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INTEGRATION AT FIRST HAND: RECEPTION, ADAPTATION AND INTEGRATION IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF REFUGEES THEMSELVES



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Introduction

This study analyses the reception, adaptation, and integration of refugees in the Czech Republic. It focuses on applicants for international protection and people who have already been granted one of the forms of international protection, i.e., asylum or subsidiary protection. The report was compiled under the international NIEM (*National Integration Evaluation Mechanism*) project which monitors and evaluates the integration process of beneficiaries of international protection in 14 EU member states. The text focuses on eight selected areas of integration: housing, employment, re-qualification, health, social security and economic status, education, language training and socio-political participation. The report does not aim to capture the integration process in all its complexity – such is the ambition of other publications within the NIEM project¹ – but rather to complement such a comprehensive picture with the experiences of individuals. In contrast to texts based primarily on analyses of legislation, strategic documents, or ministerial statistics, this study seeks primarily to convey the perspective of the refugees themselves. It captures their impressions of the first days after their arrival in the Czech Republic, looks at their involvement in the State Integration Programme², and describes the most important challenges that both applicants and holders face in the later stages of their integration into local society.

The research has clearly shown that the refugees' personal reflections have the potential to shed new light on the process of integration. The testimonies which we have collected support many of the conclusions reached by the analysis of official documents and statistics. For example, they strongly confirm the fundamental importance, and rather sensible mechanism, of the financial support provided by the state to the refugees in the first months of their stay in the Czech Republic. Not surprisingly, the respondents also gave positive feedback on the supportive role of social workers and on the quality of health care. However, in several other areas, the migrants' perspective provided new insight and

¹ *Integrace držitelů mezinárodní ochrany v ČR*. People in Need, o.p.s., 2022; For recent comparison, see *The European benchmark for refugee integration. Evaluation 2: Comprehensive report*. Warsaw: Institute of Public Affairs, 2022. All texts published under the NIEM project are available on the official website <http://www.forintegration.eu/pl/pub>.

² The State Integration Programme is an instrument created by the Czech Ministry of Interior (MoI) in order to facilitate the initial phase of integration for people who have been granted international protection. The programme provides its target group with support in five areas: housing, employment, education, social security and health care.

brought our attention to particular topics and issues that had been overlooked or neglected in previous research. For example, the conditions in some of the facilities run by the Ministry of the Interior were described as highly problematic, which can drastically affect the refugees' attitude towards the whole process of integration. An example of a neglected topic, only rarely addressed in quantitative studies, is the role played in the integration process by refugee communities.

Methodology of data collection

The analysis presented in this report is based on qualitative research. Our primary method was ethnography, namely the form of narrative semi-structured interviews. Our researchers pre-defined several areas to be covered in the interview but within each area there was no fixed sequence of questions, and the respondents were allowed to speak freely and go into as much detail as they wished. Typically, the interviews lasted at least an hour; in our research, it was usually between 60 and 90 minutes. This method was chosen because, on the one hand, it gave respondents the space to talk freely about their experiences and to highlight whatever they consider important, and on the other hand, it provided information on the predefined indicators (i. e., the eight areas mentioned above).

Respondents were contacted through NGO social workers or Czech language teachers who work with applicants and holders of international protection, and who participate as partners in the State Integration Programme. All respondents had participated in the SIP at some stage of their stay, although some only very briefly. The sample of respondents was selected to ensure a balanced variety, especially with regard to age, gender, country of origin, length of stay in the Czech Republic and legal status (applicants awaiting the decision, asylum holders, persons granted subsidiary protection). In addition, we took into account the candidates' place of residence, marital status (e.g., the possibility to ask about children's school experience, etc.) and level of education, but these factors were only indicative. If possible, the interviews were conducted in Czech or English. In cases where neither of these languages suited the respondent, the interview was conducted with the assistance of an interpreter.

As many applicants for international protection are in a vulnerable situation, the research sample was anonymized. All names of male and female respondents were changed, as well as their age within the given age category. Secondary characteristics (e.g., place of residence) were not included at all in the report in order to protect the respondents' privacy and safety.

Nickname	Gender	Age	Status	Country of origin
Anton	M	21	applicant	Ukraine
Tin	M	42	asylum	Burma/Myanmar
Nadia	F	20	asylum	Syria
Lana	F	63	subsidiary protection	Ukraine
Tamara	F	39	applicant	Belarus
Yana	F	25	subsidiary protection	Ukraine
Zaw	M	45	asylum	Burma/Myanmar
Rayna	F	44	subsidiary protection	Syria
Javier	M	35	asylum	Cuba
Hanan	F	36	subsidiary protection	Syria
Alan	M	21	asylum	Russian Federation
Ernest	M	29	applicant	Bolivia
Jurij	M	25	asylum	Russian Federation
Sadia	M	40	subsidiary protection	Syria
Sahar	F	43	asylum	Turkey
Bilal	M	24	subsidiary protection	Turkey
Mikail	M	24	asylum	Belarus
Halim	M	50	asylum	Turkey
Nina	F	43	applicant	Georgia
Tanya	F	39	subsidiary protection	Ukraine

List of respondents

Subsequently, the interviews were manually coded using Atlas.ti software and analyzed. Our analytical categories correspond with the pre-specified indicators. Within the eight areas listed above, the study highlights the migrants' negative and positive experiences. In cases where respondents articulated what they think should be different and what they would prefer, the study offers or at least suggests recommendations for improvement.

In total, we conducted twenty interviews with twenty-one respondents (in one case, a husband and wife were interviewed together). The conclusions that can be drawn from such a small sample are of limited validity – unless there is additional supporting data. In any case, the sample itself cannot be considered sufficiently representative to draw any statistical conclusions about the situation of applicants and holders of international protection in the Czech Republic.

Analysis by indicators

1. Housing

Housing can undoubtedly be seen as one of the fundamental prerequisites for a dignified life. For migrants in general, and refugees in particular, housing is not only a shelter, but also a space for personal development, family life, gatherings of compatriots and, last but not least, natural interaction with members of the receiving society. There is a consensus among experts that the availability and quality of housing has a crucial impact not only on the standard of living of migrants, but also on the success of their integration. Housing influences the resettling process in many ways. Limited availability of autonomous housing has a negative impact on children's education, increases the risk of social exclusion and contributes directly, and indirectly, to the deterioration of physical and mental health³ (e.g., when excessively high rents cut into the budget on medical services). The importance of having a home of one's own is almost unanimously confirmed by the refugees themselves. Our interviews show that the practical and symbolic significance of autonomous housing is comparable only to that of finding a job and becoming financially self-sufficient.

Applicants for and holders of international protection in CR often pass through several "transfer stations" on their way to finding a home of their own. The first type of facility for newly arrived applicants are **reception centres** – one at Prague-Ruzyně airport and another in Zastávka. Here, applicants undergo basic entry procedures and then move on to one of the **residential centres** in Kostelec nad Orlicí, Havířov or again in Zastávka, where they await a decision on their application. The residential centres, unlike the reception centres, do not restrict movement and the applicants may leave the premises or even find accommodation outside the centres. The third and last relevant type of housing under the responsibility of the Refugee Facilities Administration⁴ is the **integration asylum centres (IAS)**. These serve persons who have already been granted some form of international protection, have entered the State Integration Programme, and have requested temporary accommodation

³ For more detail, see, e.g., *Working Together for Local Integration of Migrants and Refugees*. OECD Publishing, Paris, 2018, p. 68 – 71; *World Migration Report 2020*. International Organization for Migration (IOM), 2019, p. 191, 209.

