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**POLICY VS. PRACTICE: THE EFFECTIVENESS  
OF REFUGEE INTEGRATION POLICIES  
IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC**

**1. INTRODUCTION**

Forced migrants are people who are persecuted and/or mistreated and feel they cannot be protected by their own state government. As environmental disasters and local, regional and global conflicts increase, the number of forced migrants has subsequently increased. This leads to questions and concerns about the resettlement process of refugees.

In many cases, the destination country attempts to facilitate the resettlement process for refugees by creating integration policies. Most European countries have varied policy related to refugee integration. Some countries, such as the United Kingdom (UK), have a long history of resettling refugees and very detailed integration policies. Others, such as the Czech Republic, are new destination countries and create policy as situations arise oftentimes without much knowledge of their refugee population. The purpose of this paper is to examine the effectiveness of refugee integration policies through a case study of the Czech Republic.

**2. LEGISTRATIVE STRATEGIES AND GOVERNANCE**

An abundance of literature exists on policies related to refugees because of the intimacy between forced migration studies and policy developments (Black, 2001), although much of this literature discusses policies implemented prior to

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resettlement (i.e. asylum seeking policies). In fact, there ‘is little systematic research being carried out on settlement policy and on outcomes in various communities and regions’ (Castles *et al.*, 2002, p. 162). Evaluating policy in practice is a topic deemed essential to future research on refugee integration (Castles *et al.*, 2002). Mansouri *et al.* (2006) assert that integration policies can play a very important role in facilitating the integration process. While the bulk of the literature on integration policies in Europe focuses on the outcomes of individual policies, for example housing (Robinson *et al.*, 2003; Edin *et al.*, 2004) and employment (Bloch, 2008), some studies do focus on integration policies in their entirety (Hagelund, 2005).

According to Hagelund (2005), integration policies offering too much assistance were counterproductive and amended to help refugees become more self-sufficient. Robinson *et al.* (2003) and Edin *et al.* (2004) both examined housing dispersal policies and found them to hinder integration because of their tendency to isolate refugees in less-populated areas. I address the housing issue of refugees in the Czech Republic where there is no specific dispersal policy; however, due to the location of available housing, dispersal is taking place *de facto* and refugees often refuse the proffered housing.

Resettlement and/or integration policies are often put into practice by nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). This is an example of the state’s diminishing role in regard to refugee resettlement and is seen to be ‘an “outward” shift in responsibility away from states towards social actors’ (Gill, 2010, p. 10). Furthermore international agencies (e.g. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, among others) have become more involved in influencing policies concerning forced migration, adding another level to the already multi-leveled governance configuration (Betts, 2009).

### 3. RESEARCH METHODS

Research for this case study was performed in Prague, Czech Republic during 2008–2009. The Czech Republic is a compelling site for refugee integration research; it is in an exceptional situation as it represents a duality of positions – a marginalized position within the European Union (EU), but on the frontier of EU expansion. The country has witnessed a change in patterns from a sending to receiving country of refugees in recent years, meaning that refugee integration policy is a fairly recent phenomenon.

This research is specifically focused on Prague as most refugees in the country reside there (Government of the Czech Republic, 2007). Additionally, questions were asked about services available per the integration policies, and the site remained constant to ensure all respondents had access to the same services in the same locations.

### **3.1. Research Participants**

I used nonprobability sampling to find participants for this research. Initially I contacted NGOs that provide legal and social services to refugees. Further participants were located through snowball sampling. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with twenty refugees. Eleven of the interviews were conducted in English, and nine in Czech and translated into English by a research assistant. Eleven participants were female, nine male, and their ages ranged from 24 to 62. Participants originated from fourteen different African, Asian and European countries and had been in the Czech Republic for less than two years to over twenty. Due to the relatively small number of refugees in the Czech Republic, the names of the participants and their origin countries will be omitted to preserve confidentiality.

To examine integration policy-making, extensive interviews were conducted with a representative from the Czech Ministry of the Interior who is responsible for housing policy and with representatives from various NGOs about their role in refugee integration policy implementation.

## **4. REFUGEE INTEGRATION POLICIES IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC**

Czech Parliament privileged two aspects of the integration process (housing assistance, Czech language training) in the 1999 Asylum Act. The wording was sparse and included no detailed plan(s) of action. Further amendments to this Act elaborated on integration policy. In 2004, employment assistance was added. Subsequent amendments named the ministries responsible for implementing the policies, and their duties were clarified.

Funding for integration policy implementation is provided by the state budget and is revisited annually. The policy also sets forth expectations for all Ministries even if they were not provided with sufficient funding to reach their expected goals. From the mid- to late-2000s, the amount of funding and details about funding allocation for refugee integration continued to increase, which reflects the government's learning process.

