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Integration of Refugees in Slovakia

The Slovak Republic is developing her asylum system in response to increasing numbers of asylum-seekers and in order to ensure full implementation of international obligations as a member state of the European Union (EU), which the Slovak Republic recently joined in May 2004.

Asylum-Seekers in Slovakia

Between 1 January 1992 and 31 December 2004, 44,767 asylum-seekers were admitted into the Refugee Status Determination (RSD) procedure, of whom 563 were recognized as refugees.

Another 2,747 had their applications for refugee status rejected, and 38,310 abandoned the Refugee Status Determination (RSD) procedure and left the country. The large number of asylum-seekers abandoning the procedure indicates that for many, Slovakia is still a transit country.

Out of the 563 refugees recognized by Slovakia by the end of December 2004, however, at least 300–330 are known to have remained in the country, 159 of whom have been granted Slovak citizenship.

From January 2004 to December 2004, a total of 11,391 asylum-seekers were admitted into the Refugee Status Determination (RSD) procedure, which represents a 35 percent increase over the same period in 2003.

From this number, only 15 asylum-seekers were granted refugee status, which represents the lowest recognition rate in Europe during 2004. In 2003, only 11 asylum-seekers were granted refugee status, and in year 2002 it was 20 refugees.

Generally, the number of asylum-seekers admitted into the Refugee Status Determination (RSD) procedure is not comparable with the

number of recognized refugees. This could point out one significant factor: the integration policy is not working, is not effective, and with numbers higher than 50–100, it could easily collapse.

The composition of asylum-seekers has changed in the past two years, which have seen a large increase of asylum-seekers from Chechnya in the Russian Federation, especially since 2004. The main countries of origin in the process as a whole were India, Russian Federation—Chechnya, Georgia, Pakistan, China, Moldova and Bangladesh, between the months of January and September 2004.

Eighty-six percent of the asylum-seekers are male, and only 14 percent are female, which leads to a slow but sure decrease of the female representation in the group composition of the asylum-seekers. Female asylum seekers are for the most part Chechens, who come in families with children or as single-headed households.

Refugee Status Determination (RSD) Procedure

An application for refugee status should be lodged with the Alien and Border Police (ABP), who should then forward the application to the Migration Office (MO); or, it can be submitted at designated Reception Centres of the Migration Office, where the Alien and Border Police is present to process the applications.

The Migration Office is responsible for determining refugee status in the primary instance. Asylum-seekers who are rejected by the Migration Office may appeal to an independent Judiciary Appeal Committee (JAC, with courts in Bratislava and Košice).

This court determines refugee status in the secondary instance. Those asylum-seekers who are rejected at this instance may apply to the Supreme Court for judicial review of the Appeal Committee's decision.

Once admitted into the Refugee Status Determination (RSD) procedure, asylum-seekers are accommodated for approximately thirty days under medical quarantine in a reception centre at Adamov-Gbely (with a 200-bed capacity), in Rohovce (140-bed capacity) in western Slovakia, or in Liptovské Vlachy (100-bed capacity) or Opatovská Nová Ves (180-bed capacity) in central Slovakia.

After completing quarantine, they are transferred to another reception centre in Western Slovakia, either at Brezová pod Bradlom (90-bed capacity), or Gabčíkovo (250-bed capacity), where they remain until the final determination of their respective claims.

All five reception centres are managed by the Migration Office of the Ministry of Interior Affairs, which is planning to open a new centre in Humenné, eastern Slovakia, in 2005 or 2006 (with an estimated bed capacity of 300–500).

At times of large numbers of asylum seekers, the Migration Office changes the regime of the two late reception centres, which normally operate under an accommodation regime (free leave of the centre with permission), and also changes the regime of the Integration Centre, which becomes a reception centre.

Asylum-seekers are generally not allowed to leave the centres at Adamov-Gbely, Rohovce, Opatovská Nova Ves and Liptovské Vlachy, while under quarantine. They may come and go from the centres in Brezová pod Bradlom and Gabčíkovo, but are not allowed to work.

Under the new amendment to the Asylum Law, they may enter the labour market if the decision on their case has not been issued by the Migration Office after one year. School-age children attend the local schools in Brezová pod Bradlom and Gabčíkovo, while younger children attend day-care facilities in the two reception centres.

Recognized Refugees

Recognized refugees are granted permanent residence in Slovakia and enjoy *de jure* the same rights as citizens, subject to certain exceptions, such as the right to vote and to perform military service.

In particular, refugees do not require a work permit and *de iure* they have the same access as citizens to public relief, social security and state healthcare, as well as to primary, secondary and tertiary education.

In order to facilitate refugee integration, the Slovak Government issued Decision No. 105 of February 1996, adopting the “Complex Solution for the Process of Integration of Foreigners Granted Refugee Status into Society,” which is a basic framework for the

integration process of recognized refugees, and according to which the Ministry of Interior Affairs should cooperate with other ministries, municipalities, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to help refugees.

This help may include *inter alia* to learn the Slovak language, to attend vocational training courses, to obtain accommodation in social housing, to be accepted by the local community, or to obtain employment.

This document is based on the principles of the migration policy of the Slovak Republic. The desired effect should be that a refugee (asylum-seeker) would become self-sufficient and able to exist without assistance from the state.

The term ‘successful integration’ mainly comprises knowledge of the official language, having a job and a permanent residence. Responsibility for the process of integration from the point of view of the state administration lies with the Migration Office of the Slovak Ministry of Interior Affairs.

