

***Reception of Asylum Seekers  
in The Czech Republic***



**A Report from the ENARO-exchange programme  
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**by**

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## **1. Introduction**

After being one of the fortunate participants in Enaro's exchange program in 2005, I spent two weeks in the Czech Republic together with a representative from Holland, Bianca van der Velde. From Oct. 16. – 28.05 we were guests at the Refugee Facility Administration (RFA) in the Czech Republic. Our contact person, Mr. Ales Belka, guided us through an interesting program, and introduced us to several institutions and persons connected to the Czech asylum seeker reception system. For a detailed program see appendix 1.

The main goal for the exchange program was to get information and knowledge of the asylum system in the Czech Republic. Settled in an edge and corner of Europe, it as especially interesting for me to visit a country in central Europe, also a EU member. How different are the systems, and how different are the conditions for refugees were central questions I wanted to find out during the stay. An extra bonus was of course to share the days together with Bianca who gave me a lot of knowledge about Dutch system and experiences from her work in Holland. In spite of a generation difference of age between us, I had a great time together with her.

Travelling by car to the districts of north and south Moravia, gave me also an opportunity to see the country outside of Prague. I was impressed by a beautiful countryside, and it seemed that the Czech Republic is in an optimistic phase with a lot of engineering and construction of new buildings and roads. It occurred to me that the Czech people must be a very hard working people, busy with their work wherever we were.

I want to thank for the kind and hospitable attitude that met me during our stay. Especially thanks to Ales who planned our stay, and joined us most of the time. Also thanks to Moges for meeting me at airport, carrying my heavy suitcase, and being an interesting company our last evening in Praha. Also our excellent driver who took us safely from Prague to Moravia will be remembered. Our hostess at Vysni Lhoty Reception Centre, Marcela, did an excellent job for us, and Jana at Zastavka Residential Centre spent much of her valuable time to serve us. A

special thank to Dzena who spent much of her spare time to sightsee Brno together with us– a beautiful city! Finally – thanks to Bianca for helpful language assistance, and being an understanding and sympathetic room-mate and friend during the stay in the Czech Republic.

## **2. Facts and figures**

For an illustration of the asylum system in the Czech Republic, see Appendix 2.

### ***2.1 National administration***

After 1990, the Ministry of the Interior established the care for refugees in the Czech Republic, and gradually developed the system until 1996 when the Refugee Facility Administration was established. The RFA operates asylum facilities of the Ministry of the Interior like accommodation, catering, social and health care for asylum seekers and persons temporarily under protection. RFA is separated from the part of the state administration conducting asylum proceedings.

The central administration is located in the same buildings as the Czech police's head quarter in Prague .RFA works independently from these authorities, and are responsible for the following:

- repatriation
- making ID-cards and visa
- organise transfers
- make reports and develop statistics for authorities
- organise courses and conferences

The RFA organisation is very much alike the Norwegian Directorate of Immigrations' Regional Offices. One difference is that RFA also employs the staff at the refugee centres. There are no privately run centres in the Czech Republic like we have in Norway.

At the head quarter of the RFA, we also had the opportunity to meet one of the lawyers

working at the office. Asylum seekers have health insurance, but accidents or damage under alcohol or drugs influence are not covered by the insurance. Use of these stimuli is forbidden as long as you are accommodated in the centres. Most of the lawyer's time was spent dealing with cases towards insurance companies, and claim expenses from asylum seekers who were economically responsible for health problems due to drugs or alcohol.

In addition to legal work, the lawyer also, for some weeks during the year administrated a program for Iraqi children with serious health problems. The children and their families were invited to the Czech Republic for treatment and rehabilitation. Obviously this program was very successful.

**2.2. Statistics**

The influx of asylum seekers since 2000 appears to follow the same pattern as we know from Norway. Increasing numbers from 1998, a marked top in 2001 with more than 18.000 applicants, a new top in 2003 with 11 000, and than decreasing to 5.500 in 2004. The figures for 2005 seem to be even lower.

