

WHY OWN IF WE CAN SHARE? BRINGS SHARING ECONOMY BENEFITS TO EVERYONE OR IS IT ANOTHER FORM OF CAPITALISM?

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Abstract

We are sharing cars, coworking spaces, music, apartments, clothes or services: Thanks to the Internet and the stagnant economy, the so-called sharing economy experienced an incredible boom since the 2000s. It has become a popular vision of how to achieve a fairer distribution of finances, how everyone can share profits, how to overcome rigid hierarchies of companies and work collectives. Sharing Economy promises sustainable development, evokes the idea of a functioning neighborhood in smaller cities and the production of a “surplus value” with a human dimension or human interaction. The following paper is a review article and the presented analysis is based to a large extent on theoretical considerations referring to studies of other authors. It aims to present different forms of sharing economy and to think about the opportunities and pitfalls of using them. The article focuses especially on the situation in the Czech Republic and answers the question if our social and state systems from the sociological point of view ready to deal with these new forms and to which extent we need its regulation.

Keywords

Sharing Economy, Sustainable Development, Human Interaction, Sociology of Work

I. Introduction

The Global financial crisis (GFC) in 2007/2008 brought about a new phenomenon that bears different names and has the potential to change not only the economic and financial world as a whole but the economic interaction of every individual. The sharing economy - also known as the collaborative economy, peer-production economy, peer-to-peer economy, gig economy, on-demand economy or crowd economy - has many facets and encompasses different forms of production and work, services and applications. The different concepts have in common that they use new technologies to bring their users together and connect them. In addition to globally known platforms for accommodation and transport - Airbnb and Uber - regional providers or specialized providers in niches have also emerged. The offerings in the sharing economy range from commercial platforms for exchanging music to car sharing or bike-sharing platforms to social projects and neighborhood assistance (Schor; Attwood-Charles 2017).

This new type of economy, initially in the U.S. emerged and has spread from there worldwide, raises a number of questions and problems in different fields: in addition to questions of legal regulation, taxation and control of the platform economy, other areas have recently been increasingly discussed, such as the changes in social coexistence in neighborhoods due to Airbnb rentals, the role of providers of services, who mostly bear the entire entrepreneurial risk and often slip into precarious employment relationships without a legal framework and thus enable new forms of inequality (Srncicek 2017; Schor 2017; Castells 2010).

The sharing economy has also become established in the Czech Republic and has been receiving more attention from politics, business and science for several years (Úřad vlády ČR 2017, budoucnost v sdílení 2018, Deloitte Sdílená ekonomika 2017). However, the analyzes

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published so far mainly relate to the economic and legislative aspects of the sharing economy (Chovanculiak 2020). A critical analysis from a sociological perspective is still pending (Horáková 2019). For different reasons is empirical research on the platform economy limited because of the missing data. This article aims to provide an overview of the current state of sociological research on this topic beginning with a definition and categorization of the terms. The social connection and role of the participants in the sharing economy will be also considered as well as the development and the changes in the Czech Republic caused by the platform economy. Before we dive into the problem description and analysis, there is a brief historical introduction to the beginnings of the sharing economy.

II. The Beginnings of the Sharing Economy

In his book “The World Game” in 1971, Buckminster Fuller formulated the idea that mankind could use its material possessions more sufficiently by sharing them when he writes: “All the beds and bedrooms around the world are empty two-thirds of the time. All the automobiles are empty and motionless five-sixths of the day There are two main causes of this vast uselessness: Firstly, we try to do everything at peak loads. Secondly, we try to “own” too many objects that we use too infrequently to justify ownership” (Fuller 1971). With the help of computers, so Fuller, people will be able to use resources better and make them available to everyone, as peak times and troughs in occupancy will be adjusted. The first peer-to-peer platform was eBay founded in 1995 in the U.S. as a service platform which brings together sellers and buyers for private retail. The rapid development and spread of the Internet and the GFC in 2007/8 led to a boom in the platform economy. The most famous companies, such as Airbnb, Uber or Taskrabbit were founded during this time. Even if the sharing economy includes different services and does not offer a uniform picture, there are common characteristics that apply to the different providers: Even if the sharing economy comprises different services and does not offer a uniform picture, there are common characteristics that apply to the different providers: In principle, the providers can be differentiated into profit and non-profit as well as peer-to-peer and business-to-peer. In the case of peer-to-peer offers, the platform only acts as an intermediary that brings providers and interested parties together, whereby the provider offers his services or his property. With the business-to-peer concept, the group itself owns the items that it then offers to share. The following table shows the different possibilities, supplemented by companies that offer their services in the Czech Republic