The Slovak government officially declares its fulfilment of European Union standards in asylum policy and agrees with the Council Decision of 28 September 2000 establishing a European Refugee Fund (2000/596/EC):

“The integration of refugees into the society of the country in which they are established in is one of the objectives of the Geneva Convention, and, to this end, there should be support for action by the Member States, intended to promote their social and economic integration, in so far as it contributes to economic and social cohesion, the maintenance and strengthening of which is one of the Community’s fundamental objectives.”

In the same decision we also read: “It is in the interest of both the Member States and the persons concerned, that refugees and displaced persons who are allowed to stay in the territory of the Member States are given the opportunity to provide for themselves by working.” But in a practical way, integration is not a priority for Slovak official authorities.

Since 1996 Slovak integration policy has not been changed, despite the fact that asylum legislation has been harmonized with the *acquis communautaire*. The attitude of state entities to the integration of refugees has not been changed, and it is considered

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by non-governmental organizations as an element of the asylum system, which is not a priority, and no appropriate specialized attention is given to it.

National Integration Policy (NIP)

Integration policy has not reflected the new transformation trends and has not been adapted to changed economic and social conditions. From our point of view, the main elements of integration policy—language training and vocational training of refugees—have been neglected for a long time.

An effective national integration policy of the Slovak Republic is missing, resulting in a negative impact on integration of asylum-seekers and refugees. This fact has led to an increase of socio-economic problems for recognized refugees—the lack of opportunities to succeed in the labour market, long-term dependence on the state social welfare system, and consideration of refugees by majority society as a “social burden.”

Recognized refugees are facing very hard living conditions, especially in the first phases of the integration process: no knowledge of the official language, dependency on social welfare allowances, unemployment, and accommodation at periphery of towns, offered by the Ministry of Interior Affairs.

At the beginning of the integration process, recognized refugees do not have sufficient and proper financial resources; they do not have the support of their family; and they do not have support from the local community.

Furthermore, they do not sufficiently know Slovak society; they have no funds to buy basic sanitary tools, clothes, tools for kitchen or furniture. For a successful integration process it is important that recognised refugees are provided a minimum financial stipend, in order to acquire basic items.

Only after reaching the basic level of maintenance, could recognized refugees start to be able to integrate also in the fields of culture orientation, language preparation, and getting to know the social system.

In daily life, integration-related assistance is provided only by non-governmental organisations, funded mostly by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), although it is formally declared by the state as a provision.



The non-governmental sector covers the providing of social assistance, psychological and legal counselling, language training, vocational training, support in education, material support, and the raising of public awareness.

Taking into account the status of recognized refugees as people with special needs (language, cultural and social barriers), the state does not create any special integration programmes focusing on facilitating the integration process.

From the beginning, recognized refugees are considered by the relevant state authorities as people with the same rights and obligations as Slovak citizens, and with the same options for improving their living situations.

Development of Systematic Solutions

For Slovak official authorities, refugee integration is not a priority and NGOs have to substitute for the role of the state. Because an official state integration policy is missing, the focus of NGOs is not only to provide “social assistance,” but also to develop systematic solutions and recommendations to the various state authorities.

These can include: the creation of systematic solutions in language and professional training of recognized refugees and asylum seekers; and the creation of training programmes focused

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on providing recognized refugees and asylum seekers with basic orientation, and with social and marketable skills.

It can also include: providing supporting and motivational activities aiming to build independence and self-sufficiency of refugees and asylum seekers; the formation of positive attitudes of potential employers towards target groups.

Furthermore, it can include: the constant and increasing raising of public awareness; and the formulation of recommendations for changing the general national integration policy in Slovakia.

Changes in integration policy are necessary in the language preparation and in the accommodation policy, and it is known that increased co-operation among the central state administration, local institutions and non-governmental organizations could contribute to effective and positive improvement in the integration process.

The necessity of cooperation between the Ministry of Interior Affairs, other respective central state bodies, as well as international organisations, such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the state administration, municipalities and NGOs, comes to the fore in light of all these mentioned aspects.

The creation of a functioning system of integration is one of the prerequisites for the fulfilment of obligations resulting for the Slovak Republic, originating from the 1951 Refugee Convention.

Therefore, it is highly necessary for the Slovak Republic, and maybe for the other Central European countries, too, to find durable and sustaining systematic solutions to the integration of recognized refugees at a national and regional level.

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Daniel PASTIRČÁK

There Are Many Gifts, but the Same Spirit

"There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. There are different kinds of working, but the same God works all of them in everyone."
(1Cor 12,4-6)

In 1Corinthians 12,4-6 we receive the key to open the mystery of unity in diversity. We are strangers yet neighbours, different yet joined by a common mysterious strength. Different languages, different cultures, different personality types, different traditions and denominations and yet one huge spiritual wave which soars in our different personalities, like an oratorio. What is difference and what is unity?

I. The Same Spirit

The Spirit is one. What Spirit? Why one? Jesus said to the Samaritan woman: "God is spirit, and God's worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth." (John 4,24) God is Spirit, Consciousness, which is invisible and penetrating everything. It is in you and around you.

It is the source of being of all things. From it springs the light of your consciousness. The atoms and quarks, which weave the beautiful Gobelin tapestry of the cosmos in timespace, are dancing their complicated dance according to the law of the omnipresent Spirit.

In the Spirit the whole universe has its hidden unity. "We were all baptized in one Spirit" (1Cor 12,13). The sacrament of baptism shows us the spring of our unity. The Greek word 'baptismo' means to be immersed and to soak up.

This word signifies our internal initiation into God's Spirit. The human being by baptism in the Spirit is immersed like a sponge in

