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Asylum system in the Visegrad countries after the end of communism

Summary: In the present study, we attempt to present and compare the formation and development of the institutional system dealing with refugees in the years after the change of regime in the four Visegrad countries: the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland and Hungary.

Keywords: refugee, asylum seekers, migrant, migration, the 1951 Refugee Convention, Visegrad countries

Introduction

In addition to economic and social differences, the situation in these four countries showed many similarities in the years after the change of regime. In the decades after the Second World War, countries with little experience of reception were largely excluded from international migration movements and remained essentially transit states even after opening up after the change of regime. Although they were not subject to significant forced migration pressures (with the exception of Hungary), they had to do the same measures in the migration administration as the Western European countries: create a modern asylum institutional system and regulations. Beyond their political will, their position was influenced by their geographical location, the change in migration routes and, in this context, their ability to act as an effective buffer zone in reducing migratory pressures, mainly to Germany.

The situation of the Visegrad countries after the change of regime

Czech Republic

It is a major transit country for illegal migration to Western Europe, including Germany. At the same time, foreigners from foreign cultures who were legally resident in the country were already present in Czechoslovakia at a much higher rate than at the end of socialism than in Poland or Hungary. The Vietnamese community was already visible in the 1980s, forming tens of thousands of communities sent by the Socialist Republic of Vietnam to Czechoslovakia primarily for training and experience. After the regime change, most Vietnamese did not return to their countries of origin, but often began working in lower-skilled jobs, retail, and hospitality. The relatively good economic situation in the 1990s also helped to maintain a positive migration balance.

At the dawn of regime change, in addition to income-generating migration, asylum seekers also appeared. Czechoslovakia acceded to the Geneva Convention on Asylum on the 26th November 1991 and enacted its first asylum law. This law regulated the procedure for determining refugee status and the rights and obligations of applicants for and recognized refugee status. The law took over the conceptual elements of the 1951 Geneva Convention on Asylum, and included basic benefits and benefits for asylum seekers, rights and obligations, and cases of withdrawal of status. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) had special rights in the proceedings. This UN agency, like other former socialist countries, provided effective support for the development of the national asylum system after

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the change of regime, which included expert assistance, including participation in proceedings, the development of the legal environment and financial support. In addition, support has been provided to emerging civil society organizations that were able to provide active assistance in the field of asylum, either in the care of applicants for international protection or in facilitating the integration of recognized refugees.

Persons recognized as refugees could engage in gainful employment only in accordance with the rules defined in the Geneva Convention on Refugees, however in a more restrictive manner than under Hungarian law, and could also purchase real estate only in line with the rules applicable to foreigners. After being recognized as a refugee, foreigners were also entitled to minimum integration services, including free language training and short-term benefits for applicants. Initially, the granting of refugee status was limited to 5 years, followed by an ear examination procedure, but this provision was abolished in 1996. Subsequent revocation of status could only take place in the cases specified in the Convention.

The applications were initially managed by the Border Police and later by the Asylum Department of the Ministry of the Interior. In the late 1990s, in connection with the preparations for EU accession, a review of the legislation on foreigners, including the Asylum Act, began. The newer asylum law has already complied with international and EU standards, including provisions on safe third countries of origin and safety, as well as judicial review. 325/1999, as amended several times since its entry into force in 2000. Asylum Act No. 1/2002 defines the conditions of entry and residence of foreigners seeking international protection in the Czech Republic.[2] It contains provisions on the rights and obligations of asylum seekers, recognized refugees and beneficiaries of subsidiary protection and regulates the procedure for granting or withdrawing international protection, as well as the content of state integration programs for aliens granted any protected status. Provisions for the issuance of documents by applicants, recognized refugees and beneficiaries of subsidiary protection. It focuses primarily on language teaching and housing to promote social inclusion. With regards to language teaching, which is the basis for integration, a free language course should be provided for the target group (which, however, is not detailed in the law but is the responsibility of the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport). After recognition, foreigners must be provided with accommodation for a maximum of 18 months, which can be extended for individual fairness. Other legislation on refugees (health, social, education, etc.) also contains provisions.[3]

