Between Control and Assistance: The Problem of European Accommodation Centres for Asylum Seekers

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ABSTRACT

Accommodation centres are much more than means of securing asylum seekers’ housing needs. They are an embodiment of asylum and immigration policies. To understand these policies and their effects on asylum seekers, we need to ask what interests different institutional actors have in keeping asylum seekers in the centres. Based on the study of accommodation centres in the Czech Republic, in this paper I argue that the centres serve as tools of migration control. The prolonged confinement of a highly diverse group of people produced by the interconnectedness between asylum and immigration policies leads to asylum seekers’ disillusionment about the asylum procedure and nourishes various illicit activities. The centres enable state institutions to determine the nature of assistance available to asylum seekers, including legal aid provided by non-governmental organizations. By actively promoting the image of accommodation centres as benign places, the state also controls the dominant representation of refugee reception. In everyday practices in the centres, control and assistance are closely intertwined and produce an oppressive environment that engenders asylum seekers’ dependency.

INTRODUCTION

The experience of being an asylum seeker in today’s Europe is increasingly defined by prolonged spatial confinement and social segregation. Confinement appears in a variety of forms. People’s eligibility to claim asylum and to enter the country’s territory is assessed in closed reception centres that are also located at countries’ borders or international airports. Relatively open residential centres are designed for those who are allowed to enter the asylum procedure to wait for the decision on their asylum claim. Increasingly, rejected asylum seekers are being kept in prison-like detention centres, where they are awaiting deportation. The latter have gradually become an integral part of asylum and migration systems of European countries. They have been the subject of an increasing number of studies and reports (Bloch and Schuster, 2005; De Genova and Peutz, 2010; Fekete, 2005; Hughes and Field, 1998; Jackson, 2003; Khosravi, 2009). However, we know relatively little about the first two categories of accommodation centres. These institutions often leave a permanent mark on those who are eventually granted protection and shape their prospects in the host society.

As opposed to the obviously repressive function of the detention centres, the accommodation centres represent more ambivalent places of voluntary or semi-voluntary confinement. Their aim is

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not only to control but also to assist asylum seekers. They offer more humane living conditions and are usually more long-term places of residence. Asylum seekers can spend a number of years there. The few existing studies on this topic tend to focus on the micro-level and analyse the impacts of life in the centres on the emotional and social lives of asylum seekers (Ghorashi, 2005; Szczepanikova, 2005; White, 2011) or the relations between asylum seekers and service providers in the centres (Kobelinsky, 2008; Koehn, 2005; Mackrill, 1996). The aim of this paper, which is based on a study of four accommodation centres in the Czech Republic, carried out between 2005 and 2007, is to connect the micro-level and the institutional level. I ask how the accommodation centres are constituted by asylum and immigration policies. More specifically, I investigate institutional interests that shape the use and the running of the centres. This multi-level analysis helps us to better understand the social impacts of the centres on asylum seekers.

In the study of the European accommodation centres, both national and European Union (EU) contexts need to be taken into account. Harmonization of reception conditions for asylum seekers has been part of the EU’s move towards the Common European Asylum Policy. The EU Council Directive’s laying down of minimum standards for the reception of asylum seekers (in the Reception Directive) provides a wider framework. At the same time, it leaves significant scope for individual states with regard to the provision of material reception conditions for asylum seekers. These may be provided in kind, in the form of financial allowances or vouchers, or in a combination of these provisions (Art. 13, par. 5). Accommodation centres are defined as “any place used for collective housing of asylum seekers” (Art. 2, l). Other possible forms of housing provision include private houses, flats, hotels or other premises adapted for housing asylum applicants (Art. 14, par. 1). In this study I show that the interests of the national actors are crucial in the constitution of the centres. The example of the use of the European Refugee Fund in the Czech Republic documents the fact that the implementation of these interests can be facilitated by the tools of the EU asylum policy.

In what follows, I describe the basic properties and actors of the Czech reception system. Next, three different aspects of the accommodation centres are analysed. First, I argue that the interconnectedness of asylum and immigration policies that came to the fore in the early 2000s led to the accommodation centres being used as a tool of asylum and migration control. Second, I explain that the services provided in the centres are determined by power relations between different actors in the asylum system. I show that the advent of the European Refugee Fund strongly impacted these relations and heightened the concentration of resources in state institutions at the expense of non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Third, I focus on the everyday practices of control and assistance in the centres. In each of these three sections, I examine what impacts the institutional interests, policies and practices have on the social environment of the centres and on asylum seekers’ prospects in the host society.