Most asylum seekers are from Eastern Europe, especially from Ukraine and Chechnya. Africans from Somalia and Afghan asylum seeker who are heavy represented in Norway do not appear in large numbers in the Czech republic. The fact that so many asylum seekers come from Eastern Europe means that language is not a big problem, speaking Russian covers most needs of communication.

The numbers of applicants during 2004:

	<b>Applicants</b>	<b>Voluntary returnees</b>
<b>Ukraine</b>	1577	43
<b>RF-Chechnya</b>	1522	107
<b>Vietnam</b>	424	-
<b>Russian Federation</b>	252	27
<b>Belarus</b>	222	20
<b>Slovakia</b>	160	232

### ***2.3 Repatriation***

Voluntary repatriation is based on the same principles as in Norway: Voluntariness-Safety-Dignity. IOM – support is used, but in small scale because of the cost. Most people wanting this support come from neighbouring countries, and it is easier for the Czech authorities to organize voluntary travel back to their home country by own busses.

## **3. Accommodation and living conditions**

The accommodation of asylum seekers is divided into three different kinds of centres, most located in north and southeast of the country.

### ***3.1 National standards***

#### **Reception centres**

- accommodates asylum seekers the first three weeks. The asylum interviews are made, health examination, identification. These centres are closed centres.

#### **Residential centres**

- a voluntary stay while the asylum case is proceeded. These centres are open centres.

#### **Integration centres**

- state assisted programmes. Helps finding accommodation in municipalities.

From 2006 also detention centres will be established.

The services in the centres are as follows:

- All centres provide food in dining rooms three times a day. Children are given snacks between the meals. Preparation of food in private rooms are not allowed.
- The staff does the cleaning of common areas. Private rooms are left to the room holders. Change of bedlinen every second week. Cleaning of bedlinen is done professionals.
- Finacial support is 16 CZK (about 4 NOK) pocket money every day. The amount is the same for both children and adults. Pocket money can be increased if you participate in preset activities and activities which improve coexistence at the centre. Maximum

participation every month is 12 hours.

- Everybody have health security. Nurses, psychologists and doctors give free healthcare at the centres.
- Non-governmental organisations provide legal, social and psychological advisory services, organise leisure time activities, provide material aid (second hand shops), and Czech language teaching for asylum seekers.
- Children's centres.
- Activity rooms for art, sports, library and TV-rooms.
- Non-stop service. That means office open and staff available 24 hours a day.

Protection by security guards 24 hours a day.

## **4. Visiting centres**

### ***4.1. Praha-Rezyně Reception Centre***

A tiny centre located at the International airport of Prague. Accommodation for 16 persons, presently accommodating 22. Asylum seekers staying here, usually for a few days only, have arrived by plane. The centre is closed, and persons living there are able to go outside one hour a day. The conditions were not good for neither asylum seekers nor for the staff, but new facilities were prepared for use later this year. It seemed that the atmosphere however, was relaxed and friendly. From here, asylum seekers were sent to Vysni Lhoty Reception Centre, or for private housing.

### ***4.2. Vysni Lhoty Reception Centre.***

Established in 1998. Basic capacity of 580 beds. In 1991 they accommodated around 1000 persons, to-day about 400 persons stayed at the centre.

Spending three days at this centre gave us good insight in the life inside the centre. The estate was a former military camp in the countryside, in the hills at the border of a small village. The surroundings were beautiful, and the centre also had plenty of green space around the buildings. It occurred to me that the outdoor environment was so clean and had such a high standard. Use of symbols to show where different facilities were found, gave a good insight and structure of the area. See appendix 3.

As Vysni Lhoty is a Reception Centre, Police were present and visible just close to the gate.

Nobody passed the gate without permit from the Police. Asylum seekers had to find their way to this centre after crossing the border. They were expected to live here for about 3 weeks before transfer to a Residential Centre. Single minors are accommodated in public children's homes.