From 1990 to the end of the decade, about 15.000 foreigners applied for international protection, an average of 1.500 to 2.000 per year. In the first years, taking advantage of the newly acquired freedom of travel and the facilitation of border controls, mainly Romanian, Bulgarian and Moldovan citizens arrived, followed by those from the former Yugoslavian and former Soviet Union (mainly Bosnians and Armenians). In the second half of the 1990s, many foreign refugees arrived in the Czech Republic from outside of the Europe (Afghanistan, Iraq, Angola). While almost none of those from the first-mentioned countries, many Bosnians,

[2]Act No. 325/1999 on Asylum.Downloaded December 12, 2021, from https://www.refworld.org/docid/4a7a97bfc33.html

[3]Ministry of the Interior - Procedure for Granting International Protection in the Czech Republic. Downloaded December 12, 2021, fromhttps://www.mvcr.cz/mvcren/article/procedure-for-granting-international-protection-in-the-czech-republic.aspx

Afghans and Iraqis have been protected. Between 1990 and 1998, 12.2% of applicants were granted refugee status.[4]

While the number of asylum seekers and recognized refugees essentially stagnated at a low level in the 1990s, the number of foreigners staying in the Czech Republic for income purposes has steadily increased. After the stagnation of the 1990s, the number of asylum seekers increased significantly (roughly doubled) in the early 2000s, which was similar in the other Visegrad countries. In addition to the war in Afghanistan, the large number of asylum seekers from the former Soviet Union was decisive. In Czechoslovakia (and to a lesser extent in Poland), a significant number of Ukrainian citizens also appeared and were present in large numbers on other grounds of residence, mainly as workers. In the middle of the decade, the number of applicants started to decline again. The country's accession to the European Union did not change the expected trend.

Slovakia

Slovakia is a major transit country for migration routes from south and east to Western Europe. By becoming an independent state, it acceded to the 1951 Geneva Convention on Asylum on January 1, 1993. The Migration Office of the Ministry of the Interior was also established in 1993, which was also responsible for examining refugee applications as a government agency.

In the years following the change of regime, a relatively large number of foreigners from outside Europe, such as students, who could not / did not return to their country of origin after completing their studies and applied for asylum in order to secure their long-term residence. Although the criteria for granting refugee status officially meet the conditions of the 1951 Geneva Convention, in practice Slovak language skills and qualifications were also taken into account in the decision-making. Willingness for integration into the host society was an advantage in assessing the application. After gaining the status of foreigners who had often lived in former Czechoslovakia since the 1980s, the recognition rate of applicants decreased in the mid-1990s, and more and more of them arrived illegally.

In January 1996, Regulation 283/1995 entered into force[5], which replaced the former Czechoslovak Act No. 498/1990. In preparation for accession to the EU, legislation was harmonized in 2000 (Law 309/2000), which entered into force on 1 November 2000.

The Refugee Act No. 283/1995 describes that an alien requesting protection must notify the police of this intention within 24 hours of crossing the border of the Slovak Republic (if he has not already done so at the border crossing), who will register the application book. The police will then notify the Migration Office and the client will be taken to a refugee reception centre. The procedure starts with the application submitted to the Migration Office (so – similarly to the Hungarian regulations – the legal institution of the application and the letter of intent is separated). Although the regulation left a loophole in the event of failure to express a letter of intent within 24 hours (in the event of "serious obstacles", it would be impossible to meet the deadline), failure to do so could, as a general

[4]MIGRATION AND ASYLUM IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPELIBE 104 EN. Downloaded December 12, 2021, from https://www.europarl.europa.eu/workingpapers/libe/104/czechrep_en.htm#N41