ACCOMMODATION CENTRES IN THE CZECH ASYLUM SYSTEM

The centres first emerged in their present form as a specific response to the emergency in the early 1990s, which followed the dissolution of the communist regime and opening of the borders. When the first groups of refugees arrived, no institutional infrastructure to house them had yet been established. Initially, there was a concern for public health. Refugees were perceived as potential carriers of dangerous diseases, who needed to be separated from the general public. Former army barracks were turned into refugee accommodation. In some cases, the new arrivals – many of them refugees from the Soviet Union – replaced soldiers of the Soviet Army, which had maintained a presence in the country from the suppression of the Prague Spring in 1968 up to 1991. For the following 10 years, refugee applicants had to stay in these accommodation centres while waiting for the decision on their asylum claim. Developments in the 2000s will be the subject of the next section.
The prospect and then the reality of EU accession have had a strong impact on the reception and integration of refugees in the Czech Republic. The financial support and guidance from the EU facilitated the improvement of the material conditions in the centres and professionalization of their staff. However, as will be demonstrated in the section after next, the advent of the European Refugee Fund has not always led to the improvement of services provided to asylum seekers.

Presently, in the Czech Republic, there are two types of accommodation centres for asylum seekers: reception and residential. Two quarantine reception centres are used for first medical and security screenings. Asylum applications are formally launched here and the first interview starts off the asylum procedure. Asylum seekers can be kept in these closed centres for up to 4 months. After being released from the reception centre, asylum seekers wait for the result of their application in one of the two more open residential centres. Despite some level of control, people can move in and out of these centres. Formally, their stay there is not mandatory, but in order to move out of the centre one needs to have an officially approved address of residence and sufficient financial resources to survive without longer-term state support, which is tied to the stay in the centre. Asylum seekers do not have the right to work for a year after starting the asylum procedure. The stay in these centres has no official time limit and can be prolonged for a number of years, depending on the length of the asylum procedure. In 2002, the median length of the asylum procedure was approximately 2.5 years (DAMP, 2003). In 2004, it was an average of 27 months (Baxa and Mazanec, 2005).

In the second half of the 2000s, the number of accommodation centres has been reduced in reaction to the falling number of asylum seekers – from 11,400 new asylum claims in 2003 to 833 in 2010 (DAMP, 2011). This decrease can be largely attributed to the integration of the Czech Republic into the EU system of migration control. The country is surrounded only by other member states and thus is increasingly difficult to get into. Since 2004, the application of the Dublin II Convention allows for the removal of hundreds of asylum seekers annually to other member states that are identified as responsible for their asylum claims (mostly Poland and Slovakia) (DAMP, 2011).

The two crucial state institutions operating in the centres are run by the Ministry of the Interior: the Department of Asylum and Migration Policy (DAMP) and the Refugee Facilities Administration (RFA). The DAMP’s roles include formulation of the policy framework, decisions about asylum claims and the allocation of financial sources to be spent on the reception and determination process. The centres are financed mostly from the state budget and from 2006 they can also draw from the European Refugee Fund. Its redistribution in the Czech Republic falls under the aegis of the DAMP. The RFA provides a number of services in the centres: from everyday matters of accommodation and distribution of financial support to social work, psychological counselling, child care, Czech language lessons (only in residential centres) and recreational activities. Various NGOs offer legal and social counselling in the centres on a regular basis. The following sections demonstrate that both the DAMP and the RFA have an interest in keeping the asylum seekers in the centres. This is despite the fact that, over the years, confinement of asylum seekers has proven to be more expensive and institutionally demanding than facilitating their early move into private rented accommodation (Government Council for Human Rights, 2005: 69; Pofízek, 2004; Rozumek, 2007).