Table 1 Type of sharing providers

		TYP OF PROVIDER	
		PEER TO PEER	BUSINESS TO PEER
PLATFORM ORIENTATION	NON-PROFIT	Hearth.net, food bank, time bank, fler.cz	Makerspaces, fajnadilna.cz e.g.
	FOR-PROFIT	Airbnb, Uber, liftago, Zonky.cz, aukro.cz	Rekola, nextbike

Source: Schor, J. (2016) Debating the Sharing Economy, with authors' own additions

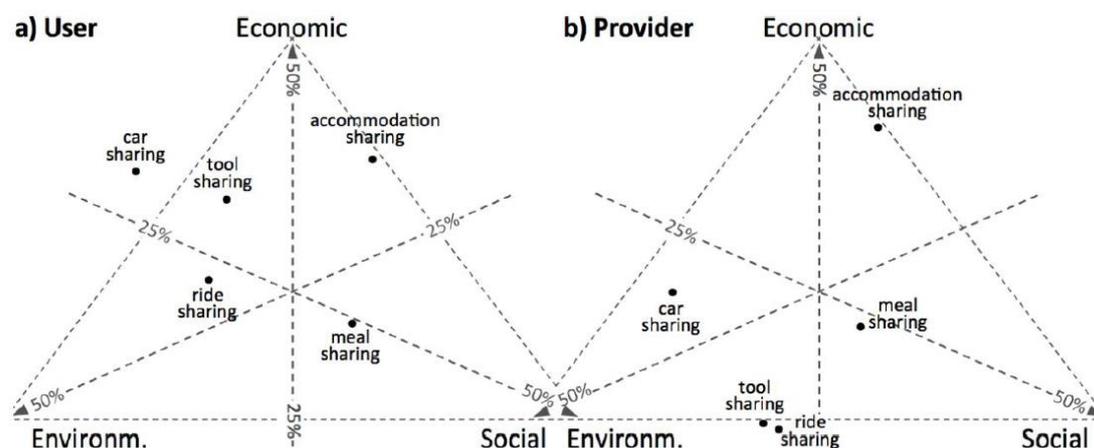
All companies in the platform economy have in common that they use the latest technologies, apps, algorithms and the Internet to offer their services or to bring providers and interested parties together. During the boom period of the sharing economy during the GFC this new type of economy was first seen as a shift in the development of capitalism (Srnicek, Williams 2015,

Srniczek, 2017). Sharing economy stands for another even better type of capitalism, which does not put ownership in the foreground, but should enable participating through sharing. This equal access to goods and services should also reduce carbon footprints (e.g. by shared rides) and should have a positive ecological effect. At the same time, sharing economy is supposed to create global and local communities, strengthen social ties founded by mutual trust. When start-up capital no longer plays a major role in affording mobility or a vacation, socially disadvantaged social groups also have the opportunity to participate in the economic process, so was the vision (Schor, Attwood-Charles 2017). It may seem surprising when non-profit and profit enterprises of the sharing economy stick to the same philosophy when offering their services. Sustainable development, the support of local production or the local economy, the creation of communities that goes together with the enhancement of solidarity, the commitment to equality and inclusion as well as the support of innovations are the core elements of the sharing philosophy. No doubt that non-profit companies can represent these principles in a more sustainable and credible way than profit-oriented providers (Schor, Attwood-Charles, 2017).

Regardless of how much enterprises feel committed to this philosophy, we can non-profit and profit companies in the sharing economy distinguish according to the product or service they offer: In the sharing economy we find enterprises specialized on recycling and circulation of (used) products, e.g. eBay on the global or aukro on the Czech market. A large part of the sharing economy is in the category of lending/sharing items or services in the area of housing or mobility. It is no coincidence that the best-known and most controversial representatives can be found here: Airbnb and Uber. The exchange of services (e.g. hlidacky.cz), labour or crowd-working platforms and sharing items or space with the aim to enable production (coworking or makerspaces) are smaller but also very important categories in the sharing economy.

