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Carrots and sticks, sugar and whips: the effects of policy on the long-term language acquisition of non-EU citizens in the Czech Republic

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ABSTRACT

As its primary form of language policy oriented toward the integration of foreigners, the Czech Republic established a language exam at CEFR A1 level for permanent residence from third-country nationals in 2009, raising the level to A2 in 2021. This article considers the question of the overall effectiveness of this policy nearly fifteen years after its initial implementation. Utilizing the perspective of the exam-takers themselves, it aims to examine whether and how the use of the exam supports language acquisition. Based in the language management framework, policy instruments theory, and the life course perspective, through which we examine test-takers' trajectories of language acquisition and use and habitus of managing everyday communication situations, we explore the emergence of a number of functions of the exam in the respondents' life courses: as inspiration, as a cap on their language knowledge, as a mere ticked box, or as an insurmountable hurdle to be avoided.

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Introduction

The Czech Republic is a nation-state with a population of over 10 million, more than 90 per cent of whom declare Czech as their mother tongue (Czech Statistical Office, 2025). The language of a technologically advanced society with its number of speakers, Czech has been classified as a medium-sized language (Nekvapil, 2013). As such it is not commonly taught as a foreign language beyond its borders, where it is widely perceived as being of limited utility (cf. Hawkey & Horner, 2022). It is thus not common for newcomers to arrive with extensive Czech skills. However, the overall numbers as well as the breadth of different national and linguistic origins of people entering the country are growing, and their need to function as full-fledged members of society is tied to knowledge of Czech.

Since 2004, the Czech Republic has been part of the European Union. On this basis, EU citizens enjoy many of the same rights as Czech citizens, including access to the labor market and no formal language requirements. Individuals from outside the EU, so-called

third-country nationals, are subject to stricter conditions, requiring visas for long-term stays and, ultimately, language requirements when they become eligible for permanent residence after five years of stay. A Czech language exam, initially at level A1, later at A2, of the Common European Reference Framework for Languages (CEFR), has been, since 2009, the primary policy in place to (declaratively) increase the Czech-language knowledge of this group, in addition to the B1 and life and institutions exams later required for citizenship or the language exams required for various professions such as medicine.

Following the implementation of language policy measures, questions of their effectiveness in addressing the problem they are designed to solve typically arise. The case of the Czech language exam, a migration policy instrument common in EU countries, is no different in this respect. State authorities initially argued that basic knowledge of Czech would make it easier for migrants to integrate into Czech society. The exam for permanent residence remained at A1 level for 12 years, suggesting that it was not intended as an obstacle, a tool to make migration or permanent residence less achievable. Yet there are observable instances of successful exam-takers who remain unable to master the communication situations prescribed by the exam. There is also a clearly visible industry focused on teaching to the test without a greater orientation toward communicative competence and autonomy, as well as a highly interested group of consumers interested in these services.

Given these issues, it is appropriate to pose the question of why the exam does not appear to stimulate sufficient Czech knowledge in some foreigners. The answers to it, of course, are necessarily complex and closely tied to individual life circumstances. We will thus place these individual life circumstances of the policy recipients, the exam-takers, at the center of the exploration of the policy impact. Based primarily on interviews with exam-takers, and secondarily on policy documents and materials surrounding the exam, this paper aims to examine the effects of using an exam as the only form of official language policy regarding language acquisition as evident in learners' experiences.

We pose the following research questions:

- (1) How do the exam-takers approach the exam functionally? How do they plan and prepare for the exam?
- (2) Where does the exam fit into the language trajectories of third-country nationals? How does their language knowledge and use develop both before and after the exam?

In considering these questions, we also aim to formulate recommendations for policy, contributing to the growing body of studies devoted to this very issue (e.g. Bruzos et al., 2018; Carlsen, 2024; Carlsen & Rocca, 2021, 2022; Cooke, 2009; Gysen et al., 2009; Hogan-Brun et al., 2009; Im et al., 2021; Innes & Skaptadóttir, 2016; Laversuch, 2008; Rocca et al., 2020; Shohamy & McNamara, 2009).

Immigrant language acquisition

States with large numbers of immigrants have been addressing the challenge of linguistic integration for many years. To contend with this, European countries have established different levels of exams for residence and citizenship, typically based on the CEFR (cf.

Beacco et al., 2017; Carlsen, 2024; Davidson & Fulcher, 2007; Extra et al., 2009; Extramiana & Van Avermaet, 2011; Khan & McNamara, 2017). These have frequently been the object of criticism, e.g. due to insufficient links between the test content and practical life, the monetization of the exams, the lack of attention given to local minority languages (Bruzos et al., 2018), or the discriminatory potential of testing in regard to low-literacy applicants (Carlsen & Rocca, 2021).

