An Integration Policy Implementation Gap: Evidence from Central Europe's Housing Market

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Abstract: One of the first steps to social integration for immigrants is the ability to choose which neighbourhood to live in. While governments across Central Europe encourage and subsidize local-language learning as a key integration tool, our multi-national field experiment reveals a policy-practice gap in access to apartment search opportunities. Across Austria, Czech Republic, Hungary, and Slovakia, email inquiries to view apartment rental listings written in English by foreigners received nearly 50 percent lower response rates compared to those written in fluent local language by native residents—driven primarily by language-based discrimination rather than ethnicity. Emailed inquiries written in A2-level proficiency of the local language—the realistic initial target for most foreigners—provided no measurable benefit. Only fluency in the local language and persistence via a follow-up email fully closed the response gap. These findings indicate that current integration efforts misjudge the real-world language threshold for inclusion. We additionally survey citizens—particularly foreign residents in these countries—on Prolific to assess whether their expectations about landlords' responsiveness at each language level align with actual outcomes. These results call for closer coordination between integration policy and private-sector actors, who ultimately determine immigrants' access to housing and other essential services.