III. Who is taking part in the sharing economy?

Participation in the sharing economy is in principle possible for everyone and is not limited by age, gender or financial opportunities. The only requirement for participation is an internet connection and the necessary hard- and software. The motivation to take part in the sharing economy is diverse but research in the U.S. shows that participants start platform work with high idealistic motivation: they are subconsciously interested in sharing values and creating personalized more humane markets in opposition to the global corporate economy (Schor, Attwood-Charles, 2017, Schor 2016). In addition to this idealistic motivation, ecological, social and not least economic aspects also play an important role. Also, not to be underestimated is the fact that the use of sharing platforms has become part of an urban and modern lifestyle: Making new friends, earning or saving money, getting better quality for less money, reducing the carbon footprint by sharing rides, all these are important aspects to become a part of the sharing economy. In their study, Böcker and Meelen (2017) examined different motivational factors of users and providers of peer-to-peer platforms. A distinction was made between social, economic and ecological motivation (see figure 1). The study shows that economic and social aspects are more important for users than for providers. For providers, social and environmental motivations are in the foreground. An exception is the apartment sharing, as this is also associated with ongoing high costs for the provider.

Figure 1: Motivation to participate in different sectors of the sharing economy (peer to peer)

Source: Böcker, Meelen (2017), p. 34

The promised positive effects in the spheres of environment, economy and social issues are critically discussed by many social scientists: Schor (2016) points out that the sharing economy does not lead to less and more sustainable consumption, but to the opposite behavior: many consumers are buying an expensive high-end product with the idea of selling it as used again only with little loss. On the other hand, many consumers take the opportunity to buy a cheaper, used item. In their case, buying a brand-new product would be beyond their financial means. The cheaper travel options through ride and apartment sharing also mean that people travel not less, but more because the platform alternatives are much cheaper than a hotel or traveling by the own car (if available). More people can, therefore, afford more and cheaper holiday trips.

As figure 1 shows, the social aspect and interaction play an important role for users and providers to participate in the sharing economy. Does the sharing economy support the social interaction between its users and do they have a better, more human relationship to each other than in “normal” economic actions? Does the sharing economy build social capital? This question is not easy to answer unambiguously. Numerous studies (Schor 2016, Schor 2017, Abraho 2017, Parigi / Cook 2015) show that many profit platforms, in particular, emphasize the interpersonal aspect. However, it turns out that with the growing number of users, anonymity grows and the social aspect takes a back seat. Besides, providers are becoming less and less altruistic under the economic pressure that comes from intermediary platforms such as Airbnb and they start focusing on the financial side of their platform engagement.

With the increasing use of sharing platforms, there is also the question of how to create trust between provider and user. Especially when services or very private items such as apartments are shared with strangers, there must be a basis of trust, although the sharing participants initially only get in touch with each other. Sociologists speak of the phenomenon of “stranger sharing”: we share goods and services with strangers that we do not know. The resulting risk, e.g. victims of fraud should be reduced through feedback and ratings from other users. This also shows how limited this system is, which often generates itself: “the reputation system of Airbnb, and by extension of sharing-economy sites—the star ratings and the number of reviews—may operate to bridge the gap between institutionally generated trust and the organically grown trust present in social platforms. Although we gathered evidence for the tendency of individuals to trust similar others, by trusting the reputation system, participants in our study were willing to extend trust to those who exhibited a high degree of dissimilarity in the social space“ (Abraho et.al. 2017).