As McNamara and Shohamy (2008, p. 89) point out, language tests are ‘perceived as devices which are effective in enforcing conformity and in ensuring the continuity of various declared agendas of policy-makers.’ On p. 92, they further comment on the question of why different countries require different language levels:

These differences in required level must throw doubt on the argument often put forward in support of such language tests – that they are functionally necessary and serve the interests of the immigrants themselves as much as those of the host societies. For why should one country have higher functional requirements than another for the same context or need? [...] One that comes to mind has to do with political expediency: the levels tend to be highest, for example, where the immigration debate has been the most intense (e.g. Denmark). Another has to do with the purposes for which the levels are applied, and particularly with the relationship between the language requirement and citizenship policy.

The case of the Czech Republic conforms to this observation. Though various language requirements for citizenship have existed since the founding of the contemporary state in 1993, requirements for permanent residence were only implemented in 2009.¹ This was preceded by increasing levels of migration and the distinction between EU- and non-EU immigrants following the EU entrance in 2004. The reasons for its implementation were explained on the basis of the fact that previous methods of checking the language knowledge of foreigners applying for permanent residence were ‘unsystematic and unverifiable’ (Ošmera, 2009). Some level of verified Czech language knowledge was then considered necessary for the applicants. In this sense, the introduction of the language exam was an important standardization measure.² The exam level was set as low as possible, i.e. at A1 of the Common European Reference Framework for Languages, as the result of lobbying by non-profit organizations who viewed it as most achievable relative to the migrants’ time and financial possibilities (Ošmera, 2009; see also Cvejnová & Sladkovská, 2017).

In addition to the exam, the Czech state has provided some support for language instruction. This includes courses run by non-profit organizations, regional branches of the Center for the Integration of Foreigners, and some municipalities, supported by the state budget or EU funds and usually free of charge or less expensive than commercial courses. However, the capacity of these courses is limited. Some foreigners (typically Vietnamese) choose commercial courses because they prefer instruction in their native language.

An NGO-based article published shortly after the exam became a requirement (Ošmera, 2009) points to the fact that while knowledge of Czech is important for integration into Czech society, this is not the case for all migrants (see also Sherman & Homoláč, 2020, 2021) and, importantly, validation through the exams does not equal communicative competence in Czech (and vice versa). This second point is illustrated using the example of exam-takers from third countries, all of whom could successfully conduct their economic activities. For some, the exam was negligible, below the level

of their knowledge, while for others, the exam required knowledge not needed at work, prompting them to spend significant amounts of money for tutoring tailored toward the exam, which they did not utilize after it. It is apparent, then, that problems have been observed by the relevant actors from the very beginning of the policy's implementation.

Theoretical-methodological considerations

The research for the present paper – its design, collection of data and its analysis, is guided by language management theory (Nekvapil, 2016). The selection of this framework reflects the character of the given problem. The question of immigrant language acquisition is indeed one of language policy, but it is also one of everyday routines, of a series of choices made by immigrants in interaction with choices made by other actors. It is also an issue of norms for language choice in a given space.

The language management framework focuses on the ways in which norms and expectations, including those imposed by language policy, are reflected in the micro-interactions that occur on a daily basis. The language management process (cf. Nekvapil, 2016) involves noting deviations, their evaluation, the design of adjustments and their implementation, or merely some of these phases. By breaking down this process step-by-step, the analyst can flesh out the underlying details of interactions and policies, the role of power and interests, and the mutual relationships between language, communication and sociocultural and socioeconomic issues.

State language policy is a form of organized language management, the analysis of which can in this case be aided by the concept of Language Policy Instruments (LPIs) (Cardinal, 2023; Gazzola, 2021), based in Policy Instrument Theory, developed to address public policy in general (Howlett, 2023). This theory posits that policy tools can be strategically used to influence people's behavior in a number of different ways, thus leading to a greater likelihood of success in policy implementation. One representation of it is through a trio of metaphorical images of different types of instruments used in policy measures (cf. Bemelmans-Videc et al., 2011; Granfeldt, 2021): (1) sermons, or the spread of information endorsing an instrument or presenting it in a positive light, (2) carrots, or incentives for doing something, and (3) sticks, or the enforcement of regulation through negative means.

For the purposes of this study, we have adapted these commonly-used metaphors relating to motivating individuals to take language exams for permanent residence. First, there is 'carrot/sugar'³, or the idea that people will undertake something asked of them in anticipation of a benefit or reward. In other words, the exam is viewed as a form of motivation to gain permanent residence and enjoy all the benefits it offers⁴, or in some rare cases, to begin or continue in the process of learning Czech. It can also be imagined that given the exam requirement, individuals are prompted to attend courses, and during those courses, they may gain further knowledge beyond that required for the exam. With the introduction of the A2 level in 2021, an increase in this effect could be expected, and our interviews with A2 exam-takers confirm this. Then, there is 'stick/whip,' represented by the denial of certain privileges to individuals who do not take or do not pass the exam, including the decrease in bureaucracy connected to repeated residence permit renewal and (theoretically) better job opportunities.