[5]Act No. 283 of 14 November 1995, Refugee Act. Downloaded December 12, 2021, from https://www.refworld.org/cgi bin / texis / vtx / rwmain / opendocpdf.pdf?reldoc = y &docid = 52c1874c4

rule, lead to expulsion proceedings. The strict interpretation of this 24-hour rule has also been strongly criticized by UNHCR and other organizations, which was also removed in a subsequent legislative amendment. Asylum seekers became eligible for a certain range of benefits and allowances when they applied: placement in a reception centre, which is generally open, three meals a day, basic medical care and health screening, and a smaller amount of cash support.6 The Office has 90 days to make a decision at first instance, and in the event of a rejection, it is subject to judicial review. In addition to refugee status under the Geneva Convention, the Slovak legislation also recognizes other protection statuses: an alien who does not meet the criteria of the 1951 Geneva Convention may be recognized as a refugee for "humanitarian reasons". The Slovak Republic has made use of this possibility in principle only in the rarest cases. The regulation also includes the legal institution of temporary protection, which was applied to persons fleeing the Yugoslav civil war in the first half of the 1990s, the vast majority of whom were Bosnians. After this date, the temporary protection status was not in use until the beginning of 2022 when Ukrainian refugees started to come in a large crowd. The legal institution of a safe country of origin and a safe third country are also used in Slovak asylum law and were already listed in a government decree in 1997. Rejected applicants have 15 days to appeal against the decision of the Migration Office, which is adjudicated at the second instance by the Ministry of the Interior.

In case of a justified need for protection, the persons recognized as refugees are placed in Zvolen, an integration centre, where they are assisted in finding a job, renting accommodation or other social services. Refugees can spend up to six months in this centre, but this can be extended on an individual basis. Permanent residence permit is automatically granted for recognized refugees that – with a few exceptions – confers on them rights similar to those of Slovak nationals.[7]

Thus, in the 1990s, a national asylum system was established in Slovakia, which included rules on asylum procedures, reception rules and benefits for asylum seekers, as well as an integration package, which was partly funded by the Slovak Republic and partly by the UNHCR funded. The role of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees is fundamentally exhausted in monitoring and coordinating the functioning of the asylum system. In addition, the role of non-governmental organizations working in the field in the integration of refugees and the facilitation of local integration was important. The practice of integrating refugees, as in other Visegrad countries, remains a major issue, given that the majority of foreigners treat Slovakia primarily as a transit country and their goal is to reach Western Europe.

Slovakia has already started to develop its asylum system before joining the European Union, in response to the growing number of asylum seekers and the country's international obligations under EU harmonization. The Ministry of the Interior is responsible for migration management, and the Asylum Authority operates specifically within the Migration Office, which manages reception centres and operates refugee integration centres. Following the review of the regulations on migration management, new regulations were adopted in the field of immigration.

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[6]US Committee for Refugees World Refugee Survey 1999 - Slovak Republic. Downloaded December 12, 2021, fromhttps://www.refworld.org/docid/3ae6a8c028.html

[7]MIGRATION AND ASYLUM IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE LIBE 104 EN. Downloaded 12 December, 2021, from https://www.europarl.europa.eu/workingpapers/libe/104/slovak_en.htm#N159

Prior to joining the EU, asylum seekers came mainly (in the first half of the 1990s) from the territory of the former Yugoslavia, as well as from Afghanistan, Iraq and the former Soviet Union. In 2002, there were about 2.500 asylum seekers and 400 recognized refugees in the country, as well as about 240 recognized stateless persons. Slovakia acceded to the 1954 Convention relating to the Status of Stateless Persons in 2000, the basic aim of which is to reduce the number of stateless persons.[8]

Poland

The country acceded to the 1951 Geneva Convention and its 1967 Protocol on 27 September 1991. The European Convention on Human Rights was ratified in 1993. National legislation on refugees is mainly contained in the Aliens Act, which is in line with international standards, and its subsequent amendments have been adapted to the requirements of accession to the European Union.[9]

The "Law on Aliens" adopted in 1997 regulates the classic issues of immigration (entry and residence of aliens, transit, visa matters, residence permits), asylum matters, the activities, powers and competences of state bodies in this field, as well as the repatriation of foreigners of Polish origin.Articles 32 to 51 of the Act (Chapters 5 and 6) contain provisions on asylum. An application for international protection must be submitted by an alien who does not have the right to enter the territory of the Republic of Poland upon entry. An alien who has entered the territory of the Republic of Poland illegally must submit his / her application immediately after crossing the border. The submission of the application does not release the alien from the responsibility of crossing the border in violation of binding legislation. In the case of a legally arriving person, an application must be submitted within 14 days. Asylum seekers receive a residence permit during the procedure, as well as accommodation and full board in a host institution (the first station set up specifically for the accommodation of asylum seekers was opened in 1992). The scope of benefits is defined by the law on a wide scale: accommodation, meals, medical care, benefits in kind, permanent or one-off financial support, financial support in the event of voluntary departure. The asylum authority has 6 months to make a decision. In the event of a positive decision, the asylum seeker will be granted a foreign residence permit.