IV. Labor in the Sharing Economy

The sharing economy not only changes the relationship between the consumer and the provider but also influences the forms of work and employment contracts. Those who offer their services or products on the platforms bear a triple risk: the legal risk, the physical risk and the platform risk (Schor, Attwood-Charles 2017). The legal risk includes the lack of labor law regulations for employees, but also the fact that the providers are seen as independent contractors who structure their working hours according to the needs of the platform without complying with legal requirements. At the same time, they are fully responsible for their working materials, services or objects that they need to carry out their work or offer their services (e.g. own car, own apartment, own computer). The workforce is becoming more casualized, they are working often part-time with high mobility in working hours, intensity of work and no stable time-schedule. Because platform workers are self-employed, they alone bear the physical risk: Illness also means loss of earnings, which cannot be compensated for. The insurance is financed solely by the self-employed. Here one could argue that the situation of the platform workers is no different from that of the self-employed, who also insure themselves and have to pay their pensions. This is where the third risk comes into play: the platform risk. The provider platforms, such as Airbnb, Uber and others have great power and an enormous influence on the activity of their users who offer their services through them. Schor (2018) points out that “platforms have very low barriers to entry and attract a wide array of earners“. Therefore, they use other measures to discipline their providers. Each provider has to pay the platforms a minimal commission from the earnings. However, if they want a better placement of their offer on the platform to attract more attention, they have to pay a higher commission. At the same time, the platform has the right to block a user account - temporarily or forever - without giving detailed reasons or warning. This can happen if the provider does not pay his commission on time, customers complain about the service or certain requirements of the platform are not implemented on time. In addition, the platform determines the rules under which the provider must sell his service: To attract new customers or retain them, platforms offer various bonus programs (e.g. business program at Airbnb or genius program at booking.com) that the providers have to accept in order to keep their account, but at the same time it gives them lower earnings with the same work performance. It is also important to point out that the working conditions and earning opportunities vary from platform to platform and it is therefore difficult to find a common regulation for all platforms involved in the sharing economy that meet the needs of all providers and improve their situation.

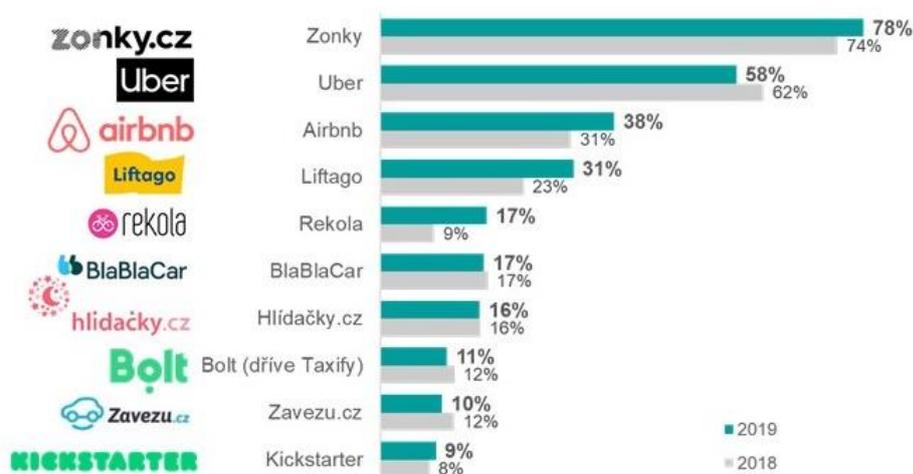
It is also important to show that platform work does not democratize capitalism and does not provide more equitable access to earning opportunities and the distribution of money. Schor points out in her research that in the United States is “an upward redistribution of opportunity and income within the top 80%“ (Schor 2018). Platform work is performed disproportionately by well-educated, white college-educated providers who often take on manual work such as cleaning, driving or delivering services that were otherwise performed by unskilled workers. For those who are already financially better off, the platform work is a lucrative additional income. People who are on the lower-income scale do not have the opportunity to offer a nice apartment on Airbnb or to offer a ride with a new high-end car on Uber. „Overall, we suspect that the additional income earned by high educated platform providers worsens the distribution between them and lower educated persons at the bottom of the income scale, “ summarizes Schor (2018). Another dimension of inequality relates to the ethnic criteria: various studies have shown that apartments in areas mostly populated by coloured people have received lower ratings, were cheaper and were mainly rented by coloured people. Conversely, coloured users were rejected more often or subsequently rated lower by the providers. (Schor 2018). Platform Work reproduces cultural capital in this way: Users look for offers that correspond to their own

social status since there is a risk of being rejected otherwise. In order to appeal to a certain clientele, the offers are about the “right taste”, the “right offer” and the “right marketing”.

