

Our Responsibilities Towards Refugees

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Introduction

This essay should discuss “our responsibilities towards refugees”, but before I start it's important to define more clearly the specific area of interest I've chosen from this wide main theme. I'll focus myself in the position of refugees in the Czech republic and / or in the European union. The conditions in the European region are very special in comparison with the rest of the world. It's caused by the presence of multiple seats of violence and potential sources of asylum-seekers (mostly in the former USSR and countries under its influence), which make the situation hazier than in America. But on the other hand there's no possible (with high probability) source of the *prima facie* immigration waves like in Africa or Asia.

The refugee-related trends in the Czech republic have been stable in the last decade. But the future evolution is uncertain due to the new challenges caused by joining the EU and the impending expansion of the Schengen area (it depends on initiation of the data-sharing system SIS II, that is scheduled on the early 2006). Should we expect more refugees in the coming years? I'll try to answer this and other questions later – after describing the current state.

General informations

Czech asylum and migration policy¹

Both the number of refugees approaching the Czech republic and the count of individuals recognized under 1951 Convention status is considerably steady in the past years. The most determinative factor of the Czech asylum policy is exactly the low percentage of the successful asylum applicants (typically under 1%). This feature uncovers the main motivation - poor economic conditions in the country of origin. The mere fact of poverty is indeed insufficient for authorization of the request.

The government carries the major burden of responsibility for safety of refugees who are seeking sanctuary in the Czech republic (wrong decision could have terrible consequences). But there are more non-governmental organizations interested in the related problems. The most important one (with the closest relations with authorities) is the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees². An obligation to inform UNHCR ensues directly from the Czech law. It seems that this cooperation works well.

¹ see the attached 2003 UHNCR Statistical Yearbook (Czech rep.) for further statistical information

² a map of UNHCR's infrastructure in central Europe is attached

public opinion¹

Viewpoint of every single man is significant for integration of successful asylum seekers into community. Everyone s an opportunity to help them if desired. At this point I have to say I have no personal experience with refugees, because there's no transit center or accommodation near my abode (Sokolov)².

In general, Czech public thinks refugees should be accepted by the Czech republic, but simultaneously is the majority for one of the alternative solutions (meaning mainly repatriation or resettlement into third secure country). But one thing is at least strange – although the attitude of most respondents towards refugees was generally good (actually half of them would donate some money, more than 80% would donate clothes and other goods), the degree of their tolerance is in most cases poor. I think this is caused by the internal economic conditions (or bleak individual economic situation) together with the fear of anything foreign.

non-governmental organizations

As I've said before, the leading non-governmental institution dealing with refugees is UNHCR. But the statutes of this “agency” is very specific among others as it is a branch of UN. Furthermore there are many movements of people which care either commonly for human rights (Amnesty International...) or more specifically for the refugees-related questions (Refugees International, International Organization for Migration...). In the Czech republic we can find mostly the first category since our asylum system isn't significantly problematic (we have other troubles - e.g. with corruption – this is what Transparency International cares about).

All the “organizations” (they're legal bases differ from each other) I've written about in the previous paragraph are international, but there are some local ones even in the Czech republic. I've found OPU (organization for help to refugees).

As you can see, the work of authorities is under constant supervision. This situation is common in west Europe, however it's not so usual in all the countries in the east. It makes from the Czech republic a safe sanctuary fully comparable with other members of the EU, sometimes even better.

new challenges within EU

The required synchronization of the law has already been made. The the Czech republic is currently partially influenced by the Schengen treaty. After it's full implementation the fact would be that we won't have any outer border (since we border only on other members of the EU). The only hold-outs would stay on international airports (and only by the “outer” flights – with a landing in a non-EU country). Truly said, I don't know what to expect, because everything would be so much different.

But one thing is clear already. Prospective tasks of bureaus will consist in closer cooperation with the surrounding countries. This refers to various governmental agencies, but above all to the police.

