Czech workforce were far from ready to take up the toilsome and badly-paid work. Consequently the company appealed for labour from abroad. The town's web pages say that a total of a hundred and fifty migrant workers came to the town in 2005, Mongolia being the most frequent country of origin. By this year, Mongolians have grown into a community of over five hundred. The leather wrapping they make is used for steering wheels by Audi, Seat, Toyota, and Ford. Clearly, the Czech company, one of the region's biggest employers, could hardly do without them.

The local residents in Blansko, a town of twenty thousand, find it very difficult to get used to their new neighbours. And the journey from Ulaanbaatar to South Moravia and back is not the most straightforward one. Thus Blansko is a strange mixture of Mongolian poverty, Czech laws, with a sense of predatoriness prevailing on both sides.

When personal interests gain the upper hand

“I simply do not want them here,” Tomáš Urminetský, manager of Café Berger declares adamantly. The cellar bistro in the centre of Blansko is a banned venue for the Mongolians. No, there is no sign on the door announcing the ban. All the owner needs to do is to put the “Reserved” signs on empty tables. “I’m not going to hunt them in the streets and beat them up – I am no racist – but I am not going to be their slave either,” says the restaurant owner, distressed by their behaviour. He says the Mongolians spend little money, get drunk quickly,

and sometimes become aggressive and haughty. Other guests do not feel comfortable in their presence, which doesn't help either.

Furthermore, he is not the only person in Blansko who could do without the exotic visitors. Although the town is home to another eight hundred foreigners, mostly from Slovakia, Ukraine or Vietnam, things only started to be difficult when the Mongolians came. Mayor Jaroslava Králová says it may be put down to their number and different habits: “They tend to move in big groups and, unlike the Vietnamese, are often out in the streets.” Most of the foreigners speak no Czech and can hardly communicate with the local people. Apos, the company which employs the migrant workers, had made no announcements about its intention to invite them, so their sudden arrival in Blansko must have come as a shock to a conservative town where the communist party continued to win elections until two years ago, well after the fall of communism in the country as a whole.

General practitioners have been under pressure from the local people, too. Particularly in the beginning, people believed they were at risk of contracting unknown diseases when meeting the foreigners in the waiting rooms.

Whilst the mayor believes everyone has settled down by now, still the housing issues remain to be solved. Once in Blansko, the Mongolian workers look for private apartments in the town and nearby villages. They leave the dormitories run by Apos or Baldangotov Jargalsaikhan, an interpreter and work agent. The reasons are lack of privacy and poor sanitary conditions. And this is precisely why the local tourist centre warns against staying at these places.

When the Mongolians move to a private place, the neighbours tend to be rather dismayed. “I hear that groups of up to ten live in a single small flat, and they are loud,” says the mayor.

Jiří Vojanec, a flat owner who rents out to one of the Mongolian families, knows that things are not so bad. A year after the Mongolians moved to his flat, the tenants' cooperative refused to give a positive report for the purposes of the immigration police, saying their behaviour in the house was unacceptable. Mr Vojanec went from neighbour to neighbour, wanting to know what it was that made the Mongolian family so unwanted. “It turned out to be merely that the head of the cooperative was envious as he had intended to buy my flat for his son,” he says. There was only one incident involving his tenants as they were unable to get into their flat after someone had stuck needles into their lock and they had to call the locksmith.

Extra shift – shelter against hatred

Mr Vojanec works abroad, too, and complains about how the local people treat the Mongolians, though altruism is not his only consideration. The fact is, he says, that they are willing to pay fifteen hundred to two thousand crowns more in rent than Czechs, and – unlike Czechs – never complain.

“The accommodation capacity is not huge, and the local people realize that the foreigners have to live somewhere, and so they ask for higher rents,” says Blanka Bendová from Charita Blansko, a local charity. But when her colleagues try to find a flat for a Mongolian family, the owners usually withdrew the offer once they realize they are being asked to rent out to Mongolians.

However, not everyone in the town treats them with disrespect: Charita runs Czech language courses; the summer historic fair had a yurt standing in the centre of Blansko where the local people went to sample traditional Mongolian dishes. And when the town web forum became a target for public statements with a racist edge, the officials closed the site.

Similarly, when neonazis staged a rally in the town last spring to voice protest against the Mongolians' alleged criminal behaviour, hardly any of the local people joined the event. The town requested that the police oversee the demonstration. As the Mongolians feared physical attacks, Apos invited them to work an extra shift in order to keep away from the streets.

Yet, the Mongolians in Blansko often face much more serious challenges than the unfriendliness of the local people. They come here with huge debts. “Most of them sell everything they have, or pawn their flats, only to be able to come here,” says Veronika Zikmundová, an expert on Mongolia at Charles University in Prague. The average salary in Ulaanbaatar is 100 dollars a month, but with unemployment reaching high levels, few people have a permanent job. The fee they have to pay to the agencies which find them work in the Czech Republic ranges from 1,000 to 1,500 euros. Baldangotov Jargalsaikhan works as a translator in the Apos factory, has his own office there, and is responsible for recruiting Mongolian workers. He admits that the workers pay him for finding them a job. At the same time, he is paid by Apos, says the company's spokesman, Jiří Šrámek.

Extra shifts: nothing unusual

The work at the factory is not easy. “The workers' requalification takes about three months,” says spokesman Šrámek. During this time, the new employees receive only a limited salary. They are paid by the task, and a wrapping for one steering wheel earns them around 65 crowns (EUR 2.50), depending on the type. “The money I earned was hardly enough to pay for rent,” says a message posted at Orloo.com by a Mongolian man working in Blansko.

A young Mongolian man, who now lives in Brno, a city not far from Blansko, and who wished to remain anonymous, says it also takes over three months to get to grips with the sewing process. The workers in Apos work with glues as well, and the Mongolians complain this leads to rashes and headaches.

In order to earn the monthly salary of 15 to 20 thousand crowns (EUR 600 to 800), promised by the agencies and mentioned by spokesman Šrámek, the workers have to work virtually all the time. “They work up to twelve hours a day but we are not happy about that,” says the

company's spokesman. Yet, the factory may benefit from those who like to work hard as they help save labour costs. "The minimum monthly output is 120 steering wheels per head. If anyone wants to produce more than that, they are welcome," says Jargalsaikhan.

Some of the migrants look for other types of work. The residence permit – Czech legislation says – is directly related to the work permit which automatically expires if the person leaves the job. Their only chance of staying on legally is to quickly find a new job, otherwise the person risks being deported. "The Mongolians usually pay the agencies for finding them a new job but still end up without the legal status," says Tomáš Janeba from the International Organization for Migration. Illegal workers are fully at the mercy of both the agencies and the employers.

The Mongolians are under pressure not to leave. "If the workers leave before their contract expires, they are fined by the employer," says Jargalsaikhan who often finds himself paying the fines instead of the workers who actually breach the contracts. Ms Zikmundová says the Mongolians in Blansko are anxious: "The agencies normally warn them that if they should try to find another job, their visas will be cancelled immediately." The same would happen if they tried to complain about the conditions. Moreover, two years ago the town authorities agreed with the factory, the foreign police and the state police, and the employment office that permits will also be cancelled in cases of unacceptable behaviour. "Those who will not respect our laws and principles of community life will be made to leave. Even if they are good employees," says Jiří Pernica, one of the owners of Apos and former communist mayor of Brno. However, it is impossible to find out exactly how many people have so far been sacked from Blansko, says Roman Pitr, spokesman for the Foreign Police in the Brno region.

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