V. The Situation in the Czech Republic

The sharing economy is a dynamically developing economic sector which is subject to rapid changes and for which it is, therefore, difficult to make long-term statements. The international sharing platforms are also represented in the Czech Republic, as are local providers who have adapted to the conditions of the local market or serve special segments (e.g. mojechaty.cz). The most used areas of the sharing economy in the Czech Republic are accommodation, mobility (Uber, but also car-sharing and bike-sharing offers), financial services and music. According to a study by the marketing agency Ipsos, 38% of respondents were familiar with the term "sharing economy", although the level of awareness of certain offers was significantly higher, as the following graphic shows.

Figure 2: Knowledge of shared economy services (Top 10) in the Czech Republic

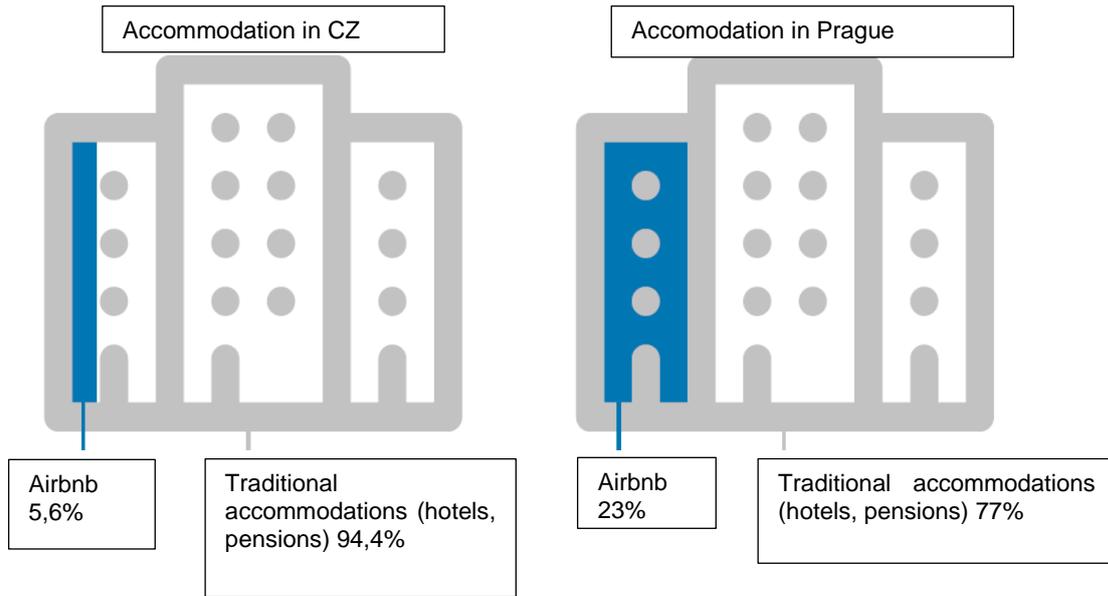


Source: Ipsos, *Sdílená ekonomika 2019*

The use of sharing economy services has increased since 2018. In 2019 every third Czech (35%) has tried them, most often young people from large cities with more than 100,000 inhabitants. The most used services include Uber (already tested by 14% of the population), Airbnb (11%) and Zonky (10%). While Uber and Airbnb are mainly used by people from the youngest age group 18 - 29, Zonky is popular mainly with people in the productive age of 30 - 39 years (Ipsos 2019). Around 10% of the respondents provide a service to the sharing economy themselves (in 2017 it was 8%) and another 16% say they plan to do so (10% in 2017). Two-thirds of Czechs have no experience with the provision of shared services, nor do they plan to (Ipsos 2019). According to Ipsos research, the main reasons for using platform offerings are a cheaper price (64%) and a better quality of services (25%). 21% of the respondents see in platform work an additional or main income (Ipsos 2019). As a reason for not using a sharing service, respondents stated that it was not available at their place of residence (33%) or that they were afraid of sharing with a stranger (20%).

The Airbnb and Uber services made particularly negative headlines in the Czech Republic and triggered a discussion about stricter regulation. The following text deals with the development of Airbnb in the Czech Republic and the resulting problems and approaches. For the most part, the studies presented served as a starting point for government regulation proposals.