⁴ The Refugee Facilities Administration (SUZ) has been the so called general provider of integration services since 2017. SUZ is responsible for providing and coordinating services in the whole territory of the Czech Republic. In order to guarantee the availability of integration services, the general provider cooperates with other stakeholders, namely the relevant ministries, municipalities, non-governmental non-profit organisations, churches, volunteers, or employers.

in an IAS. The maximum stay in this type of facility, which mainly provides language training and assistance in finding independent housing and employment, is 18 months. The IAS facilities are located in Jaroměř, Předlice, Brno and Havířov.

In the area of housing, respondents were asked where they currently live, whether they could choose where they would live, what their housing costs are, how they rate the quality of their current housing, and whether or not they have plans for change in the future.

Most respondents rate the quality of housing in the Czech Republic very positively. However, their satisfaction is mainly influenced by whether they were able to arrange for an autonomous home (i.e., they had the means to do so, or have been in the Czech Republic long enough to acquire the means) or whether they still live in residential centres or integration flats.

Regarding the different types of housing within the SIP, it should be noted that respondents usually do not distinguish between the respective centres. Most of them describe having passed through a reception centre and then being transferred to somewhere else where they lived longer, but they do not know the specific type of facility. Sometimes, respondents do not distinguish between "integration flats" and "autonomous living" because they perceive the Adaptation Integration Centre (AIC) as autonomous. Thus, their description and understanding of their housing experience does not correspond with the categories of housing set in the SIP. Apparently, many respondents are not familiar with the system and find it difficult to distinguish between the categories (note: most of the time they do not necessarily need to know the difference).⁵

Experiences of life in residential centres and integration flats:

Almost all clients have been through the reception centre in Zastávka at some point. Their overall assessment of the experience was mostly positive: they said they were provided with sufficient comfort and felt safe. However, most of them did not spend much time there.

"It was excellent. We expected to be treated like strangers, but we had everything arranged there, for us and for the children. After what we experienced in Ukraine, it was like a little holiday." (Tanya)

⁵ The same applies to the respondents' frequent comments about social workers. Again, respondents are not always able to distinguish which organisation a particular worker belonged to (whether to the SUZ or an NGO).

With one exception (a family who, thanks to previous contacts, managed to find an apartment on their own immediately after arrival), all applicants then stayed for some time in one of the residential centres. They rate this period as much more problematic. The most frequently mentioned problems in connection with staying in these centres were lack of privacy, inability to maintain cleanliness and hygiene standards to their liking, or conflicts with other residents who were often in a poor mental state. Several respondents also mentioned the poor quality or even insufficient amounts of food.

"You could call it communal living; I have only seen it in the movies before. Here everything is shared – the bathroom, the kitchen. There are rooms with two beds, but also rooms with bunk beds. The kitchen is for 2 – 3 families. Thanks to COVID, only families with children who have compulsory schooling stay here. The situation is better now; before, we didn't even have time to go to the toilet or shower. Everything was occupied and shared." (Nina)

"It's really hard to live in the camp because you don't have your privacy, you don't have anything to do, you don't have friends, you don't speak Czech. You can go out, but where are you going to go when you get 800 crowns. (...) I was sitting there doing nothing and I was depressed and it was terrible. (...) I knew who was applying for international protection – Ukrainians, Georgians, and they were doing terrible things: drinking, smoking. (...) I was living with bad people and it was really hard." (Anton)

"Then they sent me to Kostelec and it was the worst thing I experienced. You're always living with these people [mentally ill]; there are always drugs, all sorts of injections and alcohol." (Jurij)

It is worth noting that the respondents usually mentioned their experience in the residential centre when they were asked about housing in general (i.e., not specifically about living in the residential centre). The experience with the residential centre was apparently important for them and it was decisive for their assessment of housing in the Czech Republic. The quality of subsequent autonomous living was then often assessed in relation to this experience.

In terms of support with finding housing, respondents' experiences varied widely. However, they all mentioned support (good or bad) of social workers within the SIP. Apparently, the level of support depended very much on the particular worker assigned to them. In addition to the SIP workers, many respondents also mentioned (overwhelmingly praisingly) the Organisation for Aid to Refugees, Diakonia, or Charity. NGOs are generally seen as a kind of counterbalance to the social workers in the centres.

"It was hard to find an apartment because we are foreigners. We searched for half a year and no one helped us (...) At the time we were looking for an apartment, the social worker at the centre in Předlice was a lady who was about to quit her job (...) We searched all by ourselves." (Yana)

"I trust the non – profit organizations more than the state ones. The state ones do what is written; the non – profit ones want to help, they do extra things. I feel more comfortable in the non – state organizations." (Yana)

In the interviews, respondents spoke mainly about two categories of housing – first, the housing provided under the SIP, and second, autonomous housing. In contrast to the residential centres, all respondents assessed the quality of housing in flats that they found themselves or with the help of an NGO or social worker as very positive. They often mentioned convenient transport and/or good access to services. Sometimes, respondents found housing close to the residential centre in which they were staying. That typically happened when they managed to find a job and establish social contacts in the area during their stay with SUZ. However, it is more typical that respondents tried to move to a larger city.

In addition to affordability, the main criteria when looking for housing includes job opportunities. The presence of friends or a community of compatriots also plays a role.

"We have a nice apartment. I like it very much, but it's small for us. It has 3 rooms but they are tiny. We got help from the state – a sofa, an oven and a few other things. We have a friend who speaks Czech and he will arrange everything for us." (Sahar)

"I like the environment very much. There is a park nearby; we go to the park. People greet us; these people here are not like in Ústí and Havířov." (Halim)

The majority of respondents said that they knew they were eligible for financial support for housing, but they found it difficult to arrange. They appreciated the support from social workers who helped them understand the system of social welfare, but they often feared that they would not know how to go about, for example, claiming housing benefits. Some respondents mentioned that they felt lost when they moved away from their social workers – they felt alone and had no one to ask about many things.

"When I lived in Brno in an integration apartment it was better, but now that I am alone I don't know who to turn to. I have a telephone number of an OPU worker, but I am not sure

if I should use it or if I would be asking the person to do something outside her job description." (Javier)

Zaw says he does not know whether the state will help them and what they can and cannot get from it. He says that between 2018 and 2019 he applied for social housing outside of Prague, but his application was rejected. *"I'm really afraid, we are a big family, 5 people; if we don't find anything we can't (...) stay on the street."*

Most respondents have worked with OPU or Diakonia in their search for housing and rate this experience positively. It was important for them that NGO staff helped them understand the real estate market, checked contracts with them or interpreted for them during apartment tours. Respondents who were able to secure autonomous housing usually have no problem paying for it now. Some would have liked a larger flat, for example, but generally they are happy and feel comfortable and secure in their accommodation.