ACCOMMODATION CENTRES AS TOOLS OF MIGRATION CONTROL

One of the key concerns of the state is to control the entry and the presence of foreign nationals in the country. Although refugee and migratory flows are governed by different sets of legislation, in reality, they are interconnected. As the following example documents, restrictive immigration policy prompts people to enter the asylum procedure if they see it as the only way to enter and legalize their stay in the country. This has repercussions for the composition of asylum seekers and thus
also for the asylum system as a whole. It can legitimize the introduction of new controlling mechanisms aimed at preventing the misuse of the asylum procedure. It is in this context that the accommodation centres serve as tools of migration control because they are instrumental in putting various control measures in place. The confinement of asylum seekers in the centres can be used as a deterrent to curb the numbers of new asylum applications. It also facilitates control over those who have already submitted asylum applications. It has two major impacts on the social environment of the centres. First, it leads to asylum seekers’ disillusionment about the asylum system that regulates their present lives and eventually makes decisions about their future status in the country. Second, prolonged concentration of this diverse group of people in the centres nourishes illicit activities.

The roots of the above-described developments can be traced to the period of the early 2000s, which brought significant changes to the asylum and immigration policy and to the role of accommodation centres in the asylum system. In 2000, the new asylum law came into force and significantly improved the rights of asylum seekers. For example, it allowed them to receive state financial support and live outside of the residential centres. This coincided with amendment of the employment law, which allowed asylum seekers to enter the labour market from the day they applied for asylum. At the same time, a new immigration law came into force, which tried to increase control over the rising numbers of foreign residents in the country. It introduced a number of new restrictions on immigrants, which threw many of them into legal insecurity and rendered their stay illegal (Szczepanikova, 2011). Many saw no other way but to legalize their status by applying for asylum. This was, at the time, one of the few ways of avoiding detention and expulsion. What followed was a more than twofold increase in the number of new asylum applications in 2001.6 The Ministry of the Interior reacted swiftly by restricting the conditions for asylum seekers in yet another legislative change in 2002. The possibility of spending the duration of the asylum procedure outside the residential centres was limited, as was the state financial support. The right to work was taken away and asylum seekers could only apply for the work permit a year after they had applied for asylum. This forced many asylum seekers to move from private accommodation back to the centres (Hronková et al., 2002). Moreover, the possibilities for confinement of asylum seekers were further widened. An application for asylum no longer led to release from a detention centre. These and other restrictions had an immediate effect on the number of new asylum applications. Already in 2002, it decreased by 10,000 and within a year it had returned to the 2000 level (DAMP, 2011).

As this example indicates, the asylum-seeking population is not only an outcome of external socio-political developments in other countries, but also a product of domestic asylum and immigration policies and their interconnectedness. The changes of the early 2000s have left a dual legacy. First, they endowed policymakers with the realization of the possibility of curbing the numbers of asylum seekers by restricting their living conditions. Second, notwithstanding these restrictions, many migrants continued to enter the asylum procedure. This has become an established strategy, and a response to a discrepancy between the demand for their labour and the lack of other means of legalizing their stay in the country. Ukrainian nationals, who have constituted one of the major groups of labour migrants coming to the Czech Republic since the mid-1990s, are the prime example of this trend. With the exception of 2003, which was marked by a large influx of asylum seekers from Chechnya, Ukrainians remained at the top of the list of asylum seekers until the end of 2010 (DAMP, 2011). This is an anomaly in comparison to other Central European countries, where Ukrainians have not constituted a significant group of asylum seekers (UNHCR, 2006, 2008a,b).

It would seem that the centres no longer needed to be used to limit the number of asylum seekers at the time when their numbers had been decreasing rapidly every year since 2004. However, the state has an ongoing interest in maintaining the centres, because they secure easy access to asylum seekers and control over their sojourn in the country. Throughout the 2000s, asylum seekers have
increasingly become seen as a security risk. The accommodation centres are used as sites of “security assessment” of asylum seekers carried out by the DAMP in co-operation with the police and intelligence agency, Security Information Service (SIS).\(^7\) Besides, the SIS also recruits informants among asylum seekers. This is often done with the promise of a positive result of their asylum application if they supply relevant information about their countries of origin or their fellow asylum seekers. Thus, accommodation centres remain instrumental as a means of control because the physical concentration of asylum seekers exposes them to both external and mutual control. When the asylum law was amended in 2007, the SIS was strongly in favour of keeping asylum seekers in closed reception centres until the final decision in their case was made (Větrovský, 2007: 6). If adopted, this could amount to their confinement for a number of years. After a wave of protests from NGOs and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the SIS proposal was incorporated into the legislation only in a limited version. The law makes it possible to retain asylum seekers in the reception centres for up to 4 months.\(^8\) In order to prevent their escape, they have to hand in their “communication devices” (i.e. mobile phones) to the authorities for the time of their stay in the reception centre. This was a substantial shift compared to what was usually a stay that ranged from 2 weeks to a maximum of 1 month before asylum seekers could move to private accommodation or to more open residential centres.