The first couple of days newcomers were accommodated in one big room waiting for health examination and the asylum interview. The centre was organized in zones. Green zone for women, families, single minors, disabled or elderly people, and white zone for single men. Visiting each other's zones was strictly forbidden. It seemed that this rule was respected; probably due to security officers present several places in the centre. At the time we were visiting Vysni Lhoty, one building was isolated because of health reasons. People living there were not allowed to leave their house. Every zone had their own health centre, social assistance and activity rooms. Serving food in the dining room is done at different time for the zones. It seemed that the system functioned well.

Children at the reception centre are not offered public school. The centre arranged on of the days an activity day for children in the local community. The children inside and outside the fences were however not given the chance to meet each other.

I had the opportunity to spend some time with a social worker. While we were talking together in his office, I could observe a normal working day for him. People came to see him without an appointment, and he welcomed the asylum seekers professionally and in a friendly way. The questions they asked was everything from «I need some underwear» till «I need to see the psychologist».

The social worker told that alcoholism was a big problem. As long as use of alcohol was forbidden at the centre, too many abusers got big problems and needed both physical and mental treatment.

In spite of the fact that people are in a stressed situation, and the fact that a lot of people with different backgrounds, cultural and language, I experienced that the social climate was rather relaxed and calm. Asylum seekers we met seemed quite optimistic, probably because they at this time were in an early stage of the asylum procedure. The social worker informed us that conflicts occurred, and that staff and guards interfered as soon as possible. It was recommended not to leave conflict to be solved by the involved parts themselves.

The manager Katreena told us that the relationship with the local community was important, but not very challenging. When establishing the centre in 1998, there was protests against it, but because the centre is closed, the community hardly mention it know. Her impression now, was that local community accepted the reception centre

### ***4.3. Havirov Residential Centre***

A combination of residential and integration centre with a capacity of 150 beds. During our stay approximately 50 per cent of the capacity was in use.

A short visit gave us again the impression of a well-run institution, clean and well organised. The centre was located in Ostrava, the third greatest city in the Czech Republic. Two blocks connected through an outdoor hall, integration centre in one, and residential in the other. The conditions are different for the two groups, so it was natural to separate the accommodations. We were able to visit a couple of families living there. The flats were ordinary, but the habitants were also offered activity rooms for both children and adults. Persons living in the integration centre were supposed to stay here for maximum 6 months. The fact was that they stayed there longer because of problems with settling in municipalities.

The staff we spoke to was busy occupied with a new information programme. To me the program could be compared to Norwegian «Integration programme».

So far, people are offered 150 hours Czech language teaching. The staff was concerned about this volume, it was too little they experienced.

### ***4.4. Zastavca u Brno***

A combination of residential and integration centre. The capacity of the residential centre is 400 beds, presently occupied by 125. The capacity of the integration centre is 50, and is fully occupied.

Zastavca residential centre was the first centre established in the Czech Republic .in 1990. It is located in a small village outside Brno, the next largest city in the country. The building

formerly belonged to military authorities, but the administration building is new, and built for the purpose.

The centre lies close to the local habitants, and is surrounded by fences. It is an open centre, but nevertheless there are many restrictions connected to coming and going. Security guards were present both at the locked main door, and at every building where people lived. Permit to leave the centre is given for up to 25 hours. Before you leave you have to register and leave your ID-card at the non-stop office. Long-term permits are given up until 4 weeks, but then you have to remove your personal belongings from the room, and you lose economical support.

#### The Residential Centre:

There are three buildings, one ordinary, one for single women, families and disabled persons, and one for the Integration Centre.

Every block has two levels, small TV-rooms, common showers and toilets. There is one employee in each building, having their own office, and administrating different accommodation and organize the washing room. Nurse/doctor are also located in one of the buildings, the door was protected by iron bars because of medicine and drugs stored at this office.