We further utilize the life course approach (Elder, 2007; Wingens et al., 2011 or Peters & Vink, 2016 as applied to migrants) to examine the position of the language exam on the individuals' trajectories of language management. This perspective envisions individuals' lives as moving along a series of points of social relevance. These are called transitions or 'changes in state that are more or less abrupt' (Elder, 1985, p. 31f; cited in Wingens et al., 2011, p. 13), and an example of them may be completing formal education and seeking employment. Sequences or series of transitions are referred to as trajectories (Elder, 1985, p. 31; cited in Wingens et al., 2011, p. 14). In a single life course, there are many different types of trajectories with their turning points – work, family, and the like, which naturally influence one another. Here, we aim to identify and examine the subjective experiences of the trajectory of language acquisition and use in the life courses of third-country nationals. We consider the presence or absence of some key transitions, such as arriving in the country, beginning language instruction, obtaining a job with certain language requirements, or having a child who reaches school age. We also examine the different ways respondents present the importance of these transitions in the interviews and how they relate their assigned importance to other life trajectories such as family or work.

We focus on the respondents' long-term management of everyday communicative needs in Czech society. We argue that they get into a management habitus early, establishing routines for acquiring what they need. We also observe that, although there are a few life events which may increase motivation to acquire Czech, examples from practice show that these are few and far between, and that testing regimes do little to change this. We will show this using the metaphors of the position of the exams on the individuals' trajectories of language acquisition and use.

Data and methods

The main basis for the analysis is interviews with 43 third-country nationals currently living in the CR. All had passed either the A1 or A2 exam, and most had received permanent residence. Several were applying or had been rejected. Others had later passed the B1 exam and received citizenship.

The nationalities of the participants varied. Three major groups of third-country nationals, Ukrainians (12), Vietnamese (10), and Russian-speakers⁵ (11), were represented in greater numbers. These were complemented by a fourth group (hereafter referred to as 'hybrid'), a mix of citizens from elsewhere: United States, South Korea, India, Mexico, Chile, Nigeria, Mongolia, the Philippines, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Serbia. The inclusion of this group was primarily aimed at the greatest possible coverage of all third countries, but it should be noted that it has been the object of policy to a lesser degree than the first three groups, due to great differences in numbers.

The interviews ranged from 21 to 67 minutes and were conducted in person or online. The authors of this text are native speakers of Czech, English, Russian and Ukrainian. Based on respondent preference, interviews were in Czech or in their first or second language, and several were interpreted. Some respondents answered a call in English, Russian and Ukrainian published on Facebook. Snowball sampling was then undertaken: respondents provided contacts to their friends or colleagues. Others were obtained via acquaintances or teachers in Czech language courses. Before the interview, all respondents were informed about the objectives of the research and that the interview would

focus not only on the language exam, but on the acquisition and use of languages in general. The respondents signed a form confirming their consent to the recording of the interview and the possible use of anonymized samples from it.

The interviews were semi-structured, containing elements of language biographies (Nekvapil, 2004), in which individuals focus on the languages they grew up speaking and were exposed to later in life. The following analysis is based on the manual, language-management-oriented identification of the key transitions on the language trajectory and a number of themes which were also the object of questions during the interview. These were largely informed by our previous research on Vietnamese learners of Czech (Authors a, b), and included the individuals' length of stay, what level of language they hoped to achieve (both initially and at the time of the interview), how they hoped that passing the exam would change their lives, and whether they were interested in learning further and achieving citizenship.

Results

Based on the interviews, we identified a number of transitions along the respondents' trajectories of language acquisition and use. We begin by exploring the commonalities and differences among the four groups.

Arrival in the country and first years of stay

The first transition was crucial for the respondents' **establishing a communication management habitus**. Here the question of how and how much they acquired and used Czech in these first years was heavily dependent on: (1) whether they planned to remain in the CR permanently, (2) whether they had to use Czech at work, (3) whether they had acquaintances or friends with whom they used Czech, (4) whether they had children at the time.

The Vietnamese respondents arrived predominantly on the basis of family reunification, planned to remain in the CR permanently and participate in the ethnic economy, with varying degrees of Czech-speaking clientele (ranging from work in retail or nail studios, which requires regular contact with these customers, to work in the Vietnamese wholesale market, which requires little to none). Several respondents worked for short periods in a factory, where they had to communicate with superiors and colleagues in Czech on a basic level. They had learned a few basic words and phrases prior to their arrival, such as greetings or numbers. They then primarily acquired expressions necessary for their jobs, either on their own or from relatives or colleagues. If they attended courses in these initial years, these were with a Vietnamese-speaking teacher or short-term integration or drop-in courses. They were also in contact nearly exclusively with other Vietnamese, gained all necessary information in Vietnamese, and in official communication, doctor visits, etc., utilized interpreters (either professionals or acquaintances). They thus acquired and used only the Czech they needed at work.

Eight of the Russian-speaking respondents planned on or seriously considered remaining in the CR permanently, not only for economic reasons, but, for example, due to the declared desire for stability in everyday life. With one exception, they were accompanied by partners and sometimes children. Their initial economic activity was entrepreneurial or in one case employment at a Russian bank. One began as a student.