Asylum seekers’ motives to enter the asylum procedure and the amount of time they have to spend in the centres affect the social environment of the centres and the way in which they are experienced. This is especially true for the reception centres, through which the majority of asylum seekers have to go in order to initialize their asylum procedure. These centres serve as an informal initiation into the workings of the asylum system. It is here that people’s ideas about the asylum procedure and about Czech society more generally are shaped. These ideas will provide a framework for their future actions. It is here that asylum seekers learn, often to their great surprise, that the institution of asylum can be utilized in a number of ways: for example, that it is often used as a way of escaping from the Czech Alien Police and the threat of expulsion, rather than from persecution in the countries of origin. Such a disenchanting encounter with the realities in the centres makes many people question the efficiency of the asylum system within which their future is being decided. It produces feelings of insecurity. They start doubting that their protection needs will be correctly addressed. This sobering experience is reflected in the account of a Chechen man after his few weeks’ stay in the Vyšní Lhoty reception centre:

> I had the shock of my life. I thought I’d had an idea of what the asylum process was about by knowing the principles of the Geneva Convention and so on, but when I arrived in Vyšní Lhoty, I found myself surrounded by Ukrainians who already had jobs, were renting flats and simply waited to get out of there to get back to their lives. Some have been living in the Czech Republic for years and they didn’t even feel the need to hide all this. Initially, I was confused, but then I started asking myself, why did I have to end up in this mess? (Private accommodation, Brno, 16 September 2007)

A Belarusian woman who had spent over a month in the same reception centre together with her small children before she could join her husband, who in turn had applied for asylum earlier, described it as a horrific experience:

> There were many women who worked as prostitutes in Prague. When captured by the police, they said they wanted to apply for asylum. It took me a while before I understood what was going on there. In the first few days, I thought I was going crazy. I phoned my husband and told him: you said this was about political asylum, but I am in a brothel here! (Private accommodation, Prague, 18 July 2006)

The physical concentration of such a diverse group of people in one place for extended periods of time also engenders an environment in which various forms of illicit activities flourish.
Uncertainty about the future combined with scepticism towards the local legal norms and material deprivation provide a breeding ground for such activities. Most of the interview partners could provide an example of some illicit activity that they had witnessed in the centres. The following accounts point to the complicity of some of the centres’ employees (mostly workers of a private security agency) in bringing in and reselling forbidden items such as alcohol. This was often mentioned by asylum seekers, but could not be verified. The fact that many believed it was taking place supported their mistrust of the centres’ employees and of the asylum system as a whole:

I was surrounded by lawlessness. So many things were going on there, recruitment of labour and prostitutes, extortion of money, drug dealing … you name it. It seemed like one big mafia band, and even some of the camp workers were part of it, they were bringing stuff in, if you had money, you could order alcohol or something and they would get it. (Chechen refugee, private accommodation, Brno, 16 September 2007)

Only those with money could buy things and had a relatively good life there. Corruption was rampant. Alcohol, drugs, everything was sold there. Before, I thought these things were not happening in the Czech Republic. (Belarusian refugee, private accommodation, Prague, 18 April 2007)

Other illicit activities carried out from or in the centres include people smuggling or providing the so-called krysha (the Russian word for “roof”) – that is, criminal protection racket – to other asylum seekers engaged in petty criminal activities or drug dealing. Although these actions are carried out by a small minority of people, they nevertheless have a strong impact on how the life in the centres is experienced and what people associate with being an asylum seeker.

Since the early 2000s, the RFA has made significant progress in improving the security conditions in the centres. It created separate zones that allowed for physical segregation of the so-called vulnerable groups (such as families with children or single women) from single men, who were considered to be the most common trouble-makers and violators of order in the centres. Although this measure has had a positive effect, the experiences of my interview partners showed that many still had concerns for their security while living in the centre. Because many of these security risks are produced by the centres themselves, it is unlikely that they can be completely eliminated by measures taken in these centres.