At the same time, autonomous housing is mentioned by all respondents as a crucial step – those who already have it cite it as a big step forward in their integration. Those who are still looking for housing or waiting to apply for it, often pin their future plans on it.

For example, Tamara has been in the Czech Republic with her husband for a very short time, but they used to live here before; she speaks some Czech and they have friends. Thanks to that they were able to leave the residential centre quickly and find an apartment in Prague. *"The place where I live now is the best place in the world. I am happy with everything, the location, the apartment is big enough (...) They pay some things for us and that helps a lot. My husband spent a lot of money to come here, so it's great that they helped us to start with."*⁶ (Tamara)

Nina, on the other hand, has been with her family in Kostelec nad Orlicí for three years and she often talks about how much it would help them to have their own place to live – but so far this is not possible because it is difficult to find a job. *"The problem is [that] I am still in this facility, for three years now. I'm dependent on social services."*

⁶ The respondent is probably talking about the financial support related to the so called eligible expenses which are provided to the clients of SIP. For more about this form of assistance see the chapter titled "Social welfare and economic status".

2. Employment

In addition to housing, employment is another essential prerequisite for the successful integration of migrants into mainstream society. First and foremost, of course, employment is the key to economic integration. However, as with housing, it has wider implications for other areas. Stable and legal work makes it easier for migrants to find their own homes, provide quality education for their children, overcome language barriers, and establish natural contacts with the locals. Moreover, in some countries, income from employment is a prerequisite for permanent residence and/or (as in the case of the Czech Republic) citizenship. At the same time, the employment of foreigners is a major contribution to the host society. There is a consensus among economists that migrants, especially if they are able to make full use of their skills and qualifications, can make a significant contribution to economic growth, and to raising the overall standard of living of the receiving country.⁷

In order to assess the employment opportunities offered in the Czech Republic to the so-called humanitarian migrants⁸, it is necessary to **distinguish between those who have been granted international protection and those who are still waiting for a decision on their application**. In the first case, the situation is simple – people who have been granted asylum or subsidiary protection have the same conditions of employment (and the right to the same wages) as Czech citizens. They do not need a work permit, an employment card or any other special document. For applicants, everything is a bit more complicated. For the first 6 months after they apply for protection, they are not allowed to work, and after that they need an employment permit issued by the regional branch of the Labour Office. Self-employment is not permitted to the applicants at all.

Respondents were asked about their work history in the Czech Republic, the barriers they encountered when entering the Czech labour market, and what kind of support they had received during their job search.

⁷ For more details, see, e.g., *Working Together for Local Integration of Migrants and Refugees*. OECD Publishing, Paris, 2018, p. 57. In order to maintain objectivity, it is fair to say that immigration may also be associated with certain negative economic phenomena, especially on a regional or local level. For more details, see, e.g., Elizabeth Mavroudi and Caroline Nagel. *Global Migration: Patterns, processes, and politics*. Routledge, 2016, p. 57 – 117.

⁸ The term “humanitarian migrant” is an umbrella term, used for example in the texts published by OECD and referred to by this report, and denoting the applicants for, as well as holders of, some form of international protection. In this report, the term humanitarian migrant is used as a synonym to the term refugees.

Most of the interviewed migrants are currently working or have worked in the Czech Republic. The working prospects and the resulting financial self-sufficiency were emphasized in practically all of the recorded testimonials. Some of the interviewees mentioned how happy they were to be in the Czech Republic because they felt that they would also find work once they obtained international protection.

When asked what she would like to do now, Tanya says: *"Just work. I don't want to work in any Ukrainian agency; I want to work with Czechs. I want to have paid holidays and sick leave; where I work now, it's not quite according to the rules."* Sahar responds similarly, *"We don't want any help from the state; we just want to be self-sufficient."* Tin also stresses how important it is for him to be independent: *"In the beginning we had the support from the state – the maternity and the housing allowance for two years – and that really helped us a lot. But I'm so happy that we don't need that anymore."*

Because employment is such an important aspect of living in the Czech Republic – all research participants had some experience of looking for a job – the interviews inevitably turned to the barriers to finding employment. Among the most frequently mentioned barriers was (as with many other areas of integration) insufficient knowledge of Czech language. Rayna, for example, talks about problems with Czech. Every time she tried to get a job contract, she usually lost her job. This happened to her repeatedly. Even when she got a contract, the job would end a day or a few days later. *"Even if I want to get everything right; it doesn't work out,"* she says. At the labour office, she says, no one wanted to communicate with her in English. She could not speak Czech and therefore tended to keep quiet. In her opinion, this is what hurt her most in her efforts to find employment.

Surprisingly, most of the respondents do not consider the language barrier to be fatal. The vast majority of them said that if they could speak Czech perfectly, finding a job would be much easier. At the same time, however, they claimed that knowledge of Czech is not always necessary to work in the Czech Republic. Not speaking Czech only narrows down the chances and limits job-seekers to sectors where their compatriots have strong positions. Refugees from the Middle East, for example, find employment quite easily in the fast food industry, people coming from Ukraine work in construction sites, and so on.

"One of the organisations works with IKEA and [through one of their projects I] got a job.⁹ First of all, with the language, in every country it's easier, you know, but in the Czech Republic to find a qualified job with English, it's not possible." ... "In fact, in 60 – 70% jobs you do not really need Czech. Office jobs require Czech, but manual jobs don't." (Zaw)

"If you speak Turkish it is not difficult to find a job; a lot of kebab shops are Turkish, so it is easy to find a job in a restaurant. As for my current job [IT support], it took me three months to find it; that was more difficult." (Bilal)

Another obstacle that makes it difficult for refugees to find employment is the complicated system of rules. Many respondents mentioned that the Czech labour market and legislation are very confusing, and labour offices often fail to provide guidance due to the language barrier described above by Rayna. If the job seeker does not have an assistant with them, for example from the OPU, they cannot communicate with the office, and often leave puzzled and uncertain about their job opportunities.

Some of the interviewees mentioned another problem, in this case related to private businesses; namely, how difficult it is to apply for a loan. Certain professional qualifications (e.g., masseuse, or accountant) seemingly open the way to self-employment, but according to our respondents, starting a business requires an initial loan or an investment, and their legal status does not allow them to apply for it. For example, Lana first took a re – qualification training to become a bus driver, but she could not find a job during the pandemic. Now, she would like to start a non-profit or a community organisation to help others. But, she says, she doesn't know exactly how to do that, and she cannot get the money she needs to get started for legal reasons.¹⁰

A final frequently cited obstacle to getting a job is ignorance and the resulting confusion on the part of the employers themselves. According to our respondents, many potential

⁹ The respondent is probably talking about the "Skills for Employment" programme which has been conducted by IKEA in cooperation with the Consortium of Migrants Assisting NGOs since January 2021.