Refugees are informed of integration programmes after being granted refugee status. In the case of housing, refugees tell the Ministry of the Interior if they are interested in receiving housing assistance, and the Ministry notifies refugees when/if housing becomes available. For Czech language training and employment assistance, refugees are responsible for seeking out these programmes on their own. My respondents had a degree of knowledge about Czech integration policies; most were aware and availed themselves of the services while some did not know about them and/or had never been offered the services.

It is hard to know why some were unaware of the policies. The specifics are to be communicated while asylum applications are in review and/or after applicants receive the asylum decision. Refugees receive a lot of information after the asylum decision so it is possible that the specifics of integration policy are not fully comprehended. In general, my respondents were glad the policies existed, but some suggested changes could be made, mainly to the language informing refugees of integration policy:

I think this booklet was written in too official and bureaucratic language, and I would include more information. I think mainly the real life stories of immigrants would be helpful (Respondent 8).

I would recommend that the asylum information be provided online in different languages. Maybe in languages of countries where big economic or war conflicts are because people will probably leave those countries. Or at least have the information in Czech and English (Respondent 15).

While not a policy recommendation, Respondent 1 summed up his feelings about the refugee integration policies: ‘The housing and integration programme is said but not in reality, written with many promises’. Respondent 1 recognized the effort the Czech government made by enacting integration policies, but also recognized that what is pledged on paper does not necessarily translate into what actually happens. The respondents generally appreciated the fact these services did exist and were grateful that the Czech government was making an effort to help them resettle.

This attention to refugee integration policy and its evolution within a relatively short period of time shows that the Czech government is committed to enacting successful integration policies. But does this concern translate to reality for refugees?

#### **4.1. Housing Assistance**

The Czech government realized refugees may need help finding a place to live. Therefore housing assistance (overseen by the Ministry of the Interior’s Unit for Integration of Refugees and Foreigners) became part of integration policy. The Unit is responsible for securing housing agreements for refugees and paying a specified sum. From 1994 to 2008, per the Ministry of Interior (2010), the Czech government provided 494 integration apartments to refugees.

While housing assistance is available per policy, in practice it did not materialize for my respondents. The majority said they were never offered housing assistance. Respondent 11 stated, ‘I was never offered housing after getting asylum. I have been in the Czech Republic for seven years and have never been offered housing. I needed it at the beginning, but I don’t need it now’, while Respondent 14 corroborated: ‘I didn’t get offered housing. Others were offered it but not me’.

29% of my respondents said they were offered housing. However, only one respondent accepted the offer, which was located far from Prague. This respondent eventually moved to Prague. The main reason for not accepting the offered housing was due to its unfavourable location. A majority of available housing is located in smaller villages and rural areas that are perceived as having limitations. One deficiency of these areas was the lack of available employment; per Respondent 4, 'We were offered housing in a small village of 100 people where there is no work'.

Resettling refugees in places without access to employment would present a barrier to integration. Respondent 14 felt he should be offered housing in the city where he already had employment: 'If you work in Prague, you should get housing in Prague. The system is hard to understand. What do they base it on – religion, colour, culture, race?' Respondent 14 took it personally that he did not receive housing in Prague saying he knew people who did get housing there and wondered whether personal characteristics played a part.

Access to education was another shortcoming in the areas where housing was offered. Since the majority of available housing is located in rural areas and small villages, attending a university is not viable unless someone is willing to travel:

When I got refugee status I wanted to continue with my studies in Prague. But finally after a long scramble, I got a 1 + 1 flat in a town approximately 40 km from Prague. They told me to be glad for that. I asked personally every city office in Prague for a flat, but none of them approved it (Respondent 12).

Respondent 12 also raised another issue about the provided housing: size. Respondent 4 complained about the size of his apartment as well – his family of three lives in a three-room apartment. We conducted our interview in his apartment, and he showed me where the family slept. The size of available housing for refugees is one area that has been mentioned in previous studies; participants in a UK study had issues with the housing being too small for their family (Ager and Strang, 2008). Another study in Britain found that overcrowding and the lack of housing available for families was a major concern for refugees (Phillimore and Goodson, 2006).

Respondent 13 found the location of available housing insufficient because of the lack of diversity in the areas where available housing is found: 'I was offered an apartment in the country among foreigners so I didn't take it'. Respondent 13 considered himself a foreigner but did not want to live in a place that was dominated by foreigners. Because housing is often available in smaller villages, these can become highly populated with foreigners. In order to integrate, Respondent 13 felt he needed to live with Czechs instead of a community of foreigners where he would feel isolated from Czech society.