They had usually prepared for their arrival linguistically, attending courses with private teachers or online, and continued to learn after their arrival. From the very beginning they tried to be as independent as possible in terms of communication, preferring not to utilize the assistance of acquaintances or professionals. They consumed Czech media, not only to learn Czech, but also to get a better sense of the environment in which they had decided to live. Most also eventually made Czech acquaintances. Only two respondents decided to remain after having been in the country longer. One, who came to study in English, though she had attended an A1-level Czech course, continued using English and interpreters. But like many others, primarily Russian-speaking and Ukrainian respondents, she encountered social pressure to speak Czech:

... when I came to Czechia, maybe the first 2 years. I still, for example, when I went to open a bank account, I always go to the bank and say, *dobrý den* [good day], and then speak English. And I always sort of encountered the situation that I was getting the answer, you're in the Czech Republic, so you have to speak Czech ...

(Respondent from Kazakhstan, 1-20-2022, 21:39-22:07, translated from Czech)

This respondent also only began using Czech upon employment following her graduation, in a shop where Czech was mandatory. Another respondent accompanied her husband, who had a contract as a researcher. After it ended, she decided to remain in the CR and began working doing the lighting for events. Like those mentioned above, during the first years she attended various courses or learned on her own, tried to use Czech as much as possible, consumed media in Czech and found Czech friends.

The Ukrainian group is more varied in this respect, including three respondents who gained refugee status based on the Donbas conflict in 2014 and three who were initially employed using English. None came to start a business, most began working in Czech and international companies, healthcare or academia. Two respondents had attended courses and three had studied on their own prior to arrival. They then attended courses for asylum seekers or free courses organized by the Center for the Integration of Foreigners or by their employers.

Ukrainians were accustomed to language learning and did not declare dependence on ethnic networks to the degree that Vietnamese did. They utilized available courses and began working with Czech speakers relatively early. They improved their communication skills outside the workplace and often declared that they felt pressure to speak Czech. They also had either passed other exams in Czech (driving tests, healthcare worker exams) or were preparing to do so.

The hybrid group is also heterogeneous in relation to the conditions of their arrival and their employment in the CR. While some came for a job, others joined family members already in the country. Two respondents have been working in multinational companies since the beginning. Several more run businesses or work freelance, mostly in various services. The majority decided to stay after several years and this – along with the fact that English was their first or second language – frequently meant they had minimal to no Czech knowledge prior to this decision.

Overall, the Vietnamese tended to rely on family and acquaintance networks and professional services (for more important situations) for their communication needs during and immediately after their arrival, and learn Czech only for communication needs in the

workplace. The initial demand for Czech varied slightly based on the character of their work, whether they lived in Prague, surrounded by other Vietnamese, or outside of it, and whether they had children in school and needed to communicate with teachers.

Russian-speakers and Ukrainians were similar in many respects: they frequently worked with Czech speakers, attended courses, improved their communication outside the workplace, and felt pressure to speak Czech. Both groups also avoided dependence on language brokering services early on and demonstrated awareness that they would have to actively use Czech, that Czech would increase their social mobility and help them integrate into Czech society:

Interviewer: What, in your opinion, sort of pre-determined your current level of Czech?
[...]

Respondent: Well, I don't know how to say it right. This might sound funny, but I just didn't want to work in a factory [...] When I, when I came here I had already decided that I want to stay. And since I want to stay here, I realized that the Czech language would be very necessary. That I would simply have to communicate everywhere and that I wouldn't have that much support or something, that someone would help me and bring everything to me right under my nose, I wouldn't have that ...

(Respondent from Ukraine, 3-12-2022, 29:56-31:00, translated from Czech)

Both groups also aimed to avoid negative reactions based on the idea that Czech need not be difficult for speakers of Slavic languages, and that Russians do not want to speak Czech because of a feeling of superiority.

An important difference between the Ukrainian or Russian-speaking respondents and the Vietnamese respondents is that the first two groups approached the acquisition of Czech both formally (through courses) and informally (through reading, media consumption and social interaction), with the aim of attaining both linguistic and sociocultural competence.

The hybrid group members typically immediately integrated themselves into international networks or those where their language was spoken. Many predominantly used languages other than Czech at work, though some, particularly in service jobs, used Czech. They all attended courses, many after having been in the country longer. The degree to which they had Czech acquaintances and consumed Czech media varied – this group differed from the other three in the following transition point on the trajectory, deciding to stay in the CR. While the other three groups arrived with the intention to stay, this group typically made this decision only later:

After four years of living here, I guess, when it was approaching the fifth year, I was like, I'm already here. I mean, like, of course, that was somehow a natural step, I would say. And yeah, this is when I started taking some basic lessons and forcing myself a bit of more actively using the language.

