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I took part in the exchange together with other three colleagues coming from Ireland, UK and Spain. Peter Neelen introduced us the Belgian reception system. Stages of asylum grant proceedings are corresponding with various levels of reception conditions. The 1<sup>st</sup> admission stage enables asylum seekers to receive a material aid provided by Fedasil. The 2<sup>nd</sup> valid stage enables clients to receive an allowance, which is given by public social welfare centres (CMW-CPAS). Granting asylum status makes possible to draw social welfare benefits. So the Belgian asylum grant proceedings are three-staged. The first instance within the admission stage is the Alien's Office (OE-DVZ) of the Ministry of Interior and an appeal body is the Commissioner-General's Office for Refugees and Stateless Persons (CGRA-CGVS), which is an autonomous department of the Ministry of Interior. At the valid stage the first instance also is the CGRA-CGVS and an appeal body is the Permanent Refugee Appeal Commission (VBC-CPA), which is an administrative court of the Ministry of Interior. Thus all asylum grant proceedings are within the competence of the Ministry of Interior. The whole procedure could be perhaps doubted in case when the appeal instance is part of the same body as the decisive part - because what can be understood under the term of "autonomous department of the Ministry"?

During the admission stage a registration, an identification, a record filing, administration procedures, a Dublin Convention application and a quick standardised interview are being done. An asylum seeker can appeal within 3 days if his/her application is not to be found as unfounded. When he/she receives a negative decision his/her proceedings are concluded, if a decision is positive he/she enters the valid stage (10% of applicants). Greater attention is paid to particular applications within the valid stage, a positive decision means a granting of asylum status. Approximately 50% of decisions is positive, i.e. 5% of all applications. There is a big BUT behind and that is a body named the Council of State which has been established as an appealing instance against any administrative decision and verifies legal rightfulness of a decision. Its decision is definitive. The big BUT is concerning the fact that rejected asylum seekers appealing against decision of the Ministry of Interior stay illegally in the country and during that period they are entitled to get a social welfare, which is provided by Fedasil. Almost all rejected asylum seekers appeal and their proceedings take long time thus those people are the reason why the system is clogged. There is a plan to establish Council Reception Centres but it doesn't solve the problem of people who haven't fulfilled conditions of the Geneva Convention and who cannot be returned to their countries of origin (Afghanistan, Iraq, etc.). The long-term stay of asylum seekers in Belgium causes their children are more Belgian in a cultural and lingual way and so their return would lead them into isolation.

The admission stage consists in suitable services provided by reception centres, local authorities and NGOs. The valid stage consists in a financial support provided by municipalities – the Public Centres of Social Welfare. Fedasil concludes contracts with local partners that provide accommodation at the municipalities, the contracts guarantee both quality and quantity, asylum seekers get vouchers or limited allowance. Clients are a little bit excluded from legal or other forms of advisory services. OCIV and CIRE are the umbrella NGOs working in various parts of Belgium.

The financial support is provided as late as within the valid stage in which asylum seekers are to be found several years.

As regards the comprehensive explanation I only mention a few notes that seemed to be interesting to me. 2 – 3 professional female workers deal with unaccompanied minors at each department (a term of substitute mothers is used). The CGRA-CGVS employees are of an university degree: philosophers, psychologists, lawyers, etc. The office has 480

employees, 200 out of them is so called key workers. An average age is 32, people interested in the countries of origin are mostly employed. Direct experience with a country, e.g. by means of travelling, is preferred. The problem of the office seems to be its credibility because each new screening question for newcoming asylum seekers is quickly known around suburban coffee-houses. The asylum seekers' stories are very similar and if doubted a decision is made in favour of an applicant. Techniques of interview are being emphasised. Greece, Italy and France do not co-operate under the Dublin procedure.

During the 90s there was a lack of accommodation capacity and authorities in charge tried to find other places. In 1999 the Local Reception Initiatives (LRI) were forced to create a structured reception environment and to look for a financial contribution. Owing to the LRI's neglect of financial support the Fedasil had to be established in 2001 with a task to organise human, flexible and high-quality reception of asylum seekers in Belgium. Therefore asylum seekers who came before 2001 currently are an omitted category and affect accommodation capacities.