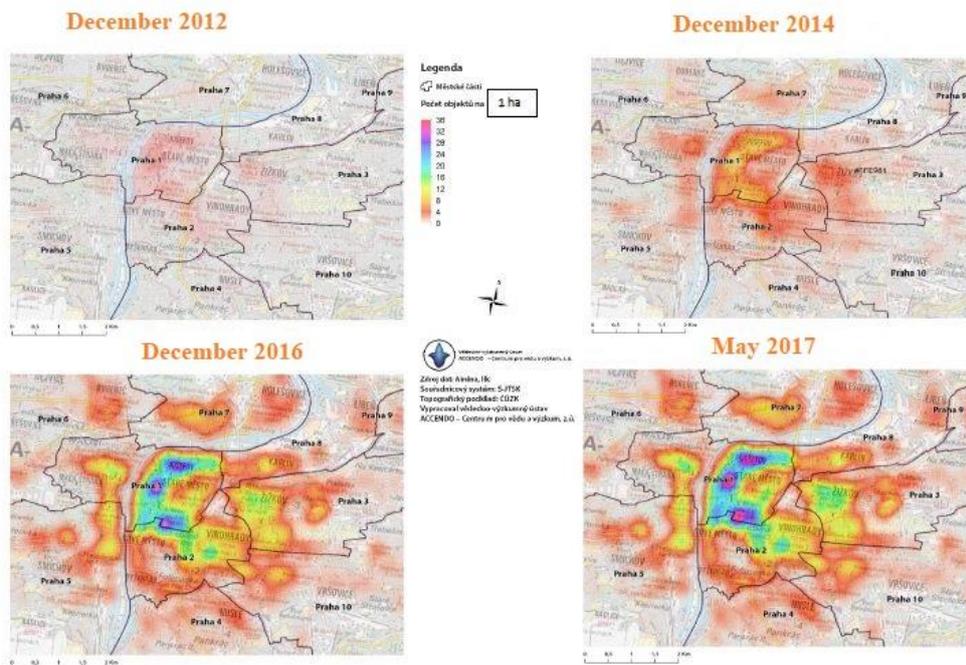
Figure 3: Market of accommodation in the Czech Republic and in Prague 2017



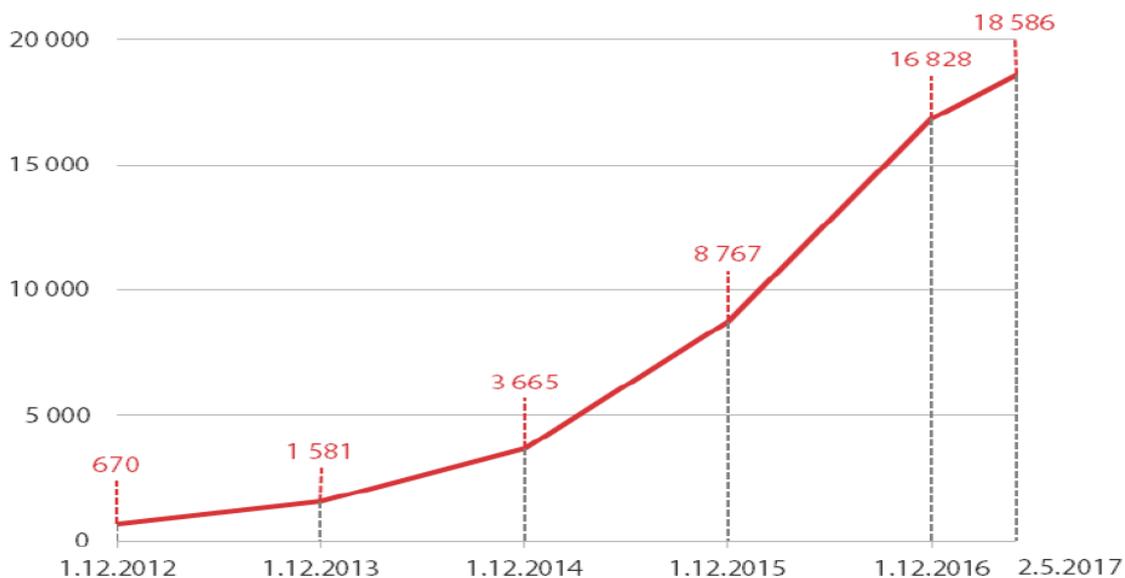
Source: Deloitte (2017) *Sdílená ekonomika*.