In a European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE) study, integration of refugees living with other foreigners was seen as problematic also. One respondent said her neighbourhood housed between four and five hundred people who were all foreigners; because of this, she believes ‘the policy of the government is one of segregation’ (ECRE, 1999, p. 56). Although the location is different – small village versus urban area – the feeling of the government segregating foreigners is the same. The Czech government considered housing refugees in integration apartments. This was discontinued amidst the realization that segregating refugees impeded integration. While intentionally segregating refugees ceases to happen, unintentional segregation continues since spaces of available housing are limited.

Some respondents found the location of available housing insufficient because of their personal inclination to live in a city. They felt living in Prague was desirable because of the social and political opportunities afforded there that would not exist elsewhere. Respondent 15 stated, ‘We left the camp and immediately decided to live in Prague. I would not live anywhere else. I am a city person and could not live in the country’. Respondent 15 is a business-owner and entrepreneur. She is socially involved with a group from her country of origin (planning parties and other social and cultural events). She was forced to migrate for political reasons and continues to support the cause while in the Czech Republic. She felt this type of social and political life would not be possible living outside Prague.

The Ministry of the Interior realizes the current housing policy is not effective. It is rethinking the policy and may change it in the future to offering money directly to a refugee who can spend it toward housing anywhere in the country (personal communication, 2008). Since one of the biggest complaints of the current housing policy is the lack of choice in where to live, this direct monetary offer could be a starting point in creating a policy that works. Monetary assistance would be helpful for refugees who wanted to live in areas where housing assistance is typically unavailable. This policy could support the integration process since refugees may feel more comfortable in a community they chose to live in.

However, this policy change would mark a shift in responsibility from the state. Under the proposed policy the state would no longer work with municipalities and much of the resettlement burden would be put on refugees. Drbohlav and Džúrová (2007, p. 72) say that one of the issues concerning migration policy in the Czech Republic is to decentralize integration efforts – ‘including involving municipalities’; the proposed change in housing policy would do the opposite since it removes the municipality from the integration process. In effect changing the policy displaces the problem from the state to the individual. The state would not have to ensure that the money was spent on housing nor would it have to find suitable housing for refugees, which lessens the state’s responsibility.

## **4.2. Czech Language Training**

The Czech government acknowledges that Czech language skills will not only help a refugee integrate into Czech society but also be useful in procuring employment. Czech language instruction is offered free to refugees on an hourly basis. The policy in 2000 offered refugees 100 hours of individual training or 150 hours of group training over a maximum of ten months. In 2008, the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport realized that this was not enough time to sufficiently learn the Czech language, and the policy was amended to include 400 hours of free individual training or 600 hours of free group training.

Unlike the Ministry of the Interior's role in housing provision, the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport does not directly oversee the Czech language classes. The management and staffing of the courses as well as the creation of class material is outsourced to NGOs. NGOs typically provide refugees the course information – meeting days and times – and it is the refugee's responsibility to choose the classes that he/she can attend. In 2008, 69 Czech language courses took place in 26 locations throughout the country; of those, 32 were individual courses and 37 were group courses (Government of the Czech Republic, 2009).

Most of my respondents received their language training prior to 2008 when the group training hours were increased (none opted for individual sessions). Sixty per cent of my respondents participated in free Czech language courses. None were completely satisfied with their training.

The inadequate amount of free class time was one of the main criticisms. Respondent 4 stated, 'I had two months of Czech language school offered by the Ministry, but I stopped because I would have had to pay for more', while Respondent 14 said, 'I was given time and a little money to learn the language, but it was not enough'. Because the amount of free training was limited, respondents stopped their training since continuing meant they would have to pay out of their own pockets. Online sources show that Czech instruction typically costs around 400Kc (20 USD/13 GBP) for an individual lesson. Respondent 4 was unemployed and Respondent 14 was working two service jobs and barely able to pay his own bills; therefore, paying to learn Czech was not a high priority.

In a previous study in the Czech Republic refugees saw 'the most burning problem in the insufficient number of lessons within a course and in the fact that the language courses focus only on mastering basic Czech' (Krchová and Víznerová, 2008, p. 3). The lack of free training hours is a frequent complaint; an ECRE study found this to be the case in Austria, Denmark and France (ECRE, 1999). Compounding this is that refugees can only use the hours during the first ten months after receiving refugee status. If training is not used by then, refugees have to pay for it themselves. This time constraint hinders a refugee's opportunity to benefit from the free training because oftentimes he/she spends the early months finding housing and employment, which take precedence over



language training. Respondents 9 and 14 corroborate this, respectively: 'I started taking Czech lessons, but it was too much with work'; 'I took only one month of language training and found a job, but now I don't have enough time to take more classes. I had to choose to work or go to class, and I chose work'.