More widespread illicit activity involves asylum seekers’ employment in the informal labour market (Basovníková et al., 2006). It is pursued in an illicit, yet legitimate, attempt to improve their living conditions above the minimum standard provided by the state. As already mentioned, asylum seekers cannot be legally employed for 1 year after submitting their asylum application. Due to administrative difficulties with extension of their visas and the need to apply for a work permit, they have very low chances of being officially employed even after this period. Such conditions discourage many from considering legal employment as a viable option. Although asylum seekers living outside the centres also get involved in informal employment, the accommodation centres are important because they serve as convenient places of workers’ recruitment. This is where irregular employment is seen more as a norm than an exception by both asylum seekers and the centres’ employees. The RFA workers are well aware of the practice, but since it does not fall within their responsibilities, they prefer to ignore it. Asylum seekers can afford to work for lower pay because they do not have to pay for living costs, which are met in the centre. Thus, inadvertently, by not allowing them to work in the formal economy, the asylum system subsidizes the informal labour market. This can have long-lasting consequences for asylum seekers’ prospects in the host country. As documented by various reports and NGO representatives, participation in the informal labour market throughout the asylum procedure often means staying there even after being granted a residence permit and the formal right to work (Burdová Hradečná et al., 2008; Gerstnerová, 2010).
The aim of the accommodation centres is not only to control, but also to provide services and assistance to asylum seekers. Assistance can be closely intertwined with control and this relationship takes different forms. The services provided to asylum seekers are shaped by the power relations between the state and NGOs. The advent of the funding from the European Refugee Fund and its redistribution by the DAMP significantly influenced these relations. This has had a surprising consequence for the services provided to asylum seekers. It has significantly improved the material equipment of the centres, including their recreational facilities, but it has indirectly led to the worsening of asylum seekers’ access to independent legal assistance by NGOs. It has therefore worsened their chances of being active and informed participants in the asylum procedure. Moreover, services provided in the centres can be utilized in promoting a certain image of the centres to the public. They have been strategically used to construct a benign image of the accommodation centres, which leads to normalization of the confinement of asylum seekers.

The DAMP’s control over the financial resources coming into the asylum system from the EU translates into greater control over other institutional actors in the asylum system. The DAMP has been using its role as a national re-distributor of the European Refugee Fund to gain more control over the work of the RFA as well as NGOs. The RFA has been the main recipient of the European Refugee Fund between 2006 and 2010. Its existence largely depends on the existence of the centres, and the EU funding has supported its maintenance despite rapidly decreasing numbers of asylum seekers. At the same time, some NGOs have had to reduce their advocacy activities in the centres due to the lack of resources.

By becoming the key stakeholder in redistributing the EU finances, the DAMP is in a position (better than ever before) to control and, in fact, limit the work of some NGOs. Broadly speaking, two groups of NGOs are active in the centres: NGOs that specialize in working with migrants (including asylum seekers and recognized refugees) and larger, church-affiliated organizations. The first group provides social and legal assistance both inside and outside the centres and lobbies to avert restrictive measures in the asylum legislation. The NGOs often challenge the DAMP’s asylum decisions in courts and occasionally criticize the conditions in the centres. During the 1990s, they were receiving relatively stable funding from the UNHCR. However, the UNHCR has been withdrawing its support to Central Eastern European countries since the early 2000s and the NGOs have had to seek alternative sources of support. Many started to provide their services on the basis of contracts with the RFA and the DAMP. The promise of stable funding from the European Refugee Fund compelled some to embrace the role of subcontractors, providing pre-approved services in the centres. The NGO representatives explained that due to the existence of the European Refugee Fund, it has become much harder to find alternative sources of funding (interview with a lawyer from the Counselling Centre for Refugees, Prague, 16 January 2007). This has made the NGOs even more dependent on DAMP decisions. Their ambivalent position in the power structures of the asylum system influences their work and the way in which they are perceived by asylum seekers. The following comment by a Chechen asylum seeker on the work of an NGO in his residential centre reflects the bewilderment and suspicion expressed by many:

How can we possibly trust them if they are paid by DAMP? Anyway, they come here once a week and stay for about three hours. What do you think they can possibly do for 90 people who are living here? (Zbýšov residential centre, 26 March 2007)

When asked about the inadequately short time for legal counselling spent in the centre, a representative from the local NGO Society of Citizens Assisting Migrants responded “Yes, it is unfortunate, but we don’t get paid for more hours” (Brno, 30 March 2007). The NGO representatives
themselves acknowledged that the lack of asylum seekers’ access to qualified legal and social assistance is an enduring problem in the Czech asylum system (Rozumek and Bajer, 2007).