Airbnb's share of short-term overnight stays has grown continuously in recent years, particularly in Prague; in 2018 it was over 40% (novinky.cz 2018). Another study concludes that Airbnb offers over 50% of the accommodation options in Prague through its platform (Veber, Hruška 2016). Airbnb's platform, in particular, offers entire apartments for short-term rental to tourists (77%), shared rooms in a private apartment only make up around 17%. This development particularly affects the Old town of Prague and the neighboring districts, so that residents are increasingly being pushed into the outskirts. The following graphic shows the development and expansion of accommodations offered by Airbnb in Prague from 2012 to 2017.

Figure 4: Development of Airbnb in Prague from 2012 until 2017



Source: *Analýza sdílené ekonomiky a platform, 2017, příloha 1*

Figure 5 Development of Airbnb in numbers in Prague from 2012 to 2017

Source: Krajčůk, V., Veber, J., Bejček, M., Klučníkov, A. et al. (2017)

Between 2012 and 2017, the number of accommodations offered on the Airbnb platform increased from around 700 to over 18,000. While initially only the immediate center of Prague was affected, there is now a dense range of accommodation options available through Airbnb in almost all Prague districts. This development brings with it a whole series of negative side effects for the residents: in addition to an increased noise level due to tourist groups celebrating, the neighbourhoods are also changing significantly. In connection with the rapid increase in short-term rental of apartments, there is a sharp rise in rents for long-term tenants and a perceived lack of affordable housing. Residents are pushed out of the inner city to the periphery, the shops and the entire infrastructure in the centers adapt to these changes and gentrification occurs. This development can mostly be seen in the capital Prague but Airbnb has expanded to virtually all major tourist sites in the Czech Republic and beyond. After initial operations only in the capital, Airbnb's shared accommodation services gradually spread through the most visited tourist destinations (Český Krumlov and Valtice and Karlovarsko) to almost the entire territory of the Czech Republic (Analýza sdílené ekonomiky a platform 2017). Uncontrolled growth without regulation can have numerous negative impacts, especially in the area of accommodation. In addition to the already mentioned, precarious working conditions for platform workers and the tightening of the housing market for residents, non-complied and uncontrolled hygiene regulations can lead to a competitive disadvantage for official providers such as hotels. Since legal regulations for short-term rentals via sharing platforms are completely absent or are just emerging, the state and municipalities experience considerable tax and fee losses as well as possible illegality (grey economy). Other negative side-effects are lower revenues for local hotels or other accommodation facilities and possible discrimination against guests (Ministerstvo pro místní rozvoj 2017). To curb these negative aspects of the accommodation market, in particular, numerous cities around the world that have had a very high number of Airbnb rentals and have been particularly affected by the negative effects have tried to regulate the sharing economy. So e.g. Berlin, which already banned the rental of entire apartments on Airbnb in 2016 under the threat of a heavy fine.

A first attempt to formulate rules for regulating the sharing economy comes from Stephen Miller (2016). In his ten principles, Miller tries to define how the sharing economy is transforming trade. At the same time, he sets out the principles according to which future

regulation, no matter how it will look, should be based.² Miller explains in his article that the sharing economy needs completely new approaches to regulation than traditional economies and that in order to create these regulations, lawmakers urgently need the necessary information, which is not always easy to obtain. In addition, the sharing economy should be understood as a change that creates new markets, but at the same time, it should not be forgotten that old markets must also change significantly in order not to be taken over (Miller 2016). What are the possibilities to regulate the sharing economy, especially Airbnb in Prague? A strategy paper by the Ministry of Regional Development states that over-regulation of the sharing economy should be avoided because it creates a lot of positive effects and the regulatory measures should not bring new obstacles to the economy. Instead of relying on radical solutions such as in Berlin, attempts should be made to find a regulation together with Airbnb, such as when occupying rooms or registering guests. The strategy paper concludes that “there are a number of possible regulatory measures for the Czech Republic. The initial solution of the situation could be the beginning of deeper cooperation between the Czech Republic, the city of Prague and the Airbnb service. Such cooperation has proved itself abroad” (Ministerstvo pro místní rozvoj 2017).