(Respondent from Serbia, 10-13-2023, 20:54-21:22)

Deciding to take the exam and preparing for it

Even among those who initially knew they wanted to stay, this transition occurred usually only after several years. This is particularly relevant among the Vietnamese

group, because it marked a change in their formal learning process and the expansion of their vocabulary (despite the fact that they were learning specifically for the exam). They typically began preparing for the exam approximately one year prior to their eligibility for permanent residence. They utilized courses organized by NGOs with Vietnamese-speaking teachers, private intensive courses, official exam preparation materials, and YouTube videos and Facebook groups. The expansion of online offerings during the Covid-19 period was especially useful for individuals on parental leave with small children and people outside of larger cities.

The change from the A1 to A2 level requirement marked a significant difference in the preparation required for the Vietnamese group, distinguishing them from the Ukrainian and Russian-speaking groups, whose declared preparation for both exam levels was minimal. At most, they browsed the exam brochure to get a sense of the formal structure of the exam. The hybrid group also tended to prepare for the exam, for periods ranging from two weeks to seven months, sometimes focusing on specific aspects such as writing, often in courses or with private tutors. In at least two cases, individuals began learning specifically because of the exam.

Taking the exam

This point revealed tendencies within groups, but was also highly individualized. Most Vietnamese respondents found the exam difficult, particularly the listening section. Some felt the level was sufficient, but also that less educated individuals would have a hard time with it. Ukrainians and Russian-speakers found the exam easy, maximally involving a few words they did not know. One declared the A1 level sufficient, but most felt it was too low and that A2 was appropriate. The hybrid group did not find the exam difficult in general, though some found the A1 level too low and others found the A2 level too high.

Regarding this point, the respondents could comment on the exam itself, including as a policy measure. Objects of critique ranged from the fact that not all third-country nationals could access free courses, or that EU citizens not being required to take the exam was discriminatory, to the observation that the exam was too far removed from real life and not focused enough on speaking. There was also a tendency to evaluate the perceived difficulty of the exam from multiple perspectives, e.g. some respondents felt it was not an issue for them, but would be for others from different educational and/or linguistic backgrounds⁶:

It's quite hard to say here, because there are people like me for whom it's no problem. Yeah, and who like, yes I do speak, I speak Czech like regularly, right? So for me, the exam's not gonna be a problem, right? But I see my husband who, even though he speaks, for him it would be ... for him it would be a problem, let alone if I take some, say, Asian groups for whom it's a completely different language. And the ones I saw there, like at the exam, and for whom even the A1 was like quite a lot of work, right?

(Respondent from Russia, 10-25-2022, 36:48-37:45, translated from Czech)

Learning and using Czech after the exam

This point was especially telling. Based on their general desire for citizenship, the Vietnamese respondents declared that they were learning further or wanted to, for the purposes of official

communication or if they had children in school. Some Ukrainian respondents admitted that they had since improved their vocabulary or other skills such as job interviewing, but the exam had not significantly changed their acquisition or use. The Russian-speakers also observed minimal to no changes in their communication after the exam. Several hybrid group respondents felt that the exam led to an improvement in their level, while for others, it had no such influence. Although some were satisfied with their current level, most emphasized their motivation to learn further and could specify the contexts where they needed it. About half of these respondents had children in Czech schools. One respondent working as a teacher wanted to communicate better with her colleagues and the children at the school. Another wanted to be more involved in civic life. Others simply felt that because Czech is the language predominantly spoken in everyday life, and that Czechs require it, it was necessary to learn it to be better integrated, or even that it was an embarrassment to have the level of Czech they had given their length of stay and/or language background. Here we can observe a sort of double standard, with some respondents stating that they were pressured to speak Czech (Russian-speakers, Ukrainians and an Indian), while others complained that people did not want to speak Czech with them, preferring English:

... the most frustrating thing about living in Prague in trying to speak Czech is you know they hear your accent and immediately respond in English and finally I've reached the point that I just beg them you know that look I've lived here for a long time and my Czech is crap and it's because every time you guys hear my přízvuk [accent] you know, so and you know the thing is that I know they just want to be helpful you know but it's an emotional thing sometimes you just sometimes uhu you don't understand so it, of course then your Czech gets worse because every time they respond to you in English you get more stressed and so yeah it's a it's not an incentivizer by any means ...

(Respondent from the United States, 7-17-2021, 40:55-41:51)

Deciding to apply for citizenship and subsequently applying for it

The final transition was discussed with all respondents but experienced only by some. Of the Vietnamese respondents who had passed the A1 exam, the only ones declaring interest in citizenship were those who had regular communication with Czech speakers. Those who had passed the A2 exam were categorically interested in gaining citizenship. The Ukrainian interest in citizenship was minimal, or conditioned on the fact that it would bring some thus-undiscovered advantages to the respondents and/or their children. The Russian speakers were all interested in citizenship and two had already passed the B1 exam. In the hybrid group, interest in citizenship did in fact motivate them to learn further, and most were in fact interested in it, with one already having acquired it and two more actively studying for the B1 exam.