¹⁰ In this particular case, the respondent – a holder of subsidiary protection – seems to be referring to a practice where at least some banks are not willing to provide loans to foreigners who have a temporary residence status with no guarantee that the status will be extended. In some cases, banks can be discouraged by the fact that the holder does not have a job at the time or is working in an unskilled position.

employers believed they could not employ refugees, were unsure if it was legal, or did not understand the documents presented by refugees. As in the above cases, limited Czech language skills made the job-seekers' position even more difficult. They cannot explain their situation clearly and are dependent on NGO staff, who are not always available. Some job-seekers try to refer employers to the Ministry of the Interior for information. However, according to their testimonies, this does not work at all – employers tend to choose the path of least resistance and instead of finding out how the rules are set, they prefer to employ someone with a Czech ID.

"During the interview, I did not say I was applying for asylum; I said I was here with Erasmus. Only after they gave me the job and I signed the contract did I tell them I was waiting for my asylum. The employer was horrified; they thought it was illegal. But then they got in touch with the OPU and found out it was okay." (Ernest)

"If it wasn't for the worker from Diakonia, I would be completely lost and I wouldn't know what to do." (Javier)

The above shows that informal contacts and friends are crucial in the job search. Respondents feel almost no official support, and they often appreciate the help of NGO workers, but they rather seem to perceive it as random and not systematic. Most of the respondents got their current job through friends; some through contacts gained in their residential centre or through compatriot networks.

"The owner of the company is Canadian; we met at the camp where he used to volunteer. We became friends, so when I got my residency permit, he offered me this job." (Tin)

As mentioned above, in the field of employment, different rules apply to the holders of international protection than to the applicants. In addition to this distinction, it is very important to know which type of international protection a person is granted. While asylum holders may feel relatively comfortable about the future because their legal status is of unlimited duration, the mindset of the holders of subsidiary protection is different. Their status is only temporary and subject to uncertain extensions. This may, rather logically, result in less determination, energy and time invested into job-seeking.

"I would have to invest a lot of time in learning Czech and I don't really know why I would do that if I don't know what will happen in the future. Mostly I need to work and save money in case my asylum application is rejected and I have to leave the Czech Republic." (Ernest)

3. Requalification

Effective recognition of refugees' education and professional qualifications is a challenge faced by practically all host countries, including the Czech Republic. The people applying for international protection are usually more educated and better qualified than the average person in their country of origin. However, employers in the receiving countries tend to undervalue this potential and fail to use it. There are several reasons for this waste of human capital. Humanitarian migrants generally come from places with completely different education systems, and a different structure and functioning of labour markets. Moreover, unlike other groups of migrants, those fleeing persecution or conflict often lack documentation to prove their education and professional competence. And for obvious reasons, it is very difficult to obtain such documents retrospectively. In some cases, refugees may even have the documents, but recognition is impossible due to excessive bureaucratic obstacles. The unfortunate result of the above barriers is often unemployment or stagnation in inadequate low-skilled jobs.

Legally, holders of international protection in the Czech Republic have the same conditions for requalification as Czech nationals. In practice, however, the **labour authorities** often refuse to pay for requalification if the candidate does not have sufficient knowledge of the Czech language. Alternatively, requalification can be covered by the **SIP**, but only if it is included in the individual integration plan. Applicants for international protection have their requalification needs complicated by additional practical circumstances beyond language: for example, poor knowledge of their legal status on the part of officials. Apart from the labour offices and the SIP, some **NGOs** also offer assistance with requalification, mostly under the European Social Fund operational programmes.

Respondents were asked about: their education, their previous work experience in their home country, how they managed to use their education and experience in the Czech Republic, and what obstacles or support they received in the process of recognition of their education. The questions also focused on personal experiences with requalification courses.

The impossibility to use the qualifications from the home country was very often mentioned in the interviews. This problem is particularly painful for people who have a university degree. It is very difficult for them to get used to a situation where they cannot practise their original profession. In addition, they complain about the Czech system of nostrification of diplomas. Not only is it very lengthy and administratively demanding, it sometimes requires documents that applicants often do not have, and, given that they have lost the necessary contacts in their home country (e.g., in Turkey and Syria where university staff face repression), it is not very realistic that they will be able to obtain them. A situation where, for example, university workers have no choice but to take a job in an Amazon warehouse is understandably a huge strain on the psyche – all the more so as they see no way out. Of course, the idea that they should study their subject again is not very realistic – they cannot afford to do so because they do not have time to study because of the need to earn a living.

Bilal, for example, mentions the frustration caused by the obscurity or illogicalness of the nostrification process: *"It sounds stupid, completely ridiculous. I spent two years preparing for nostrification and then some people just get everything and don't even have a degree. I don't understand it at all."* Let us add that Bilal eventually managed to get his degree nostrified, with help from an OPU staff member.

Rayna, who taught at a university in her home country, also had a similar experience. In the Czech Republic, she says she encountered problems when trying to get her education recognised. In the interview, she mentioned that she tried to find out what would be needed to get her PhD diploma nostrified. She communicated with people directly at the university but did not receive any concrete answer. The only way to get a job at the university, according to her, would be to study her field (linguistics) again here.¹¹

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the priority of most applicants and holders of international protection is the ability to earn a living through their own work. Whether the work they have obtained corresponds to their level of qualification is secondary from their point of view. This is also reflected in their relatively low interest in the requalification courses on offer – refugees only seek them out when they have the time and/or when they

¹¹ Rayna's account does not make it clear why the process of nostrification was so complicated or why it was not possible to nostrify her diploma. For general context, it is important to add that in the Czech Republic, university degrees are nostrified by rectorates of relevant state universities. If an application is rejected, the applicant may appeal to the Ministry of Education.

desperately need them (e.g., because they cannot find a job). Most respondents did not know where to look for courses. They noticed an offer at the Labour Office, but often encountered the fact that the courses were only in Czech and this was an insurmountable obstacle.

"I didn't attend any courses. I could only do them in English and I couldn't find anything like that." (Zaw)

"I would like to do a course in HR. But it's only in Prague and I can't commute." (Yana)

"I don't mind asking about those different courses, like a masseuse or a beautician. But I was told that I have to speak Czech well, so again there is this barrier." (Rayna)

4. Health

It is clear from expert studies that migrants as a broad group tend to be healthier than the average person, at least in the first years of their stay, not only compared to the population from which they came, but also to the population that receives them (the so – called "healthy migrant effect").¹² However, the situation is very different for refugees. A significant percentage of them suffer from psychological problems, such as anxiety and depression, as a result of traumatic experiences in their country or during their journey. Moreover, some of them arrive in a poor physical condition, whether as a result of beatings or torture by the security forces, or, for example, injuries sustained in armed conflict. There is a consensus across the expert community that early detection, accurate diagnosis, and effective treatment of refugees' mental and physical problems is crucial to their successful integration into mainstream society. It must always be remembered that health and integration go hand in hand: good health is both a prerequisite and a consequence of full social participation. Poor health, on the other hand, significantly impairs the prospects for successful integration. It makes it more difficult to find a job, to learn a language, to communicate with the authorities, or to achieve good academic results.