So far, Airbnb has not been regulated in Prague or the Czech Republic, even if it has been announced frequently. The temporary closure of all accommodations in the pandemic during springtime 2020 has shown what Prague could look like without a large number of tourists. This positive experience gave new impulses to those responsible, but also to the residents so that the Mayor of the City of Prague would like to introduce new regulations. By curbing short-term rentals through Airbnb, he also hopes to get the problem of affordable housing for families and seniors under control. The proposal provides for the following changes to the law: the platforms should be obliged to provide the municipalities with sufficient information, e.g. how many guests are accommodated to be able to calculate the city tourist tax. At the same time, municipalities should be given the opportunity to react quickly to developments and independently regulate Airbnb's business activities and that of other platforms. A permanent rental of an apartment by Airbnb should only take place with the consent of the house community and at the same time, the structural conditions in the apartments must meet the strict requirements that hotels have to comply with (Pirátská strana 2020).

VI. Conclusion

Sharing economy is a dynamic phenomenon that has spread globally since its emergence during the 2007/8 financial crisis. A critical analysis of the different manifestations of the sharing economy has shown that the profit-oriented platforms, in particular, do not do justice to the vision that has accompanied the sharing economy from its start. Sustainable development, fair access to resources for all participants and a more humane approach between providers and customers are principles from which the profit platforms have long since removed. One of the positive effects of the profit-sharing economy is that there is an added value for the consumer: the direct exchange between the consumer and the provider often gives the customer a higher quality of service at a lower price. At the same time, this new economic form has changed working conditions significantly: The platform worker bears a much higher risk than the self-employed and - due to the lack of regulations and controls - is in danger of constantly exploiting himself. The sharing economy, therefore, does not lead to a more equitable distribution of

² The ten principles are the following: 1. The Sharing Economy is differentiated and requires a differentiated regulatory response, 2. The Sharing Economy must be daylighted, 3. Regulating the Sharing Economy requires (the right kind of) information, 4. The Sharing Economy is here to stay (and that is a good thing), 5. The Sharing Economy disrupts and reimagines established markets, 6. The Sharing Economy establishes new markets (that established markets want to take over), 7. The Sharing Economy disrupts and reimagines established regulatory structures, 8. The Sharing Economy requires a response beyond traditional regulation, 9. The harm and the remedy are uniquely challenging to determine the Sharing Economy, 10. Each of whom should be considered in establishing a regulatory response. (Miller, 2016)

income, but does the opposite: the more educated middle class creates a second income through platform work and deprives unskilled workers of their employment opportunities. Another negative aspect is the discrimination of ethnic, religious or sexual minorities through the platforms (either as consumers or as providers), as numerous studies show, especially from the US.

The sharing economy developed later in the Czech Republic than in the US but has great potential. A study shows that more than a third of those questioned use services of the sharing economy, around 10% themselves offer a service via a platform. In addition to the positive effects of the platform economy already mentioned, it is becoming increasingly clear that the lack of regulation can become a problem for platform providers, consumers, but also municipalities and the state. This can be seen in the example of the city of Prague and the rentals on the Airbnb platform. In 2017, these were 28% higher than in 2012. This enormous number of short-term rented housing creates a whole series of problems for residents, but also for the community itself, which could be solved by targeted regulation. However, the municipalities have their hands tied for this, as they have no instruments to regulate the platform offers. Besides, there is currently no strategy on how the apartment platforms should be regulated: a strict regulation such as that in Berlin is perceived as being too restrictive and inhibiting the economy. Close cooperation with the platforms to come to a common solution to the problems seems to be an approach that has already been successfully tried abroad, but has so far been of little use in Prague and other cities. The dynamic development of the sharing economy also makes it difficult to develop legal regulations, since they are usually out of date when they are introduced. However, the closure of the accommodation due to the pandemic in spring 2020 has shown the quality of life cities can have for their residents if the number of tourists is reduced significantly. This could lead to a motivation boost for the political will to regulate in particular accommodation platforms. But the meaningful regulation of other companies in the sharing economy is – except for Uber - still a long way off.

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