Discussion

The various transition points established during the interviews helped highlight some more universal themes representing key factors influencing the respondents' long-term language acquisition and use, and, ultimately the effectiveness of the exam as a policy instrument. The first of these was *length of stay*, or how long the respondents wanted to remain in the country and when they decided this. Most Ukrainians and Russian speakers, and

above all Vietnamese wanted to remain from the beginning, while the hybrid group made this decision gradually. A direct consequence of this were their *language use goals*. Ukrainians and Russian speakers learn for life – they want to understand and be understood in their everyday and professional lives. For the Vietnamese, learning Czech beyond the phrases necessary for work practically overlaps with the preparation for the exam. They use Czech only minimally outside of work, it is not a medium of information reception and they declare the need to use it in offices and at the doctor, in some cases at school, so to not be dependent on others. None of our Vietnamese respondents connected greater knowledge of Czech with the job market. Given that they are involved in the ethnic economy, they associate better knowledge of Czech only with easier performance in their current jobs, not with greater social mobility or better employment.

Both the planned length of stay and the overall goals then led to the *language use outcomes*. For Ukrainians and Russian-speakers, passing the exam did nothing to change where, with whom and how they use Czech. The Vietnamese improved their Czech knowledge by preparing for the exam, but their use of Czech did not increase, and the question remains as to how much of this knowledge they retain and for how long. The hybrid group varied in this respect depending on their employment situation. Their social lives tended to remain the same.

For all four groups, passing the exam was closely connected to *stability*. They viewed the exam as a responsibility, the fulfillment of which would provide them with legal stability and remove administrative barriers, which, particularly for the Vietnamese, may be tied to financial costs for interpreters. However, this stability need not be based on officially gaining *citizenship*. This is particularly the case for Ukrainians because they do not consider it to be more advantageous than permanent residence. The Russian speakers aim for citizenship and often do not view language knowledge as a barrier to it. For the Vietnamese, on the other hand, though they would like citizenship, preparation for the B1 exam is a difficult task. The hybrid group was also interested in citizenship, and in many cases were motivated to improve their language skills for this purpose.

Overall, the most important takeaway from the interviews is that *the exam may improve communication abilities, but does not influence use*. The policy instrument theory described above, in combination with the language management framework and the life course approach, help to uncover a number of tendencies. Firstly, in our pool of interviewees, the ‘carrot’ offered by the exam was almost exclusively the resulting permanent residence. In some extremely rare individual cases, exam-takers already had sufficient competence in Czech for the exam, but saw the preparation for it as a chance to work on some areas where they felt less confident. In these cases, the exam serves as motivation for the respondent to acquire Czech and continue acquiring it even afterward, particularly for those who would like citizenship, greater autonomy, or employment mobility. This is a perspective implicated in state documents explaining the shift from the A1 to A2 requirement, which declare that upon passing the exam, the given foreigner is prepared for life in the Czech Republic, for example:

This change aims to support foreigner’s self-reliance and motivate them to study the Czech language. Thanks to a higher level of Czech, they’ll have a better understanding of received information, they’ll be able to solve their issues at various offices, talk to doctors, inform themselves about their kids’ school grades and behavior etc., without needing an interpreter or another third-party. (Integration Center Prague, [n.d.](#)).

The opposite pole to the ‘carrot’ metaphor is that of the ‘stick’ or ‘whip,’ which was the predominant model in the view of some exam-takers, language teachers and migration experts. According to them, people are being punished for not passing the exam or not learning Czech well enough, because they do not need Czech in their daily lives. Additionally, they consider this model discriminatory because third-country nationals are required to pass the exam and EU citizens are not.

Beyond these two metaphors, we can articulate several more, representing our respondents’ interpretation of the policy instrument designed to serve as a ‘carrot’. These multiple acts of management stem from the fact that for many of our respondents, a ‘learn for the test’ approach (also referred to as washback in regard to language teaching, cf. Innes & Skaptadóttir, 2016) was undertaken. This is revealed in several more different metaphorical functions of the exam or its position in their life trajectories.

In the function we can call ‘cap,’ the exam may motivate, but the respondent understands it as the pinnacle of his or her language acquisition, which ceases to continue afterward. This is (unfortunately) the case for the greatest number of our respondents, with a particularly high occurrence among the Vietnamese, primarily as a result of the management habitus established in the first five years of life in the CR, involving employment where Czech was not required or only minimally necessary, learning a few basic phrases, establishing contacts to interpreters, developing reliance on translation technology, or even utilizing the growing English knowledge among Czech speakers. Here shines a tiny ray of hope: this is the group that may reap the greatest benefits from the A2 exam requirement, though there is also the threat of the opposite effect (see ‘avoidance’ below).