During its long history, Poland was mostly a country of emigration of migrants and refugees, which only changed in the years after the change of regime. During the decades of socialism, like other Central and Eastern European countries, a smaller number of refugees were admitted on the basis of political ideology (Greece, Chile, Vietnam), each representing only a few hundred people. However, given the modest circumstances of the age, they were indeed given a chance to integrate in the long run. In the years around the change of regime, Poland faced serious economic and social problems, even compared to the other Visegrad countries, and most of its citizens lived in very modest conditions. Due to this and its location, it was not an attractive destination country at all from the point of view of foreigners coming legally, for employment or other purposes, or from the point of view of asylum seekers. Due to the low number of arrivals and the mass emigration of Polish citizens, a phenomenon that

[8]UNHCR Country Operations Plan 2002 - Slovak Republic. Downloaded December 12, 2021, from https://www.refworld.org/country,,UNHCR,,SVK,,3b6671e74,0.html

[9]Aliens Act No. 739 of 25 June 1997. Downloaded December 12, 2021, from https://www.legislationline.org/documents/id/4545

was characteristic until the mid-2010s, Polish society was fundamentally pro-refugee and generally pro-migration, with no rejection of foreigners at all. Only a few marginalized groups have tried to forge political capital with anti-immigrant and anti-refugee voices. (However, this attitude has fundamentally changed since 2015.)

In the first half of the 1990s, only a few hundred people applied for asylum in Poland each year, which stabilized at around 2-3 thousand per year from the second half of the 1990s after a slow rise. The main sending countries are Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, Iraq, Pakistan, the former Yugoslavia (early 1990s), and the former Soviet successor states (Armenia, Ukraine, and later Chechnya). The rate of recognition has been very low throughout, with typically a few dozen, 100 to 150 people a year in the mid-1990s receiving protection. However, this is not primarily the result of a strict asylum regime, but rather a consequence of the fact that the majority of the modest number of applicants did not wait for the procedure to end. The vast majority of asylum seekers only applied for international protection if they were apprehended or returned from Germany under a readmission agreement during an illegal border crossing attempt. Those who were placed in an open reception institution left for the most part in an unknown location, thus terminating their procedure.[10] The integration of the few recognized refugees has also been difficult. According to UNHCR reports, access to housing, employment and social assistance was also problematic. In particular, access to legal employment was a barely penetrating barrier in a country where there were few foreigners, and the unemployment rate was high in the 1990s, even by regional comparison, at around 15%. In addition to government agencies, some civil society and church organizations, as well as the UNHCR local office, have been involved in supporting refugees and facilitating their integration. UNHCR's role was similar to that in other countries in the region: it worked with the government to help set up reception centres, develop early integration programs, and set up training for all those who might have encountered asylum seekers (border guards, police, NGO staff).

Hungary

Like other Central and Eastern European countries, the XX. Century – except for a few short periods – was a country that released voluntary and forced migrants. This tendency only changed in the second half of the 1980s.

During the period of regime change, the first modern norms of an alien nature were born, and the alignment with international standards in the field of asylum began. The roots of the asylum administration, which later was developed, date back to 1988, when an increasing influx from Romania was experienced. Due to the deteriorating living conditions and the growing ethnic repression, the phenomenon that Romanian citizens, mainly of Hungarian nationality, who entered Hungary legally, did not return to Romania after 90 days. Although the Hungarian authorities initially tried to send these people back, this became increasingly difficult to accept and met with widespread opposition from the Hungarian public.[11]According to official figures, the number of refugees arriving in Hungary from Romania at the beginning of 1989 could be around 13.000, but in fact, around 20.000 had to find a solution for their care and legal settlement by the last non-elected government. Accession to the 1951 Geneva Convention provided the legal basis for settling

[10]Stola, 2001, 8.