The main Fedasil's goals are:

- a) diversified reception of asylum seekers
- b) proper control and monitoring
- c) good community relations
- d) policy making at the administration level
- e) effective governmental agency

15,636 beds are available within the reception system. The most numerous group of asylum seekers currently is coming from Congo (10.1%), Russia (8.5%), Serbia and Montenegro, Slovakia (4.6%), Turkey, Guinea, Iran, Cameroon and Armenia. Since 2000 the number of asylum seekers is growing down to the up-to-date 9793 applicants.

More personal remarks:

From the outside the Fedasil office seems to be a discreet house with a mouthpiece at its entrance door. At the first time I passed it by without noting. After entering the building I was addressed by an internal structure, which usually implies what's go on. The director had a big bright office room with an assistant who guarded him perfectly. When I asked for a personal audience she checked me up three times before I came in. It seemed to me the management was dispersed throughout the floors near the stairway and those who fulfilled tasks were placed down in the hall. I could feel the working atmosphere and concentration.

The second afternoon we visited the Petit Chateau reception centre in Brussels. I had found out we had many issues in common: allowance, work of asylum seekers, conflict mediation, difficult clients, hygiene, hospital care, unaccompanied minors, catering and its problems, robbery.

Social workers are specialised in administrative organisation in order to communicate outward and in mediating to focus on day-to-day problems related to the stay in the centre (unlike the Czech system where social workers are specialised in particular professional fields). The mediators are taken as those who are subordinated because they have to deal with everyday troubles. As soon as something has been broken a damage is immediately remedied (the broken window syndrome). The free access to Internet and to library where it's possible to study a comprehensive history of individual countries of origin including various forms of persecution seems to be an organised training to develop professional asylum seekers (if they haven't something experienced they've got a chance to train themselves on the issue). The catering is both common (food is brought) and individual. A social worker decides on individual cooking according to two criteria – family and health conditions. Various decisions of Fedasil are displayed in employees' office rooms – it is very positive, seems to promote an order. On the other hand there was a good mess at the reception - a bunch of standing and shouting clients and a worker in glazed cubicle speaking through a mouthpiece.

A religion is left outside the centre and there is no place for it inside. There were pictures made by a former client, which were hanging on walls in corridors and they were very impressive. I hope the painter got asylum status.

When we visited rooms of asylum seekers I was shocked that nobody asked a client to allow us to enter, nobody knocked on the door.

As regards the medical care a main focus is put on prevention from TBC. It's hard to explain clients and their family members they have to be hospitalised because of positive findings. Belgian colleagues took seriously a menace of the SARS infection, which meant endeavours to separate Chinese asylum seekers. There are to be found both same diseases as in the Czech R. (shigella, scabies, hepatitis and a wide range of untreated diseases) and different diseases given by the different national structure of clients (a minimum of BWR in Belgium). I assume to carry foods away from dining rooms as a risk.

Many asylum seekers live outside the centre with their friends or relatives and attend a doctor by themselves (beyond a set-up procedure). Clients pay for abortions, it's not a disease. Vaccination is done in asylum centres, if a client proves he/she has been vaccinated it's accepted.

A dispatching centre is the first place where X-ray and allocation of asylum seekers is being done. It is the place of the first contact where basic information, a social aid, a special assistance to handicapped persons are provided. If asylum seekers do not go to the centre directly they have to wait in two temporary centres in Brussels. These centres are also designated for persons suffering from various problems, mostly health, before they are placed to proper facilities. When allocating asylum seekers, "a good decision" is emphasised, as an example the allocation of Chechens near the airforce site was mentioned. If a client is placed improperly or he/she acts in contradiction with the accommodation rules a suggestion on his/her replacement together with an opinion of a social worker and a manager is send to the dispatching centre where decision on a possible transfer is taken. The dispatching centre is a place where information is exchanged and one can understand many things just there. The centre's employees process statistics, co-ordinate accommodation capacities, co-operate with NGOs and are in the touch with numbers of employees throughout the country. From my point of view there was a key working place and I asked Peter to spend there one day more. My wish was met at the end of my exchange. The dispatching centre is open from 7.30am to 9pm. Workers deal with approximately 60 clients a day and the both Red Crosses are present there.