Several refugees mentioned the topic of insurance in their interviews. In this area, the legal rules are clear and inclusive: **both applicants for international protection and holders of asylum and subsidiary protection are by law covered by the public insurance system.** Probably the most frequently cited problem is again the **language barrier**, not only when

¹² See f.e. Alistair Ager, Health and Forced Migration. In: Elena Fiddian – Qasmiyeh, Gil Loescher, Katy Long, and Nando Sigona (eds.). *The Oxford Handbook of Refugee and Forced Migration Studies*. Oxford University Press, 2014, p. 433 – 446.

seeing a doctor, but perhaps even more importantly, in the case of basic counselling in the residential or integration centres. Here, it is fair to point out that both types of assistance are given a great deal of attention under the State Integration Programme. Both **SIP staff** and the **staff of many NGOs** are ready to assist applicants, as well as holders of asylum and subsidiary protection, in this area. Therefore, it is possible that some of the complaints listed below may be due to a lack of *visibility* of interpreting services rather than their objective *unavailability*.

In the area of health, respondents were interviewed about their experiences with the availability and quality of professional medical care, both in the area of physical and mental health.

Healthcare services, along with housing, rank among the most highly rated aspects of life in the Czech Republic, from the perspective of applicants and holders of international protection. All respondents agree that the quality of Czech healthcare is very good and often repeat that they are really grateful for the care provided. In one case, the possibility of medical assistance was the reason why the respondent fled to the Czech Republic.

The level of health care is best rated by those respondents who had to deal with a serious health problem, for example, undergoing surgery. All of them appreciate that they were treated for free.

"I had heart problems and a lump on my neck. They did the operation at the Military Hospital in Prague, and I didn't have to pay anything. When we arrived, both my husband and I were stressed and so there were some problems – but in Ostrava I had a coron[ar]jography, which is a very expensive operation, and I had it for free. I really appreciate that." (Lana)

Those respondents who have not yet dealt with any major problem usually visited general practitioners or dentists. Social workers usually helped them register.

Although the assessment of the Czech health care system is predominantly positive, several problematic points can be identified in the statements of both applicants and holders of international protection. The most frequently mentioned barrier to healthcare is – again, not surprisingly – language. Some of the interviewees described their experiences when doctors or nurses were not very polite to them due to their poor knowledge of Czech. However, they added that if they asked for help, they were never refused.

Another tricky issue is, as already mentioned, health insurance. Some respondents mentioned that SIP staff or NGO representatives instructed them to arrange commercial insurance by themselves. In many cases it remained unclear, who and at which point is eligible for public insurance. Contracts for commercial insurance were difficult to understand. Despite all this, for the group we have studied, in contrast to other groups of migrants, insurance is not a major issue: both applicants and holders of international protection included in the SIP are covered by public insurance. Subsequently, it is usually the employer who pays the insurance for them.

Problems with insurance were mentioned, for example, by Sadiq. He now has employer-paid public insurance, but before that, he allegedly had to have commercial insurance and says it was difficult for him to change insurance companies. Sadiq's account of events illustrates how difficult it is to comprehend how the Czech healthcare system works. Sadiq mentions, for example, that he does not understand why he sometimes has to pay for medicines and sometimes not. As far as medical care is concerned, he generally complains that it is often difficult for him to find the necessary information. Among his experiences he mentions how doctors used an online translator to communicate with him. Another time, a hospital sent him away to another facility, hoping that someone there would speak English.

Psychological support and mental health:

While the picture of physical health care in CR is generally positive, when it comes to mental health, the evaluation is more ambivalent. About three quarters of our respondents said that, at least at the beginning of their stay in the Czech Republic, their mental health was not good. This is not just a consequence of traumatic events that many experienced before fleeing their country or on their journey. Many also mentioned their stay in a residential centre (most often in Kostelec nad Orlicí) as a source of extreme stress where their mental health deteriorated greatly. According to their testimonies, they felt that they needed some form of professional help but did not know where to turn. The language barrier plays a significant role here. At this stage of their stay or integration process, foreigners often do not yet speak enough Czech. They would be in great need of psychological help in their own language and that is not available. As the interviews show, trying to describe one's problems to someone in English or Czech, when one cannot find the words and feels helpless, can sometimes make the problems worse. Some of the participants in the study said that the staff of NGOs (specifically OPU) tried to help them to

deal with this difficult situation. However, even for NGOs, the language barrier is often difficult to overcome. However, it is fair to say that other interviewees received the necessary psychological care in one of the state facilities. Positive experiences are specifically mentioned in connection with the reception and residence centre in Zastávka.

Those of the respondents who did not receive professional help at a critical time claim that they were helped by their compatriot community (if present in the residence centre). The advantage of such a solution is that the compatriots had often gone through similar experiences themselves. Besides, among compatriots there is often a greater willingness to help each other. However, almost all of the testimonies point to a systematic deficiency, where psychological care does not seem to be available at the time when it is most needed, i.e., at the beginning of the stay, when people do not understand Czech or do not have a place to live and feel completely lost.

There are many examples in the recorded testimonies of people not receiving the psychological care they needed, or not the care they had hoped for. For example, Jurij described that when he lived in Předlice he felt he needed help but was afraid to ask for it because he did not trust the social worker who offered it to him. Alan, on the other hand, mentioned that when he needed help from a psychiatrist in Zastávka, he was immediately provided with it, but everything was in English. There was no help available in Russian and this was very difficult for him. Alan's perspective on the psychological problems of refugees in general is also interesting: *"Everybody who flees the country has post-traumatic depression, (...) almost everybody needs psych[ological] help and that is not possible because when you are a refugee and you ask for asylum, you have nothing, (...) all the bad thoughts in your head repeat and then you need at least some medication."*

Nina also talked about her mental health, saying that she would prefer to work with children. *"I have depression, I shut down, I haven't gotten over it yet, I don't communicate with anyone much. I think the light is mainly in children. They bring light into life, but there is the language barrier. I haven't talked to anyone about it yet."*

"Help was offered to me, but I didn't accept it because I don't think anyone can understand my situation. I tell my Czech friends what I experienced in Syria and they tell me that they can't even imagine it. I don't think any psychologist or psychiatrist could understand it."
(Rayna)

5. Social Security and Economic Status

For no other group of foreigners do social benefits represent such a vital necessity as for refugees. The material situation of people fleeing persecution or conflict is usually extremely difficult. Many of them have lost not only most of their income and savings at some stage of their flight, but also the 'safety net' of support from their wider community, friends and family. It is this reality that the receiving state must take into account if it seeks to integrate refugees successfully in the long term. In the case of people fleeing persecution and violence, the state should not limit itself to providing for their immediate and most basic needs, but should be able and prepared to provide them with a truly comprehensive range of social services that at least partially compensates for their extreme social uprootedness.

Although our respondents almost unanimously stated that one of their absolute priorities upon arrival in the Czech Republic was economic self-sufficiency, it is clear from their statements that they appreciated the material assistance they received from the Czech state at the earliest stage of their stay. What form of assistance are we talking about? First of all, recent asylum seekers, as well as persons granted subsidiary protection, are legally entitled to **one-off financial support in the amount of the minimum subsistence level**. The second type of assistance is the reimbursement (or co-financing) of selected, so-called **eligible expenses** under the **SIP**. The central and strictly adhered to criterion in each case is adequacy: any item to be reimbursed must be of a purely 'starter', basic nature and should not exceed the standard of low-income households in terms of value.