The Czech government responded to the time issue by increasing the number of available free hours of training. However, a corresponding increase in the monthly time limit did not occur. Without extending the time limit, the increase in hours may be irrelevant since some respondents did not use the free hours in the first place due to lack of time. If the monthly restriction were extended (or removed altogether), refugees would be able to better use the service; they would have time to find suitable housing and employment before deciding the best time/place to attend language classes.

In addition to the shortage of hourly training offered, respondents found troublesome issues within the classes themselves. Respondents attended classes with students having a range of Czech language skills resulting in classes with students attending their first and last day of training. Respondent 1 stated, 'The language classes should be built to the level of the students otherwise it's hard', while Respondent 13 said, 'You learn in a group with people at different levels. I would recommend that the classes find out who can come and when and have smaller groups'. Respondent 13 said people who had already taken several weeks of language training were in his classes, and this made it difficult for the students and the instructor. He said the instructor usually taught to the advanced students leaving the rest behind. The recommendation of having classes based on skill levels is an obvious remedy to this situation. Making matters worse is that instructors change; the same instructor does not always teach the same class at the same time each week. This means the instructor does not always know what the class has already learned.

Difficulties with language course material are documented in previous studies. Krchová and Víznerová (2008) found it problematic that language courses focused on learning basic Czech. One of their respondents said he did not learn Czech in ways that would help him find a job. A refugee in Austria found the same fault with her courses of learning basic, elementary German that would not be of any use in integrating into Austrian society (ECRE, 1999).

The diversity of students in the classes was another problem mentioned. Because of this, there was no common language that could be used to teach students. Respondent 2 said 'The classes were not helpful because we were put in classes with Arabic and French speakers, and we learned to write in Latin'. Respondent 10 also found deficiencies with the courses: 'I learned Czech from a textbook for Vietnamese'. The diversity of students meant it was hard to communicate with classmates as well. Another found that refugees had a harder time learning in a diverse atmosphere: 'I had terrible experiences in learning Danish... we were between 15 and 65 years of age, and all of us had different educational backgrounds and interests' (ECRE, 1999, pp. 29).



One solution is to have courses taught by instructors that also speak another language commonly spoken in the Czech Republic. Classes offered in English or Russian, for example, would be practical due to the prevalence of speakers (both Czechs and immigrants) in the Czech Republic. More advanced Czech classes could be taught and attended by those who already have basic knowledge of Czech.

Individualized instruction is also another way to resolve these issues; though it would be a more costly endeavour. Refugees are given the choice of individual versus group training with individual training having fewer free hours. All of my respondents opted for the group training because of this. With individualized training, the student and instructor would always be in sync. Courses could even be tailored to the specific person and their interests (after learning basic Czech). Specialized instruction is beneficial to refugees when seeking employment or education. This type of instruction is available in the Netherlands, for example. A refugee took the basic Dutch course and ‘also took classes on surveying created especially for him’ (Daruvalla, 2002).

The deficiency in free course hours, refugees’ lack of time (when choosing between learning Czech and working) and issues of class composition and skill levels are all barriers to Czech language training. These dimensions illustrate the dysfunctional relationship the state has with the NGOs responsible for language training. Each of the reasons mentioned by my respondents as a barrier has a simple solution: basing policy on the amount of time necessary for someone to learn Czech fluently; eliminating the monthly constraint on using the free language training; and creating classes that are based on different levels of Czech language knowledge. Again this shows a shift of responsibility and a withdrawal from service-providing by the state as the Ministry outsources language class management to NGOs. While some problems with language classes and implementation could be issues of money and/or time, other problems can be rectified by talking to refugees in the classes to find out what problems exist.

### **4.3. Employment Assistance**

Employment assistance is offered through the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs. Unlike the first two components of integration policy, employment assistance is offered to anyone in the Czech Republic who meets certain conditions; refugees are offered this as they are considered people who need ‘special assistance’ (Government of the Czech Republic, 2005). Employment assistance consists of retraining programmes focused on computer skills to complement existing technical knowledge and personalized counseling services.

None of my respondents received employment assistance. This is partly because they were unaware of the policy and partly because they found jobs without it. Respondent 18 said he might have used the employment assistance if not for the language barrier: ‘I didn’t use it because I don’t understand Czech

[assistance is provided in Czech]'. All of my respondents who were employed found jobs without any assistance from the Czech government. Therefore, they did not have opinions on the employment assistance aspect of integration policy.