On the base of my information obtained the problems caused by asylum seekers can be classified as follows:

1. Coarse and aggressive acts
2. Psychological problems – PTSD, alcohol addiction

The Belgian system has not have a strategy how to work with clients having psychical problems, their hospitalisation is exceptional and such clients can be repeatedly found in so-called conflict situation and are transferred from place to place (I mean asylum centres).

According to information I got in asylum centres the typical difficult individual is a man coming from Chechnya, Albania, Arabian or post-Soviet countries. The way how to banish a difficult individual is to require the dispatching centre to move him out, and sometimes the sanction includes a withdrawal of all forms of asylum seeker's assistance. A transfer form includes data on a contact person, information on asylum seeker, a reason of transfer, a social report with emphasis on a cause of his acts, description of client's reactions (regret, etc.), brief description of an incident (e.g. conflict). All is written down on two pages.

In the Charleroi reception centre I'm enchanted with walls' colourfulness, a tiled TV room and containers for water, coffee and tea. It is to be a centre for clients in special needs. The centre is designed for 150 asylum seekers and has 40 employees. I wasn't able to find any social service. Clients seemed to be the same as anywhere else. I rather was taken up with the project funded by the ERF, which is aimed at equality of approaches of institutions providing assistance for handicapped persons.

I was also interested in the work of NGOs. We visited the OCIV, a Flemish umbrella NGO, which has been active 17 years. It provides contracted accommodation for 750 persons, legal advice and affects the public opinion. Its financing comes from various funds. The OCIV representatives dispute an amount of allowance when the money is not sufficient to live in Brussels but the same amount exceeds a common minimum in Ardennes. They also criticise a length of proceedings and a bad transmission of information from social workers to clients. Other complaints were regarding a disposition of asylum system, which had come through one crisis to another whereas the Fedasil became the expected stabiliser. Peter told me the OCIV's criticism is being diminished with growing numbers of exchange stays. Other two exchanges and we shall learn nothing.

Another umbrella organisation of a small extent but a big incidence is the Committee for Refugee Relief. It is near the UNHCR and consists of a team of lawyers who deal with individual cases. They claim subsequent hearings of clients, are concerned with humanitarian reasons or travel hindrances. I was told they meet all Fedasil partners once a month and negotiate important things, they often call to asylum centres and ask if a client is worth of pleading, they are involved in the issues of unaccompanied minors and their tutors and in unification of families.

The IOM workers consider as their advantage that many embassies are situated in Brussels. Their program is a little wider and includes illegal immigrants. There are specific programs for persons coming from Angola and Congo where part of asylum seekers' repatriation also is their non-integration skill training. I was interested if it's true the IOM workers meet asylum seekers and explain them a possibility of return. That was confirmed by social workers and they also mentioned asylum seekers' fear to meet the IOM workers not be taken back to their countries of origin...

Municipalities play important part and provide a half of accommodation capacities. The Fedasil pays EUR 32 for a bed daily and 60% of the amount if a bed is empty. The municipalities are well motivated and the money has attracted local activities. The Fedasil checks up a quality of services provided and assists with starting new activities. All that idea of delegation of responsibility to a local level has its roots in necessity to solve problems regarding a high density of foreigners in big cities and in opinion that an integration should start up immediately after an asylum seeker enters the second instance. The advantage of such approach is the community can easily ensure an access to schools, hospitals and other public institutions. The risk consists in disunity of approaches and absence of one common strategy.

I practically compared two approaches of municipalities near Ghent and of the Petit Chateau reception centre. There are 8,000 illegal foreigners in Ghent and I spent two days in different municipalities (Heusden and Sint-Martens-Latem). The both days resembled because the methodology was the same. I felt a vast space for doing things – e.g. whether an asylum seeker will get allowance by means of a cheque, a catering voucher or on a bank account. It's up to a municipality how it uses of the daily amount (EUR 32) – I could see that somewhere it was used in favour of an asylum seeker, somewhere else in favour of a municipality. The integration strategy is to disperse clients around municipalities and expose them to a common-life situation – they have to do shopping, meet their neighbours, contrive, etc. The standard is high and an approach of social workers is individual. Social workers do not glut them with information, which are given out in successive steps in accordance with their needs. Social workers keep a professional distance and that's great. The drawback is a lack of contacts among social workers, a missing team spirit and a bad exchange of information.