Their asylum seekers rooms were of a modest standard. From two to six persons shared rooms, single rooms were out of question. A new national law is about to be established. Nobody knows for sure, but they suppose that one of the new demands will be that single rooms should be available, and that showers shall be connected to each room.

Not many residents were to be seen, probably most of them were out of the centre for the day. Two big light rooms were used by the pre school children in the morning, and school children came after lunch. The rooms were well equipped, and the children seemed happy and active. The girls were busy with dolls, the boys ran around doing physical activities!!! The children centre was located in the same level as the family lived, and the assistants told us that parents too often was too busy to take part in the activities. Does that sound familiar to a Norwegian colleague?

The art centre was well equipped, but not much visited. Adult persons were invited to take

part in children activities there, but it was just occasional that some persons with individual interests took part.

### The Integration Centre

The integration centre was separated from the residential centre with locked gates. This was for making a physical mark between the groups. People living in integration centres should have a more normal living situation than asylum seekers.

After permit of stay, within 3-4 days they have to get their papers from the police, and also have the basic information about settling in a municipality and somewhere to stay. Most people want to live in Prague, and they can if they can support themselves. To get help from the public sector, they have to sign a contract about joining an integration program. That includes financial support and language classes of 150-200 hours. The program is new, and they are just about to put it into practice. The information that is given is meant to make the clients self-sufficient and realistic about the future. The money they receive should make them able to pay for their lodging, pay for language class, health service and so on.

Clients are given one offer of housing. If that is not accepted, they will go out of the system. The centres mainly administrate the program. The municipalities do very little to continue the program after settlement.

Before leaving Zastavka, the manager Mr.Zekerka told us that finally the decision about the changes ahead is taken in Prague, and that the staff this morning were told that from 1. of February 2006 Zastavka residential and integration centre will be a Detention centre.

A Detention centre means that foreigners ready for repatriation have to stay there for 6 months before leaving the country. It will be a closed centre, in fact a jail. Great changes have to be done with the buildings; there will be demanded better accommodation, and higher security. The centre should be able to house 170 clients.

From 1. January 2006 RFA also will be responsible for Detention centres, while the police will be in charge of security. They were anxious about the cooperation.

#### **4.5. Zbysov Residential centre.**

Recipients 110: asylum seekers, mostly families.

Some kilometres from Zastavka, a rather small residential centre invited us for an Open Door Day. The centre was part of a hotel building, and the owner of the hotel was also responsible for keeping the buildings. Modest housing, but a nice and familiar atmosphere. It seemed to me that the line between asylum seekers and staff was short at this centre. The offices and the living rooms were part of the same buildings, and even the security guards talked in a relaxed way to the inhabitants. A nice, but short visit.

### **5. Non-government organisations**

An important part of service given to asylum seekers in the Czech Republic is the efforts of non-governmental organisations. The co-operation with the centres is close, and a numerous NGOs are an established part of the every day work. It might be religious or humanitarian organisations. The service given can be offering legal, social or psychological counselling, prepare activities, teach adults the Czech language, or run second hand stores.

The authorities seemed to pay much attention to this support. An interesting way not only to give asylum seekers assistance, but also in an integration point of view.

### **6. General comments**

My impressions after a two week stay in Czech Republic and being a guest at several institutions and meeting a lot of people connected to the asylum system in this country, are mainly that we all speak the same language. I met a lot of enthusiasm, empathy and professionalism. The system might be some different, but still I think there are more similarities.

What made the hardest efforts for me to find out of, was the structured co-operation between centres and voluntarily organisations. This support can not be exchanged with Norwegian lawyer support, but have a much wider and more personal engagement.

Also the security system in the centres is stricter than we are used to in Norway. The Czech system gives a more structured system in the centres, and also a safe life for the asylum seeker. The presence of staff 24 hours a day also gives the same effect. On the other hand, the strict administration gives people in an unnormal life situation an even more unnormal life.