However, an issue regarding employment did arise – the inability to find jobs that were commensurate with education level and/or professional experience. This phenomenon of downward mobility follows the trend found in more developed countries worldwide (Gans, 2009; Nawyn, 2010). 35% of my respondents experienced downward mobility, while only 10% clearly did not.

The respondents who faced downward mobility can be categorized based on employment type (or lack of) in the Czech Republic: retail employee, language instructor or unemployed. Working in retail was the main type of employment for the downwardly mobile. In each case the respondent held a highly-skilled job in his/her country of origin. Respondent 17 blamed her lack of Czech language knowledge for being unable to practice her former profession: 'I used to be an accountant [...] but because of the language barrier I cannot do it here'. Respondent 17 was interviewed in Czech for this study. Her language skills were sufficient for this purpose, but she did not have the professional Czech language skills required to work in accounting. She works in a shoe store. Respondent 18 owned a metalworking business in his origin country; he works as a convenience store clerk in Prague.

My respondents also entered the Czech job market by teaching their native language to Czechs. Respondent 1 has a Master's degree and taught French literature/philosophy and ran the Human Resources department at a university in his origin country. In Prague he teaches French to children. Respondent 10 has a Bachelor's degree and was a bank manager in his origin country. In Prague, he teaches Russian to adults.

Arguably these instances of downward mobility can be ascribed not only to language barriers but also because education and/or professional experience are not always transferable. Nawyn (2010) found the lack of recognition of educational credentials from institutions in lesser-developed countries by employers in more developed countries promotes downward mobility. She recounted a story of a Bangladeshi man 'who is a doctor [...] worked with the Ministry of Health in Africa, worked with Doctors Without Borders and he came here [the United States] and he had to work in a hotel [...] nobody is going to hire him as a doctor [...] we find that many degrees are not respected here if they are not from Europe or from the United States'; another example involved an Ethiopian refugee who was a pharmacist. He was informed about an entry-level position at a hospital; he asked about more skilled positions and was told he could consider getting certified for highly-skilled work in the future.

Compounding the language barrier and non-recognition of education and/or professional experience is the issue of discrimination. Respondents 4 and 5 had some college education and were employed in their country of origin. Respondent

4 has actively been seeking employment since he received refugee status, but says he cannot find a job because employers discriminate against him: ‘When I go to find a job they won’t give it to me. Because I don’t speak Czech, they see my brown skin and assume that I am Roma [a marginalized ethnic group]’. Gans (2009) finds that refugees in the United States who had professional degrees and experience were barred from working in their fields due to racial and/or ethnic discrimination. My data may corroborate this point – out of the 35% who experienced downward mobility, 71% were from countries outside of Europe, which introduces the potential element of discrimination. With the Czech Republic having a relatively homogenous population (roughly four per cent foreign-born), someone who is not native to the Czech Republic or Eastern European is fairly conspicuous. Racial discrimination by employers was also reported in ECRE’s study: an African refugee in Ireland felt that his education was not recognized because he was black and a Rwandan in Austria experienced discrimination from her boss because she was black (ECRE, 1999, p. 39).

Since few refugees in the Czech Republic have used employment assistance, my findings are not surprising. One reason for not using the assistance pertained to a lack of Czech language skills. To alleviate this issue, language training and employment assistance could be combined.

## **5. CONCLUSIONS**

The Czech Republic established refugee integration policies in 1999 and revisits them annually. Features of Czech integration policies include housing assistance, Czech language training and employment assistance with a different Ministry responsible for each aspect.

Despite the good intentions of the Czech Ministries involved, oftentimes policy administration does not always have the anticipated outcome. Due to the lack of available housing and that housing that is available is located in smaller towns and villages, providing refugees with suitable housing can be problematic. Issues also arose regarding the free Czech language training. These included not enough hours to fluently learn Czech, extremely diverse class compositions and a lack of individual training. Employment assistance was either not offered or not sought out by any of my respondents; although other issues arose regarding employment.

Dissatisfaction with the implementation of the Czech refugee integration policies seems to be the case more often than not in this particular study. Respondents offered suggestions on ways to improve integration policy implementation. The Czech government has typically responded favourably when they realize integration policies are not effective and have amended them as needed. However,

more dialogue is needed between refugees and policy-makers. Often there is a disconnect between the people creating the policies and those who are living with the policy decisions. As such, more refugees should be involved in the policy-making process. If policy-makers incorporate refugees' perspectives into future integration policies, refugees can become agents in creating a governance environment that is efficient and effective.

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