The ‘cap’ category strongly reflects the predominance of two groups in our sample – those with lower competence (A1 was their level and they don’t need more) and those with higher competence (already exceeding A1 prior to the exam). The exam function for this second group can be characterized as a ‘ticked box,’ by which the respondent does not prepare for the exam and it does not influence his or her language acquisition before or after it. These are usually foreigners who work with Czech speakers or who have to communicate with them regularly, and may even have had to informally demonstrate knowledge of Czech to be hired, e.g. those in professions involving speaking and writing. A particularly striking example of this is a Ukrainian nurse, who, even despite the fact that he was integrated into his profession by talking to colleagues and patients daily, still had to take the exam. Here arises another policy question: whether the demonstration of professional competencies already heavily grounded in the need to speak Czech and verified by professional organizations does not negate the need for the exam. This is of now particular relevance given (a) the high demand for medical personnel, and (b) the recent migration of tens of thousands of qualified Ukrainian professionals. The inclusion of an aptitude test for health employees other than doctors⁷ in the current list of tests equivalent to the permanent residence test would therefore be appropriate.

The final model of the exam’s function is ‘avoidance,’ by which the individual views the exam as an unsurmountable hurdle and does not take it, choosing to forgo the potential benefits of permanent residence instead.⁸ As our interviews included the question of whether the exam-takers had discussed the exam with other third-country nationals, we heard of cases of spouses and friends who feared the exam so much that they preferred to renew their long-term residence visas on a yearly basis or to wait until they surpassed

the age when the exam was no longer required. These were all people working in the ethnic economy or in other professions with no contact to Czech speakers. Lack of time or education was cited as a reason for the avoidance. As mentioned above, given the even greater requirements of the A2 exam, it is possible that more people will be pushed toward this strategy. This is supported by the stated opinion that A2 was too high for some.

In sum: how the respondents view the exam and its level most commonly reflect a number of socio-demographic variables. One is education: those with secondary school and above are more experienced with studying and taking exams. Another involves professional and social networks, i.e. whether individuals have contact with Czech speakers at and outside of work. Their life plans and trajectories are also important: motivation is increased greatly with plans to acquire Czech citizenship, advance professionally or to start a family with children in Czech schools, requiring communication between parents and teachers.⁹ If the exam is a mere formality for respondents (see the 'ticked box' above), nothing in their lives changes. However, if they are planning further changes, it serves as a point from which they can continue.

Conclusion

Our research has supported (a) previous studies on testing regimes outside of the Czech Republic, and (b) the initial observations and fears of teachers of Czech as a foreign language and representatives of NGOs. Simply put, it is not a sufficiently effective tool in the advancement of linguistic integration, and in addition, it is also discriminatory, as it is not required of all foreigners, including those from the EU. However, given the extensive use of testing in many countries around the world and increasing migration tendencies in the CR, its elimination seems extremely unlikely.

All respondents perceived passing the exam as an act of *socio-economic* management. Permanent residence relieves them of an administrative burden and, with the exception of the right to vote and some others, ensures them the same rights as Czech citizens. For Vietnamese respondents and the hybrid group, it was a personal act of *language* management. Unlike the Ukrainian and Russian-speaking respondents, they already had to spend considerable effort and finances to prepare for the A1 level exam. While some respondents did experience an improvement in their vocabulary or in coping with common communicative situations, they did not start using Czech more and/or in other communicative situations afterward. As an act of organized language management by the state, its language policy, the introduction of a language exam for the purpose of permanent residence does not seem to be very effective.

The state argued for raising the language exam from A1 to A2, claiming that A1 level knowledge is not enough and cannot ensure migrants' linguistic self-sufficiency. Only Vietnamese respondents disagreed with this view. Although they too said that they would like to be able to speak to the authorities and the doctor on their own, they judged the exam primarily not in terms of practical usefulness, but of difficulty. Respondents from the other three groups also pointed out that the A1 level exam was already too difficult for Vietnamese, based on their experience of taking the exam. Speakers of Slavic languages explained this as due to the great difference between Czech and Vietnamese, but even more relevant is the sociolinguistic argument: most Vietnamese applicants for permanent residence work in the ethnic economy, as do many Ukrainians (and

other nations not heavily represented in our sample, such as Mongolians). It is therefore likely that even more members of these and other ethnic groups than before will avoid the exam and thus permanent residence. Vietnamese respondents and those from other non-EU countries, who intend to acquire Czech citizenship in the future and will have to pass the B1 level exam, appear to be encouraged to continue learning Czech. It is clear from the responses of the Vietnamese respondents that, having passed the A2 level exam, the B1 level exam is already conceivable for them.

Over at least five years in the Czech Republic, foreigners learn to interact successfully in a predominantly Czech-speaking environment. Their language and interaction management take various forms: using family members, acquaintances or colleagues, paid interpreting and mediation services, using English or Russian, acquiring mainly words sufficient for their profession and finally, mastering spoken and written Czech and using it in various communication situations. From the interviews analyzed here and from interviews with Vietnamese conducted in previous research (cf. Sherman & Homoláč, 2020), it appears that outside the work environment, Czech is used more only by those who have partner or friendly relations with Czechs (with the latter much more likely in smaller cities) and/or those who have children and have to communicate with schools.