¹ based on the STEM statistical research (years 2001-2002, submitter: UNHCR Prague)

² a map of the Czech republic's asylum and migration infrastructure can be found among attachments

international comparison

I would say comparing the situation in Europe and in developing countries is unfair, but at the same time it is inescapable. I think it's logical that the leading role in these parts of world is in the presence of the non-governmental organizations. And since these institutions are from bigger part dependent on donations, a fraction of responsibility lies on everyone of us. Even though the main feature of the face of affairs in the third world is its dependency on a help from outside, often there is a way of fixing up everything from the inside. The best approach to deal with the situation of refugees leads through elimination of the difficulty that forced them to leave their homes. But it's honest to say that this is both the best and the most challenging solution (and I'm not the type of a naive optimist who thinks it's possible to enforce this more than once in a single century).

Subjective point of view

In previous passages I was trying to hold certain degree of objectivity, but now the time has come to express my personal opinions about some of the discussed topics. The main thing is, that I find Czech asylum policy alright. It's true, that there are many features which can be improved, but it is the same with everything.

I was surprised by public opinion – more specifically by the intolerance towards refugees (in the meaning of having a refugee as a part of family or having a refugee camp near their habitation). It can be partially caused by obduracy of the “old generation”. Views of young people are much more broadminded due to the ongoing globalization (I don't mean the globalization in the right meaning of the word, but the progress of the whole ideology that is more world-wide – significant is particularly influence of the Internet and other communication instruments).

It's good to say, that although many refugees have significant reason for leaving the country, there are also many people who claim to be refugees with a view to utilize our lavish welfare system. As an instance you can check the number of “refugees” from Slovakia. I have a justified impression, that the second group forms majority of the total number.

Another thing I want to introduce is the quality of presented information (or the way of their presentation). Since I'm interested in web design, I'll focus myself on the websites of the mentioned organizations¹ even if it may seem pointless to somebody – I ensure it isn't. Let's start with the best ones. The winner in the category “The best website” that is considerable because of the nature of our time is (at least for me, but I think you can trust me in this) the site of UHNCR. In fact along with the primary site exist multiple national mirrors including Czech one. Not just the mode of presentation is very transparent but also the quality of presented data is in comparison with others markedly above standard. The rest is a long way out, but surprisingly the second best is a web of Amnesty International (again in several national mutations). I am sorry to say that the site of the Czech ministry of interior is a catastrophic patchwork of inconsistent documents without any central scheme (although some of the documents are really interesting, the navigation between them is hardly perceptible). The greatest disappointment was for me the website of the European Union. Maybe it's not that bad, but if I spend a whole hour browsing it and find nothing absorbing, there's something wrong. I would expect more from the institution like this! The other webs are somewhere amid – not too good, not too bad.

¹ you can find a list of URLs at the end of this essay

Summing up

It's not easy to sum up this essay as it is in fact a summarization of basic facts (I hope it contains all the necessary informations about refugees and their situation in the Czech republic). The number of subjects that care about observance of various treaties and agreements related to the questions of refugees in the Czech republic guarantees a high standard of dealing with everyday problems. On the other hand I'm glad that the Czech republic doesn't offer asylum to anybody - do you think we have much money to waste?

As for the attitude of the community, I'm slightly disappointed, but not surprised – I've known that Czechs aren't very magnanimous – I have to say I'm not as well (unhappily). Unfortunately - again - I've done nothing for refugees till today – as I've written there's no refugee camp in the surroundings.

My last insight does not refer to the topic of this essay – the governmental agencies should invest more money into their web presentations or invest them better (cooperate with really real professionals¹).

¹ somebody could have been impressed from the essay in the way that I'm considering myself for professional web designer, but it definitely isn't true – I'm amateur in the very meaning of the word, but I still have some experiences to be able to evaluate the work of others

information sources

www.unhcr.ch – the UN Refugee Agency home site

www.unhcr.cz – Czech mirror of UNHCR

www.amnesty.org – the home site of Amnesty International

www.amnesty.cz – Amnesty's mirror in the Czech republic

www.refugeesinternational.org – the home site of Refugees International

www.opu.cz – home site of Czech organization for help to refugees

www.mvcr.cz – Czech ministry of interior – more specifically www.mvcr.cz/uprchlici/index.html

department of asylum and migration policy (it is almost impossible to find it)

www.refugees.cz – information center for refugees

portal.gov.cz – portal of the public administration of the Czech republic

europa.eu.int – informational portal of EU