[11] Klenner, 2017, 50.

their status in March 1989. Due to their Hungarian nationality, they did not need integration services, but their financial assistance was necessary. Their provision and integration has been facilitated by social solidarity and an initially high degree of donation. The then-emerging civil sector and the church with support infrastructure also played a part in caring for newcomers. After the initial period, the state gradually took over the care of refugees and established a legal framework, but did not want to encourage Hungarians in Transylvania to leave their homes. A short intermezzo in the history of Hungarian asylum was the temporary care of East German refugees in the summer of '89, who received temporary accommodation and assistance in Hungary for a few months before leaving for the Federal Republic of Germany. This had essentially no effect on the development of Hungarian asylum, but the current Hungarian government enjoyed political benefits in German-Hungarian bilateral relations for decades.

Due to Hungary's special historical past and location, the institutional system dealing with refugees started operating before the change of regime and well before the other Central European countries. Some of the refugee apparatus have been operating in the Ministry of the Interior since 1988, and when the country formally acceded to the Geneva Convention on Refugees and the establishment of refugee reception centres began, a separate office was set up. Even in the period immediately before the change of regime, there was a general professional opinion that an asylum case in line with international standards should be established in Hungary. Official work on refugees in the initial period was mainly carried out by the police. Facilitating the settlement of thousands of people who have been granted refugee status in a short period of time and who have found a predominantly permanent home in Hungary has been a significant financial burden and has been achieved with the help of public funds. Among the majority of Hungarians, Hungary clearly emerged as a destination country, but more and more people came to consider their stay as temporary and wanted to travel further west as soon as possible.

The first reception centreswere established as early as 1989, and the premises of former state-owned companies, barracks and resorts were transformed, making them suitable for the reception of refugees. Until the mid-1990s, most of these institutions in the region, about 20, operated in Hungary. Although Hungary's accession to the Geneva Convention on Asylum and the establishment of the Hungarian asylum system can be traced back to the mass influx of Hungarian refugees from Romania in the late 1980s, the influx of the newly established institutional system was not without its task. The most bloody conflict in post-World War II Europe and the most directly affecting Central European countries was the series of wars leading to the break-up of Yugoslavia. First, Slovenes and Croats declared their independent statehood in 1990 and 1991, and fighting broke out in 1991 between Serbs, Bosnians and Croats in Bosnia-Herzegovina, which features a colourful ethnic mosaic. By the end of the war, 1995, half of Bosnia and Herzegovina's 4.4 million population had been forced to flee. About half of those who left their homes were internally displaced persons who remained in the country, and the other half came abroad to neighbouring countries or Western Europe. Of the European countries, Germany, Hungary, Austria and Sweden participated in the temporary or permanent reception of the largest number of refugees. Because of the war, Hungary's burden has been steadily increased. In the first half of the 1990s, the country provided protection to some 74.000 former Yugoslav citizens. However, the vast majority of arrivals did not receive refugee status under the Geneva Convention, but temporary protection, as the vast majority of cases did not involve personal persecution, but persons

whose place of residence was in the area affected by the fighting. Their stay in Hungary was considered completely temporarily by the Hungarian authorities and by the refugees themselves as well. They wanted to return to their country of origin or travel to another developed country, trusting in the imminent end of the war. Temporary protection was constantly reviewed in the post-war years. The procedure was humane and returning to and traveling to a third country was only voluntary. No one was sent back to his place of origin against his will.

In addition to the refugees of the South Slavic War, which was a massive task, refugees from non-European countries and foreign cultures were present, albeit in small numbers, even in the years after the change of regime, most of whom did not consider Hungary as a destination either then or later. The Hungarian authorities did not deal with them at all until 1998, and the UNHCR Budapest office decided on their refugee application.

After the end of the South Slavic war in 1995, the number of asylum seekers in Hungary also fell, but it was still high in the comparison of a few thousand people in Central Europe. Then, at the end of the 1990s, as in the case of the other Visegrad countries, migration legislation was in place in preparation for the imminent accession to the EU, thus, for example, in the case of Hungary, the territorial restriction was lifted, according to which Hungary in 1998 until the beginning, it received only European refugees.