Larger, church-affiliated organizations such as Caritas (Catholic Church) and Diaconia (Evangelical Church) are also active in the accommodation centres. Alongside legal counselling, they provide asylum seekers with charity clothes and organize “leisure-time activities” for them. As opposed to the former category of NGOs, these organizations rarely take a stronger advocacy stance. In the past, the DAMP and the RFA have shown a preference for these service providers. This has been reflected in the allocation of funding from the European Refugee Fund.

The DAMP has used its control over the European Refugee Fund not only to select the providers of the services in the centres, but also to determine what kinds of services will be offered. A closer look at the DAMP’s allocation of the European Refugee Fund reveals that significantly more funding goes to the so-called “leisure-time activities” than to legal and psychological counselling. Legal counselling is extremely important for asylum seekers’ ability to understand the asylum procedure and to access international protection. Many applicants succeed in getting asylum or subsidiary protection only after the DAMP’s initially negative decision in their case is challenged in court (DAMP, 2003). The “leisure-time activities” include various arts and crafts workshops, sports facilities, children’s centres, Internet access or occasional trips outside the centres. In 2006, one-third of the resources from the European Refugee Fund assigned for the improvement of the conditions of the reception of asylum seekers was spent on the RFA’s widening of the scope of leisure-time activities for asylum seekers or improving the material equipment of the centres. The other two-thirds was shared by NGOs providing legal and social assistance or working with vulnerable groups of asylum seekers (DAMP, 2006). In 2007, the proportion of finances supporting asylum seekers’ “leisure time” rise to over 50 per cent, while legal assistance was supported by 20 per cent of the resources (DAMP, 2008). This distribution of funds indicates the priority given by the DAMP to keeping asylum seekers occupied in a controlled and non-threatening way. The provision of quality independent legal assistance is only of secondary importance.9

The present situation results in a paradox. Asylum seekers have extensive opportunities to actively spend their time in the centres, but their access to legal advice has been limited. The recreational activities can certainly make the waiting time in the centres more bearable, but they have little impact on asylum seekers’ ability to access their rights and make informed decisions about their future steps.10 During this research, I was stunned by how little most asylum seekers knew about the workings of the asylum system. This lack of reliable information made them rely on the experiences of others, rumours and self-proclaimed legal experts among asylum seekers. This can be particularly misleading in the context of the highly complex and continuously changing asylum legislation.11 At the same time, I observed the process of dynamic production of knowledge that emerged through intense social interactions in the centres among people with vastly different experiences of, and expectations from, the asylum system. In the environment of the centres, the same information often circulates, gains a life of its own and gradually transforms into a powerful myth, which then guides people’s actions. An example of a common myth that I encountered in all the centres was the belief that the systems of refugee reception in Europe, including the accommodation centres, were paid for from the budget of the United Nations. Different conditions for asylum seekers in the Czech Republic and in Western European countries were therefore believed to stem from the fact that the Czech administration was “saving money” on its asylum seekers. This belief further supported general mistrust of the administration and doubts about the fairness of the asylum system.

The focus of the DAMP and the RFA on asylum seekers’ recreation in the centres has been instrumental in constructing an image of the accommodation centres as benign places. Their role in the system of migration control and their social consequences for asylum seekers are both effaced in these images. Images of asylum seekers engaging in leisure-time activities dominate the RFA’s public relations materials. They are also being presented as advancement over other European
countries at international conferences. This gives the ministry an opportunity to demonstrate that asylum seekers are being treated well – as human beings with complex needs. This positive self-representation is programmatically sustained in media representations of the accommodation centres that are eagerly promoted by the RFA. An analysis of the local media in areas where the centres are located showed that the dominant account of the centres is that of places in which asylum seekers paint, take part in drama productions, listen to music, compete in sport tournaments or cook their national specialities (Křížková, 2007). In this way, the institutions are being actively affirmed as the right and humane tool for the management of asylum seekers. This contributes to normalization of the confinement of asylum seekers.