The Petit Chateau reception centre is different. There is no idyll of a private life in villages. A hygiene, taking foods away, distribution of cleaning service, clients' arguments, noise, children running about, ... anyway, collectivism in its top degree. A social worker is rather an administrator and informer, everyday problems are solved by mediators.

## Opinions

I've got problem to understand how the communication between particular entities goes on. Complexity and variability of relations within the system lead to informality, it's difficult to bring work problems from a social worker up to his superiors – if you need to arrange for something it's necessary to know somebody in person. I think that too much of bureaucracy is detrimental to asylum seekers and can easily become a target of political criticism. Fedasil's contracts with its partners are questionable – many partners means diversity of approaches, unlikeness of interests and a non-standard fieldwork. If 20 social workers in 6 regions check up and enforce contracts, it's too little. The result is a non-standard work and unequal conditions for asylum seekers.

The system of appealing to the Council of State is inconsistent part of asylum grant proceedings and clients involved just play for time – a winner takes a few years more.

A long-term stay lead to degradation of human existence, I felt that 3 years is a psychically tolerable limit in Belgium. Moreover, within the Belgian asylum system, there is a forgotten and pushed-away category of asylum seekers having come before 2001. Big minus is a facile access to illegal stay in the country. The problems related to illegally staying persons cast bad reflection upon asylum seekers who often are connected with them.

Employees themselves do not regard the volunteers' work very well. Volunteers often do not respect rules and their "humanity" is in conflict with their professionalism. Thus an uncontrolled flock of volunteers is not in favour of a client and may provoke his hopes and expectations.

Belgium is a doubled country with a doubled view. If you want to start an NGO you do that doubled. The efforts to work and provide services separately do not have a credible effect. But I don't want to say it's the question for the Fedasil workers.

I was looking forward to meeting with NGOs. I was taken by surprise with a remark that still rings in my ears – "Belgium is a country where people speak to each other". I also think so and appreciate the Belgian NGOs tolerate problems to be solved and do not occupy themselves with oddments. NGOs emphasise an union of tradition, history and everyday work.

I liked that reception of new-coming asylum seekers is limited from 7.30am to 9pm. Asylum seekers know it and respect it.

Sanctions in the form of fines and transfers are imposed on difficult clients. The transfer system is transparent. A report on a conflict or an extraordinary event is written down including a cause of conflict, a manager's and a social service's opinion and a suggestion of solution. The form is sent to the dispatching centre, which takes decision on a further transfer. There, however, is trouble that the Belgian system doesn't deal with psychically handicapped persons who can easily get into the merry-go-round of transfers because they are involved, either in person or vicariously, in a lot of conflicts happening in asylum centres. A psychological and/or psychiatric care should be applied on them for they are a vulnerable group.

The procedural integration impressed me best. Although I had been sceptical before I learnt it and had been thinking in "the Czech way" that an intentionally controlled integration of asylum seekers is a senseless activity, I came to conclusion it makes sense. Asylum seekers being found in the 2<sup>nd</sup> instance and living in the country take full part in the integration. Familiar environment of a village can guarantee dignity of their stay, a social control is provided by more or less inquisitive neighbours and a client has to go out of his/her

house for shopping and so he/she meets local people regularly (unlike Brussels where asylum seekers usually join their communities). Such an integration includes one risk – a possible separation from relatives during asylum seekers' stay in municipalities. On the other hand the feel of separation may force a client to cross over boundaries and involve himself in the social life in a village. Problem emerges when a client is rejected definitely and is fully integrated in a local society and taken as a common citizen. He/she has to use of his/her knowledge obtained during his/her stay and the knowledge's level and nature decide if he/she becomes an illegal worker, a naturalised citizen, a returnee or a humanitarian case.