After the mass influxes of the 1980s and 1990s, in addition to legal harmonization, asylum policy also changed and reception capacities decreased. Although the number of asylum seekers increased in some periods, a significant number of foreigners in need of protection were no longer permanently admitted. This country's membership in the European Union and its slow economic catch-up have not changed either.

Differences and similarities

As mentioned above, the communist ideology generally did not accept the concept of persecution based on the Geneva Convention on Asylum, so the Soviet Union and its allied states did not even accede to the convention when it was established. Until the late 1980s, these states appeared primarily as emitters of refugees and emigrants for other reasons.

Hungary was the first of the Visegrad countries to face the need to accommodate a larger number of refugees, long before the change of regime or before any rules were in place. The rapid accession to the Geneva Convention on Asylum here meant only a partial voluntary adoption of the standards of liberal democracies in Western Europe, but rather the coercive effect of external circumstances. In the euphoric mood of regime change, Central and Eastern European countries wanted to distance themselves from the communist past, mostly to seek asylum for those who arrived, and were ready to transpose Western regulations, the first step being the ratification of the 1951 Refugee Convention.[12]The development of the refugee protection system was an important element of the democratization process, which was enforced by a wide range of social support. Enjoying the freedom to travel at the borders that opened up, many of their own citizens also tried to migrate to Western Europe. However, this no longer met the willingness to accommodate the arrival of a few thousand Eastern European citizens a year in previous decades.

[12]Szczepanikova, 2011.

Following accession to the Geneva Convention on Asylum, the UNHCR has provided extensive assistance to Central European countries in building asylum systems in order to establish a functioning reception system. These efforts have also been financially supported by Western European governments, in order to increase the reception capacity of asylum seekers and refugees, parallel to relieve their own care system.[13]Although Central European countries were already considered safe at the time, to which foreigners could be returned under readmission agreements, migrants, who arrived mostly illegally, considered them only transit countries, thus effectively relieving Western asylum systems.

As mentioned, the Visegrad countries have followed a very similar path in adopting international asylum standards, developing asylum and migration regulations, and creating reception capacities providing basic services; . Within a few years, Hungary also had to face two severe waves of refugees. Tens of thousands of Hungarians from Transylvania came to the country, who managed their affairs, settled their legal status and facilitated their rapid integration, partly through the then established asylum administration.[14] The situation of refugees fleeing the war in Yugoslavia, for whom a temporary protection was provided, was fundamentally different. Although most of the burden of reception was borne by Germany, Hungary was also the first country to be a safe country. Assistance to refugees was surrounded by a somewhat declining but still widespread social support, mainly due to its significant financial burden.

Among the politicians who came to power in Czechoslovakia after the change of regime, there were many who had previously left for the West and later returned home, and who had explicitly supported the reception of refugees, although the number of asylum seekers was actually very low. The few applicants who waited at all for the proceedings received a high rate of international protection, demonstrating the country's Western, liberal commitment. After the break-up of Czechoslovakia, only a negligible number of asylum seekers arrive in Slovakia, but it operates its asylum system on the basis of established regulations. The Czech Republic – although not a destination country for asylum seekers –is more forced to stop illegal migration under the 1995 readmission agreement with Germany.

The situation in Poland was somewhat different. The number of asylum seekers was insignificant here as well, playing only a transit role in terms of forced migration. Although society was generally not dismissive of foreigners, the Polish political elite after the regime change was fundamentally more conservative than Czech politicians with liberal-intellectual, partly dissident backgrounds. Poland was the last country in the region to accede to the Geneva Convention, and the Polish parliament did not address asylum issues until the mid-1990s.[15]

In summary, many similarities can be observed in the assessment of the refugee issue, the development of the asylum regulation and the institutional system for this group of countries; however, due to their geographical location and historical past, they faced different challenges in the years around the change.

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[13]Cutts, 2001, 161.

[14]Klenner, 2017, 59.

[15]Shevel, 2011, 227.

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