CONTROL AND ASSISTANCE AS EVERYDAY PRACTICE IN THE CENTRES

In the previous two sections, I focused on the role of the centres in asylum and migration control and in determining what kinds of services will be made available to asylum seekers. Here, I investigate the nexus between control and assistance in the everyday running of the centres. I argue that the centres engender asylum seekers’ dependency on assistance because they foster the general attitude that many, even mundane, problems will be identified and solved by others – those who are in control.

Once in the centres, asylum seekers are not recognized as being able to take responsibility for their own affairs (see also Mackrill, 1996; Tollarová, 2008). Everyday matters such as accommodation, hygiene or their free time are arranged for them by the centres’ employees. Asylum seekers are not given any control over the kinds and means of the delivery of the assistance. Given the level of social distance and mistrust between the employees and the asylum seekers, assistance is accompanied by constant monitoring of asylum seekers. This ranges from the use of visible techniques, such as cameras that constantly monitor the spaces within the centres, to less obvious and more pervasive forms of control. These concern asylum seekers’ family relations, how they relate to each other and how they spend time in the centres (see also Kobelinsky, 2008). Many interviewed RFA workers genuinely believed that having more control over asylum seekers gives them better opportunities to help them. One social worker clearly expressed the connection between control and assistance:

If we know more about the people, we can guide them better and alert them to things they shouldn’t do. (Havířov residential/integration centre, 3 April 2007)

The system of food provision organized through canteens in the centres serves as an example of assistance that is being experienced as particularly oppressive by asylum seekers. Between 1990 and 2007, most accommodation centres were equipped with canteens that offered asylum seekers food three times a day. Due to concerns about hygiene, asylum seekers had to consume the food in the canteen and could not take it to their rooms. In the residential centres, asylum seekers had to come to the reception office every morning between 7 a.m. and 9 a.m. in order to stamp their meal tickets for the day. This practice was widely resented. People found it humiliating not to be able to control their lives in such an intimate matter as food consumption. The taste and quality of meals was a continual subject of complaints. An RFA report about conflict situations in the centres between 1991 and 2004 indicated that cooks were among the groups most commonly verbally attacked by asylum seekers (RFA, 2005: 81). When venting their frustration about life in the centre, many asylum seekers used a variation of the following statement: “All we do here is eat and sleep; this is not a life, it is pure existence.” The organized provision of food heightened their feeling of passivity.
The RFA workers, on the other hand, considered it a good way of keeping track of asylum seekers. They believed that it was beneficial for asylum seekers to get up in the morning rather than sleep until the afternoon – and therefore to have a lively night-life, after most of the employees had left the centre and there was less control. Some also saw it as a way of maintaining more personal relationships with asylum seekers, based on regular contacts that were required by their daily registration for meals. This controlling/caring relationship was actually seen as one of the positive aspects of their work in the centres (interview with a receptionist, Kostelec nad Orlicí residential centre, 16 February 2007). When repeated on an everyday basis, control may not be seen as obviously intrusive to those who exercise it.

At the same time, the RFA officially promotes the recognized refugees’ independence and self-sufficiency. Those who are seen as relying too much on the help of the state and the NGOs are referred to as pathological and having problems with integration. This is a typical strategy employed in camps across the world: although refugees’ dependency on assistance is largely produced and nurtured by the institution itself, it is blamed on the individual characteristics of refugees rather than on the system of assistance (cf. Hyndman, 2000; Kibreab, 1993; Voutira and Harrell-Bond, 1995).

This situation has serious repercussions for recognized refugees’ prospects in the host society. Those who spend extensive periods of time in the accommodation centres find it much more difficult to move into private rented accommodation and to find legal employment than those who spent the asylum procedure outside the centres. This was the experience of my interview partners, which is corroborated by numerous reports about integration of recognized refugees (Pofízek, 2004; Tollarová, 2008; Uherek et al., 2005).

CONCLUSIONS

In order to understand the problems that asylum seekers face in the accommodation centres, it is necessary to think beyond the institution itself. Most of the relevant actors in the asylum system have an interest in maintaining the status quo of the accommodation centres. This facilitates their normalization as a tool of migration control. It is therefore no surprise that the alternatives to confinement of asylum seekers are rarely debated in the Czech context. The ongoing decrease in the numbers of asylum seekers opens up new opportunities for targeted support of their private accommodation and more independent living conditions. Nonetheless, the institutions’ stakes in the preservation of the centres seem to prevail despite the substantial financial costs involved.