In the social area, respondents were asked about their economic situation, whether they had and have sufficient resources to provide for their basic needs, and where these resources came from. With the exception of one respondent who was new to the Czech Republic, struggling and not familiar with the local system, all respondents stated that their situation was satisfactory. As long as they are able to work, they can provide for their own needs. All respondents consistently stressed that they were very grateful for the help they received from the Czech state in the beginning. However, they added in the same breath how glad they were that they no longer needed it. The phrase "we do not want to take any more money from the state" came up frequently in the interviews.

"I have a paid job. I never took anything from the state except for the early days in SIP – they helped me with housing and furniture and stuff." (Bilal)

"We also had a lot of help from the state; they gave us this virtual money, almost 200,000. They bought us a fridge, a washing machine, a dishwasher, an iron, a dryer, dishes... When we came to the Czech Republic, we had nothing at all." (Tanya)

"It's not great, but it's not bad. When my wife can work after maternity leave, it will be much better. I don't want any social benefits; it's a moral thing. When I went to the labour office, I got a job straight away. My salary covers our rent and food, and the maternity benefit pays for the rest." (Javier)

In addition to their salary, respondents most often mentioned material support provided under the SIP (i.e., the above – mentioned eligible expenses) as the most important additional source of income. They also very often mentioned support from their expat community – some say that material support from friends, for example food, is more pleasant and acceptable to them than applying for benefits. For example, Tamara and Rayna described how important it is to have financial support from family and friends who also live in the Czech Republic and who can provide them with money, food or other material equipment if needed.

The last topic that came up a lot in the interviews about the economic aspects of integration was the lack of orientation to the Czech social security system. It is clear that refugees are confused – the degree of confusion depends, of course, mainly on how long they have already spent in the Czech Republic. However, all of our respondents agreed that the social system was, at least initially, very incomprehensible to them and, in their words, they did not have enough information to help them navigate it. Some reported that they had missed out on certain financial benefits simply because they did not know when and how to apply.

The research also showed that, as with other areas of integration, the staff of specialised NGOs (again, the most frequently mentioned was the OPU) played a crucial role in helping clients navigate the system. At the same time, however, it became clear that this assistance has its limits. For a number of reasons, mainly capacity, it is simply not possible for NGOs to provide personal accompaniment to all the offices that foreigners need to visit. And without assistance, foreigners feel stressed and lost. Some guidance should be provided by the integration courses designed to orient newcomers to the Czech administration system (see below) but according to our findings, they do not solve this problem either.

"I don't know how the integration plan worked; I didn't have the opportunity to draw the money I needed. I did not understand what I could buy, so I asked for the paper that

indicated how much money I could draw for what, but the worker would not let me take a printout of it, saying it was an 'internal document'. So, I just didn't have a clear idea of how I could use it." – "I wanted a bicycle, so I got one, it was bought from the plan, but I used up all my travel money and then they refused to reimburse me for everything, which was difficult when I commuted from Ústí to Prague to work every day. Nobody warned me that I would use up all the money by buying the bike." (Jurij)

6. Education and schooling

Education plays an indispensable role for refugee children in their integration into the host society. It determines in a fundamental way the extent of their personal development, the prospect of good employment and the associated social mobility. Last but not least, it provides these children with a unique opportunity for early integration into their peer group (a structure that sociology refers to as a social network). The level of education determines to a large extent whether and how refugee children will participate in social life in the future and how positively they will be perceived by the local community. In short, without a full-fledged education, the successful social integration of young people from refugee families is hardly conceivable.

Access to education is a basic human right. However, it remains one of the weakest points of refugee integration in global terms, which is very regrettable. In 2017, more than half of all children with a UNHCR refugee mandate were not in school – 4 million out of 7.4 million.¹³ The vast majority of these children (and refugees in general) are in developing countries. The situation in the Czech Republic should be seen in the context of similarly developed EU or OECD countries. Czech law **guarantees equal access to education**, from primary to higher education, for holders of international protection as well as for applicants. In addition, according to Section 16 of the Education Act, migrant children (like all children with special educational needs) are eligible for **supportive measures**, such as an individual education plan or a teaching assistant. In general, the number of refugee children who enter the Czech education system is relatively small. In the 2019/2020 school year, only 450 refugees attended kindergartens, primary and secondary schools. In 2020, an individual integration plan under the SIP was set up for 28 children from families of international protection holders.¹⁴

¹³ *World Migration Report 2020*. International Organization for Migration (IOM), 2019, p. 193.

¹⁴ *Integrace držitelů mezinárodní ochrany v ČR*.

Respondents were asked about their own or their children's experience with the Czech education system, the main obstacles they faced when integrating into the education system, and the support they have received.

Of the respondents in this study, some have experience with the Czech education system through their children. Only Nadia, who had previously attended primary school in the Czech Republic and now attends a grammar school, has her own experience. Like other children of asylum seekers, Nadia started school later and attended a lower class to catch up with Czech – the same experience is shared by Sahar's children. Both women agree that the later start slows the children down in their studies. *"At the time I didn't mind because everything was new, but now I regret that I am late with my graduation."* (Nadia). Sahar and other parents often point out that their children learned Czech very quickly and that the language barrier at school is only a problem when teachers do not show understanding for migrant children.

Most parents mentioned problems in communication with the school. In two cases, it was necessary to change primary schools two or three times before finding one where the children felt safe and could function normally – but this option, i.e., changing schools several times, is only available to families in Prague or larger cities. It is clear from the testimonies that parents often do not know who to turn to when it comes to choosing a school and solving any problems – although they sometimes communicate with NGO workers, they generally lack information about which organisations specialise in the education of refugee children. As a result, they said, they got the impression that they had to solve their children's situation themselves.

"For my younger son, it is harder. In Syria he would be in second grade; in the Czech Republic they put him a year lower. He doesn't speak English that well and he tries to speak Czech. At school, they treat him racistly; I have already talked to the headmistress. It has a big impact on my son. The situation has gotten to the point where he doesn't want to go to school; he's running away and he's even started wetting his pants. The principal has tried to resolve the situation, but I think the class teacher doesn't understand my son's situation at all. Rather, she has ignored what is going on among his classmates. When there was distance learning, my son was happy." (Hanan)

"Children don't have a problem with other children. Children have a problem with bad teachers. Those teachers don't want to be part of some international community; they only want to teach Czech children." (Tin)

"My younger son was born here, but both of my children had a bad experience with the way they were treated at school. Just our status as foreigners/refugees is a barrier." (Tin)

In situations where parents asked for help for their child, for example in the form of tutoring, sometimes they did not receive it, or it took a very long time because NGOs do not have enough capacity to cover these needs.

For example, Zaw talks about not being able to find a school for his middle daughter. They applied to all the schools in the area, but were rejected everywhere because they had no vacancy or could not take a child who did not speak Czech. Zaw doesn't believe the last explanation. He says this probably wouldn't happen to a Czech family. Another interviewee, Hanan, mentions that she has had both good and bad experiences with schools. As an example of the worst, she cites the situation of her daughter, who applied for a language course a year and a half ago, but still failed to enroll.