The above suggests that state organized management can only minimally influence whether and how migrants use Czech and should therefore focus on managing *how* they acquire Czech. Ideally, as with our Ukrainian and some Russian-speaking respondents, this acquisition should be as separate as possible from exam preparation. Therefore, the state would do best to offer free A1 level courses to those interested in permanent residency when arriving in the country, and a free A2 level course after successful completion. This would increase the likelihood of using Czech in their everyday lives and that the exam, which they could take at any time within five years, would not be such a problem for them as it is now. This corresponds to similar recommendations made for testing regimes (see e.g. Rocca et al., 2020). In our opinion, to promote Czech acquisition in the first years of residence, the state should also recognize medical examinations for health professionals or other professional examinations passed in Czech for permanent residence. We also consider it important for the state to have an idea of which companies motivate their employees to learn Czech, and to support such practices by recognizing certificates from these courses for permanent residence or providing employers with tax breaks. In addition, it may be helpful to work more closely with the statistics on the success rates of speakers of different language and sociocultural backgrounds as well as the continually diversifying backgrounds of the exam-takers. This has been previously done, for example, in Germany, for the citizenship tests described by Laversuch (2008), or in South Korea for the proficiency tests considered by Im et al. (2021).

Introducing free or subsidized courses as a form of carrot/sugar for those seeking permanent residence in their first two or three years in the CR would certainly be financially and organizationally demanding for the state and would probably have little effect on migrants who are involved in the ethnic economy, as well as for all English speakers, whose socio-economic mobility is significantly higher and who, judging by our respondents, decide to stay in the Czech Republic only after several years of residence. Even so, the proposed adjustments would better reflect sociolinguistic reality and could contribute to greater rationality of organized language management of foreigners' Czech acquisition.

Here we have provided a sort of post-implementation evaluation of a process of organized language management (Kimura, 2014). The Czech Republic finds itself in a specific state of problematic constellations regarding the linguistic integration of foreigners. On the one hand, it needs migrants to fill professional shortages. On the other hand, it makes their linguistic integration difficult by not providing them with free language instruction upon their arrival. The only policy measures it has undertaken are the establishment of the exam requirement and the funding of some language courses, without a clear relationship between these acts of organized language management. Our research has shown that if the state insists on testing as a policy instrument, any consideration of testing levels needs to be preceded by a thorough sociolinguistic analysis of both: (1) the effects of the exam on individuals' behavior both before and after it, and (2) the management practices employed in daily communication routines. It may thus be useful to consider, as an act of management, the concept of language testing activism as outlined by Carlsen and Rocca (2022) on the examples of Norway and Italy, through which the language test designers and testers themselves are trained to consider these sociolinguistic realities.

Notes

1. For an evaluation of the first five years of the exam requirement, see Cvejnová and Sladkovská (2017).
2. Before the introduction of the exam, Czech was not a condition for obtaining permanent residence and an unspecified knowledge of it in business establishments was only required in the Trade Act. The verification of the fulfillment of this condition was entrusted to the trade unions of the local administration, but without qualified workers or uniform instructions.
3. The opposition of sugar and whips is a translation of the equivalent Czech expression 'cukr a bič'.
4. Cooke (2009) discusses the similar concept of 'entitlement' in regard to language and citizenship testing in the UK.
5. Ukrainians were already the largest third-country nationality before the war. In addition to ethnic Russians, migrants from the former USSR come to Czechia with Russian as a second or even first language. This is also true for many migrants from Ukraine, but for inclusion in the group of Ukrainian respondents, the deciding factor was their ethnic self-identification. All interviewees were in the Czech Republic prior to February 2022, though some (7 Ukrainians and 5 Russian speakers) were interviewed only after this point. This was discussed more extensively in Sherman et al. (2024), a report from an earlier stage of this research, focusing on exams for permanent residence rather than citizenship as a topic, the composition of respondent groups, issues of recruitment due to the war, and some initial themes from the interviews.
6. Cf. Khan (2022) on the role of language exams in the formation of raciolinguistic borders.
7. Within current legislation (Government Decree No.199/2021), the language test for permanent residence is equivalent to the aptitude test for doctors, dentists and pharmacists. In our opinion, it would be appropriate to apply a similar exception to the aptitude test for other health professionals (e.g., nurses), provided that the candidate passes the written part in Czech (unlike the aptitude test for doctors, this is not compulsory). The oral and practical parts of this test can only be passed in Czech and, in particular, the practical part is conducted over a certain period of time. The approbation exam (also for doctors) covers a limited repertoire of communication situations tested in the permanent residency exam, but candidates have a higher competence in reading and must be able to act in real communication situations.
8. Cooke (2009) refers to the exam as a 'barrier' in this role.

9. This corresponds to the finding by Innes and Skaptadóttir (2016, p. 13) regarding migrant language learning that ‘Some commitment to Iceland or Icelanders always came first (i.e. those with Icelandic heritage or in a relationship with an Icelandic), followed by a familial need (i.e. immigrant parents seeking greater fluency in Icelandic to allow them to help their children with homework or be more involved in school activities) ...’.

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