In this paper, I have analysed some of the everyday impacts of asylum and immigration policies and the institutional practices on asylum seekers. I have demonstrated how the interconnectedness of asylum and immigration policies produces a certain composition of asylum seekers and thus affects the social environment in the accommodation centres. People with very different motives for entering the asylum procedure are brought together, united by their lack of rights and other dignified means of survival. This leads to the experience of disenchantment and to the fear that their protection needs will not be recognized by the asylum system, the efficiency of which they are already starting to question in the reception centres. Furthermore, the existing hindrances to asylum seekers’ employment provide a strong incentive for entering the informal labour market. Accommodation centres are instrumental in nurturing this practice. Asylum seekers’ prolonged physical concentration in the centres, combined with material deprivation and legal insecurity, also lead to more serious involvement in illicit activities. Although they concern only the minority of the centres’ inhabitants, they nevertheless have a strong impact on asylum seekers’ experience of insecurity.

Control and assistance are closely intertwined in the everyday running of the centres. This is perceived as legitimate by their employees, but experienced as oppressive by the asylum seekers. The
exposure to assistance conditioned by everyday control displaces asylum seekers’ responsibility for their affairs and thus engenders their dependency on the system. These features of the accommodation centres contribute to the feeling that being an asylum seeker is associated with carrying a stigma. Moreover, they also have a long-lasting effect on asylum seekers’ future prospects in the host society. No matter how well equipped they are, the accommodation centres unnecessarily isolate asylum seekers from the rest of society, and from their own potential to rebuild their lives. This makes their future settlement more difficult and their continuing socio-economic exclusion more likely.

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NOTES

1. There is, of course, an extensive body of literature on refugee camps in Africa and Asia. The findings of many of these studies have relevance for understanding the social dynamics of accommodation centres in Europe and elsewhere. For the sake of this paper, I am limiting my references to studies that specifically focus on the European context.

2. My field research consisted of 1–2 week-long research stays in one reception centre (Vyšní Lhoty) and three residential centres (Kostelec nad Orlicí, Havířov and Zbýšov). I conducted participant observation and interviews with the centres’ inhabitants and various groups of personnel in each of the centres. Altogether, I undertook 29 semi-structured interviews with representatives of the state administration responsible for asylum seekers and refugees under the Ministry of the Interior, together with 13 interviews with representatives of five major non-governmental organizations (NGOs) working with migrants and refugees in the Czech Republic: Berkat, the Centre for the Integration of Foreigners, the Counselling Centre for Refugees, the Organization for Aid to Refugees and the Society of Citizens Assisting Migrants. Forty-five asylum seekers and recognized refugees who were either currently living in the centres or were reflecting on their past experiences of living there participated in the research. The study focused on refugees from the former Soviet Union – namely, from Armenia, Belarus and Chechnya – who were among the major groups of both asylum seekers and recognized refugees in the 2000s. The analysis was also informed by my experience as an NGO social worker in two accommodation centres between 2000 and 2003.


4. The European Refugee Fund is the major source of financial support from the EU. The general objective of the fund is to support and improve the member states’ asylum systems and reception conditions. Except for various costs related to the reception of asylum seekers, the European Refugee Fund can also be used for integration purposes and for the so-called voluntary returns.

5. This number reflects the situation in 2011. At the time of this research, there were still five accommodation centres.

6. The number of new asylum applications increased from 8,793 in 2000 to 18,094 in 2001 (DAMP, 2011).

7. The asylum law gives police and secret services access to asylum seekers’ personal information.

8. People defined as vulnerable are exempt from this treatment.

9. In early 2011, legal counselling in the centres was provided for 3–7 hours a week and psychological services were offered for an average of 5 hours a month. To access the psychologist, asylum seekers needed a referral from the RFA social workers (personal communication with the representatives of the RFA, May 2011).
10. During my research in the centres, I observed that RFA and NGO workers often struggled to engage larger number of asylum seekers in leisure-time activities. This was often blamed on their troubled mental state and their passivity. It seems to me that there is also another explanation. Because these activities did not address asylum seekers’ most urgent needs, they saw little sense in taking part in them.

11. The asylum law was amended 13 times between 2000 and 2007.

12. Allowing asylum seekers in residential centres to cook independently has been a recent trend in the RFA that has led to the gradual abolition of canteens in most of the centres, with the exception of the reception centres.

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