7. Language training

The command of the language of the host country is often considered one of the most important, if not the most important, aspects of integration, both from the perspective of the foreigners themselves and the host society. As with many of the indicators mentioned earlier, language competence is closely linked to a number of other areas of integration. The better the foreigners' command of the local language, the better they are able to interact socially, understand and function in their new environment, access health care, obtain employment corresponding to their actual qualifications and skills, find decent housing, and secure a quality education for their children. Moreover, a defined level of language proficiency is one of the conditions for obtaining citizenship in many countries, including the Czech Republic.

The offer of language training provided to holders of international protection in the Czech Republic is quite broad (but, unlike education, it is not available to applicants). According to the Asylum Act (§68), beneficiaries of international protection are offered **a free 400-hour Czech language course under the SIP**. The course is delivered by the Association of Teachers of Czech as a Foreign Language (AUČCJ) which has a long-term contract with the Ministry of Education. Most of the courses are held in the Integration Asylum Centres. All holders of international protection, including school-age children, are eligible to participate. The availability of the courses is enhanced by the fact that their duration is not limited by participation in the SIP, i.e., 12 months. In addition to the courses organised by

the AUČJ, asylum and subsidiary protection holders (sometimes together with other categories of migrants) can also benefit from separate courses provided by the **Centres for the Integration of Foreigners** or courses organised by **non – governmental non – profit organisations** such as the OPU.

Respondents were asked about the courses they had taken, where they had obtained information about them, whether they had learned what they needed to learn and whether the language barrier still hindered them in their life in the Czech Republic.

Regarding the aforementioned entitlement to a free 400-hour language course under the SIP, all respondents were familiar with this possibility but not all had exhausted this option. The main barrier to not completing the course was usually lack of time – respondents needed to start work as soon as possible, and from a certain point onwards, could no longer attend the course at the scheduled time.

"I'm sitting here talking to you now, but when I was working on construction sites, I didn't have the energy to sit down like this at all. And to carry on some polite conversation, I couldn't do that at all. A job like that really takes you away from everything. I just had work and home. I just didn't have the energy to learn the language." (Ernest)

"In the beginning, I took a Czech course through OPU, and then when we got the residency, we were entitled to 400 hours of Czech, which we started in Ústí. Then the pandemic came. Now we have 300 hours left, but now the teacher can only teach after the fourth hour. It's too late; it's inefficient." (Halim)

Most respondents also know about the offer of other Czech language courses from non – profit organizations or Integration Centers. The course offer itself seems sufficient from this point of view. Nevertheless, several barriers can be identified that prevent holders of international protection from effectively mastering Czech. It is by far not only the lack of time related to employment mentioned above. For example, interviews show that for complete beginners, and especially those from non-Slavic language backgrounds, it can be very problematic to have someone explain the grammar of one foreign language to them in another foreign language. For example, Rayna mentions that she had a good experience with the courses and the teachers were good, but she soon realized that she would need grammar explained in Arabic and of course no one knew how to do that. Rayna finds Czech very difficult and language training is still a big problem for her.

For children, the language barrier is easier to overcome, but for adults, it is very challenging and obviously also puts a lot of strain on the psyche. The sense of failure and the associated stress leads many people to settle for the lowest satisfactory level or to give up learning all together. Another obstacle is the simple fact that many foreigners are not sufficiently motivated to study the language – many of them never meet Czechs in the workplace and simply do not need to speak the language.

Finally, in terms of motivation, there is an important difference between asylum holders on the one hand, and people granted subsidiary protection on the other. The former, who have been granted permanent protection, have a much greater willingness to learn the language of the receiving society than the "subsidiary", who can theoretically lose their status within a few years or months.¹⁵

The interviews show that the refugees themselves perceive the language barrier in relation to Czechs very differently. Some of the interviewees said that they suffer from not knowing the local language and that this circumstance makes their life very difficult. On the other hand, especially for those who live in larger cities and have access to their own community, some interviewees do not consider poor knowledge of Czech to be a big problem.

"I made friends with other asylum seekers in the camp. And there was a common dislike of Czechs and Czech language building up between us, because all the situations we encountered were unpleasant. So, I didn't even want to learn Czech at first." (Anton)

"I still attended one Czech course from OPU. I finished it; I got a certificate, A1, but I cannot recommend the course. I could communicate without the language! I can feel other people and their energy. The barrier is not the language... I don't need Czech in the facility; the integration started at the massage course, where I felt conviviality, warmth. There were Czechs there." (Nina)

¹⁵ A weaker motivation to study Czech is also evident in applicants for international protection. The applicants are offered Czech language courses from their first day in Residential Centres and also in the Reception Centre Zastávka.

8. Social and political participation

Integration is a two-way process, requiring some effort from both the migrants and the receiving society. Ideally, state integration policy should not neglect the role and responsibility of citizens, should support civic initiatives and contribute to creating a welcoming social environment free of xenophobia and discrimination. On the other hand, the involvement of beneficiaries of international protection in the public sphere (including participation in the design of the integration policies) can make a significant contribution to their smooth and effective integration.

Awareness-raising can certainly be identified as the main tool for engaging the majority society in the integration process. The reality in the Czech Republic is that the state, through European and national subsidies, transfers a big part of the responsibility for awareness-raising activities to non-profit organisations. Among the current or recent awareness campaigns, we can mention for example the projects (Dez)informace or Jako Ty, implemented by the Integration Centre Prague and Meta, O.P.S. The main tools aimed at migrants themselves – holders of international protection – include mentoring and volunteering. In any case, not only the answers of our respondents, but also other available data (opinion polls) indicates that there is plenty of room for work in the Czech Republic in "building bridges" between holders of international protection and the majority society.

Respondents in this area talked about how they spend their free time in the Czech Republic, what activities they engage in outside of work, how they perceive their position among Czechs and in Czech society, and what they see as the main obstacles to their integration into the local community.

The interviews show that both the forms and the extent to which humanitarian migrants engage in social life depends primarily on two factors. The first is, quite predictably, the length of their stay in the Czech Republic. Secondly, it is, very importantly, the country of their origin. It is generally easier for people from Ukraine or Russia to make friends, and they themselves mention that they understand life in the Czech Republic quite quickly because it is not so different from what they know from home. Although people from the Middle East have more difficulty making friends among Czechs, they usually do not feel limited by this and find friendships within their community. The low participation in life in the Czech Republic is particularly problematic for applicants from Southeast Asia (e.g., Burma). They feel lonely; most emphasize that they do not have enough information, do not know their way around, cannot communicate and often face a sense of their own

failure because they should have done something differently and are not successful in integration. This feeling of failure makes them withdraw and stop attempting further contacts.

In general, however, most respondents report having friends among Czechs. The most common ways of meeting and establishing relationships are through the work team and neighbours. Respondents often cite lack of time as one of the barriers to networking. Not knowing Czech also plays a very important role; for example, Alan mentions that so far, he talks mainly with people who speak his language, because the language barrier makes him uncomfortable, and he is very shy among Czechs. Zaw also expresses similar views. In his words, Czech remains an impenetrable language for him, and he feels that it limits him a lot, both in contact with authorities and in making friends.

Although it may seem strange at first glance, the interviews showed quite clearly that a low level of social participation of beneficiaries of international protection is associated with their stay in one of the residence centres. The explanation is quite simple: the overall experience of integration, and the related desire and willingness to participate in Czech society, is in most cases very fundamentally influenced by the first months of life in the Czech Republic. Many respondents spent these critical months in a residential centre and there, as mentioned in the chapter on housing, their experience was almost exclusively negative. The lesson to be learnt from this is that the conditions in residential centres co – determine how people will continue to approach the whole integration process.

"Now it may seem funny, but I remember it as a prison, as a kind of concentration camp" (...) *"I remember in that camp and in those conditions, the poorly paid work, we actually started to hate the Czechs and everything related to the Czech Republic. Because of the memories of the security there, or the memories of the Labour Office...those are memories of how hostile somebody was. And then it's hard to just put energy into it and learn new things and how things work when you only had those bad relationships out of it."* (Ernest)

"If somebody asked me how to live here, I would advise that they should never live in a facility like I live in. Even a strong person will break here. Here adaptation or integration is not possible; it's more about survival." (Nina)

As for leisure activities, most respondents do not feel any specific barriers apart from those that apply in general, such as lack of time.

"Unfortunately, we really miss that; we can't find friends like in Ukraine. We have the right friends in Ukraine, not here. We have acquaintances; we are not very friendly with anyone. We have one such family that we spend time with; they are Ukrainians. We also have good neighbours; the children play together. They don't mind that we are foreigners. But we can't find real friends; we don't have time. We work a lot or spend time with family." (Tanya)

Regarding political participation, interviews showed that most respondents were not interested in it. In some cases, the reason is that they have fled from the very bad political situation at home and are afraid to talk about this topic in general. Alternatively, they are tired of political issues. Other times, they simply do not have the motivation and energy for any engagement in this sphere. Only in two cases did the respondents show an active interest in getting involved in the political process. In their words, they would like to share their own experiences and talk to Czechs about what is happening in their countries (Cuba, Russia), but they feel that no one is interested in this and that they have no way to get involved in the discussion, for example, by speaking in public or actively participating in a debate.

Conclusions

Analysis of our interviews results in a mixed picture of how refugees – holders of and applicants for international protection – perceive their reception and the integration process in the Czech Republic. On the one hand, the testimonials contain a number of positive statements. People who are seeking or have already found protection from persecution and violence praise, among other things, the quality (and free, as they sometimes point out) healthcare, comfortable private housing, or job opportunities. Many appreciate the assistance they received immediately after their arrival or after applying for protection. The modest, but nevertheless highly valued, material assistance offered by the State Integration Programme as a contribution to a new start has received generally positive feedback. Similarly, the support provided by social workers was also appreciated, although it is evident that there are significant differences between social workers.

At the same time, the analysis of individual areas of integration revealed a number of pitfalls and systemic weaknesses in the process of integrating humanitarian migrants into wider society. One problematic theme that runs through virtually all the topics discussed, from housing to social participation, is the **language barrier**. Time and again in interviews, interviewees mentioned when and how not knowing Czech made their lives more difficult – whether it was when looking for a job, going to the doctor, or trying to establish informal contacts with neighbors in their place of residence. The language barrier has the most fatal impact on those who come from culturally more distant backgrounds. Some of the respondents (Zaw, Bilal) had managed to circumvent the language barrier at least partially through connections to the community of compatriots. This mechanism can best be seen in the example of job seeking, where the lack of language proficiency de facto "directs" migrants to sectors in which their compatriots already have strong positions and where the need for Czech language is little or non-existent. (The question is whether in such a case, the economic positives outweigh the negative impact on integration, when migrants give up their effort to learn Czech).

Another obstacle to integration, which is mentioned at least as often as the language barrier – and which is even harder to overcome – is **poor orientation to Czech institutions and the rules of the Czech system**. Confusion concerning social benefits, the possibility of placing children in schools, the recognition of diplomas, requalification courses, health insurance and many other issues is mentioned countless times in the recorded testimonies and leads to considerable frustration. With reference to our research, we can conclude

that applicants and holders of international protection often fail to take advantage of the existing services, not because the services are unavailable, but simply because refugees have not been told about them – at least not in a sufficiently clear manner and at a time when they would need it most. NGOs can only partially fill in this gap, within the limits of their capacity. The research also shows that it is not only the foreigners who are not familiar with the rules. It is certainly worth noting that Czechs are also often confused about the norms, especially the legal ones – a perfect example is the general ignorance of relevant labour legislation (and what is worse, the lack of interest in it) on the part of many employers.

Closely related to the topic of confusion and feeling lost is the issue of **mental health**. This theme appeared repeatedly in the interviews, sometimes in unexpected contexts. Respondents mentioned the psychological strain and helplessness caused by unrecognised qualifications and a prospect of professional degradation, or the stress that they (especially those of adult age and of non-Slavic origin) experience when they have to learn a foreign language and cope with an enormous workload. The most relevant testimonies were quoted in the chapter on health and health care. Specialized psychiatric and psychological assistance is one of the Achilles' heels of the reception and integration of refugees in the Czech Republic. Our study not only clearly confirms this fact, but also indicates the contours of what should be corrected: the unavailability of specialist care at the moment when it is most needed – in the first phase of the refugees' stay, i.e., when they applied for protection, they had no housing, they did not know the language, and they felt completely lost. The capacity allocated to care should ideally be matched by capacity for interpreting.

Based on our findings, if we are to suggest improvements to the system of reception and integration of refugees, it would be a mistake to leave out the **living conditions in some of the SUZ facilities**. The interviews show that the experience of the **Kostelec nad Orlicí** residential centre is particularly traumatic for refugees. It should be remembered that this is not just one of the many stages of the integration process. From the collected testimonies, in which people repeatedly return to their experiences in the Kostelec centre and in connection with a variety of other topics, it is clear that it is the experience in this environment that determines to a large extent how people will later approach the integration process as a whole.

The success of the integration of refugees, holders of international protection, into mainstream society is not determined by one single factor, one single moment, or one

single experience. To be effective as a whole, integration must be effective in all key areas, from housing to language acquisition to social or political participation. But still, the question arises – are some areas more important than others? This study suggests that, at least from the perspective of the actors themselves, i.e., the refugees, this is the case. The majority of them see two major milestones in their integration: firstly, **a home of their own**, and secondly, their **work** and the financial self-sufficiency that goes with it. For both, they stress the invaluable role of their **community**. It is often compatriots, relatives or friends who help refugees find employment and autonomous housing. The importance of expatriate communities in providing refugees with a sense of belonging and, in many situations, largely replacing the role of the state, cannot be overstated in the light of our findings. All three of these integration 'pillars' (housing, work, community) must be seen as closely interlinked. Just as without a permanent job, people find it difficult to maintain an autonomous home, without a community they sometimes struggle to find work. Analogous links exist, of course, between other spheres of integration as well. However, in the eyes of the refugees themselves, none of these is as important as having a place to live, a way to earn a living as soon as possible after arriving in their new homeland, and – to put it simply – someone to talk to.

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