

Integration of Chechen refugees in Poland

Since its accession to the European Union in 2004, Poland less and less often constitutes a transit country for refugees and illegal immigrants looking for work in the West. More and more settle here for good. Even if they want to continue their journey, if they seek asylum, they need to stay for at least a year in special facilities to complete the required procedures.

Most of the refugees in Poland are Chechens, citizens of the Russian Federation. Many of them experienced the trauma of war. Some never went to school, even if they are just teenagers. It is sometimes difficult to interact with them because of, among others, the vast cultural differences. On the basis of the Chechen community, I would like to present the specificity of the integration process in Poland. The Polish Ministry of the Interior and Administration defines integration as: "A process, during which the settling person adapts to live independently in the host society accepting local laws and respecting the values recognized and protected by the host country in its constitution and legislation."

According to Polish researchers, integration is not identical with assimilation, which is the process of gradual loss of the immigrants' own values and a becoming more like the dominant majority. Integration is a double-sided process, which also involves the host society. It is aimed at "creating both a place for the unique identity of the immigrants and the mechanisms necessary for their harmonious coexistence with the culture of the host country."

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Integration is a social process and is mostly concerned with the means and dynamics of adaptation of the immigrants into the host society together with their desire to retain individuality and cultural identity. The opposite of integration is the marginalization, isolation and ghettoization of the immigrants as separate minority groups which do not want to amicably coexist with the host society (majority) and cooperate with the state institutions. By integration we mean the process of the immigrant's inclusion to an existing social system. The rooting into the new community should be relatively peaceful and consolidating, so that the expanded system could still function harmoniously and efficiently. Integration refers to different phases and forms of this process. The phenomenon is regulated by means of a complex set of legal norms. The key indicators of a successful integration of an immigrant with a host society include the achievement of language proficiency, employment in an area corresponding to the immigrant's qualifications, achievement of financial independence and permanent place of residence, participation in political life and the lack of criminal charges.

As there are no international regulations concerning integration, each country developed its own unique integration policies. Still, international law is there to protect economic, social and cultural equality and to ensure the immigrants' political and civil rights equal to those of the citizens of the host country, as well as freedom from discrimination and xenophobia. The host countries should possess an infrastructure sufficient to accommodate the immigrants: flats, medical care, social welfare, educational facilities and legal protection system.

Poland does not have a sufficiently developed and consistent integration policy. The Ministry of the Interior and Administration takes care of such matters. The most important problems in the process of the immigrants' integration are finding a place to live, a job and learning the Polish language.

In Poland there lives a large community of Chechens with distinctive appearance and manner. Young women wear headscarves and long, modest gowns. The dark complexion of men is clearly different from that of Slavic people. They are colloquially called "Ruscy" (meaning Russkies in Polish) because of the Russian language that they use. Almost all Chechens declare themselves to be Sunni Muslims.

Chechens have been coming to Poland for over 10 years – the first of them appeared at the beginning of the Russian-Chechen War in December 1994. At first, not many of them came to Poland, but when the conflict escalated, their numbers increased significantly. The Chechens usually arrive by train from the Caucasus to the Polish-Belarusian border crossing in Brest on the river Bug in Belarus (about 92%). Having



come to Poland, they apply for asylum in a nearby town of Terespol. They are then directed by the border guards to a reception center for refugees in Dąbak near Warsaw. Next, after the completion of initial asylum procedures, they are directed to one of the facilities, among others in Lublin, Łomża, Białystok, Łuków or Czerwony Bór.

According to the data of the Office for Foreigners in Warsaw, between the years 2008 and 2010, 4 212 citizens of Russia received a permit for a fixed-term residence in Poland (in 2010 – 1 379). In total, there are about 20 thousand refugees, i.e. people who applied for asylum and received a refugee or tolerated person status, living in Poland at the moment. The Polish state ensures their legal stay in the country, as well as social welfare. Only about 3 per cent of the applicants get refugee status (this is around 2 thousand people each year).

Many of the Chechens living in Poland have a so-called tolerated stay permit. It does not entitle them to any social welfare, but enables legal employment. Because of that most Chechens strive to leave for Western Europe. From the very beginning most of them treat Poland as a transit country.

There are many Chechens who, apart from those that are considered victims of war and its aftermath, leave their devastated homeland with their whole families because of poverty and unemployment. This is why the percentage of those who receive the political status of a refugee is so low.

Chechens who receive a refugee legal status or a tolerated stay permit encounter a number of obstacles in the process of integration. Living through a war, escaping and then coming to Poland might lead to the learned helplessness syndrome. According to Małgorzata Klepacka, the chairperson of the Center of Intercultural Initiatives from Warsaw: "They really fight as long as they can. But as soon as they come to Poland they are locked in ghettos, or reception centers. For years they wait for an official decision to grant them refugee status or subsidiary protection, which enables them to begin normal lives. Without these they do not have the right to work and are condemned to idleness. They sleep till noon, float about the center and don't even know what day it is. They become depressed and apathetic. They get used to the thought that nothing depends on them anymore. They don't know what to do and how to do it and they don't even speak Polish. They need to rely on the help of the state and organizations such as ours. They reach out for this help once, twice and after that they cannot manage without it."

However, the real problem begins when the long-awaited day finally comes and the Chechens get their refugee status. According to the Polish law, only then does the



integration program begin. In such situations it is usually too late for a change. The Chechens are unprepared to leave the center and start a “normal life”. They need to do it from one day to the next. The biggest problem is that in the reception center the refugees get all the necessary means of livelihood. Then, there comes a disaster. They are left with nothing. In theory, the refugees should not wait for the decision for more than half a year, in reality they wait two-three years. They do not speak Polish very well, if they speak it at all, they cannot find a job or afford a place to live, even if they somehow manage to find one. Many of them return to the reception center to rent a room there. In a situation like that, without a proper integration program, the chances of breaking this vicious circle are rather slim.

In this particular case the integration program should be thoroughly modified. It should begin as soon as the refugees get to the reception center. The amount of help received should depend on whether a particular person really tries to improve his or her situation. Otherwise, this support is superficial and rarely effective. The Chechens staying at reception centers should be provided with intensive Polish language courses and constant psychological therapy.

According to the activists from non-governmental organizations, who provide help for refugees in Poland, attempts should be made not to locate the refugees in closed centers. They should be directed to independent flats in affordable buildings, like for instance in Sweden. There are no closed reception centers in this country. It is imperative that the refugees, together with their families, could run households of their own. Then, they need to care about their flat, not live in a “kolkhoz” belonging to everyone so, in fact, to no-one.

The funds and efforts put into refugee integration are insufficient. This gap is filled mainly by non-governmental organizations funded on the basis of specific projects. Some of them end, some begin. There is no guarantee for the continuity of such work, neither is there for the financial stability and continuation of support. The activists of such organizations demand abolition for refugees and foreigners illegally residing in Poland. The estimates are from 40 to 400 thousand people. On June 26th, 2011 a bill was signed into law concerning the legalization of stay for certain illegal immigrants in Poland. The abolition was targeted at those who have been continuously residing in the country since December 20th, 2007. While during the two previous abolitions (in 2003 and 2007) complex legalization procedures were put in place, this time a passport stamped with the date of entry should be enough. According to the estimates of the Polish Ministry for the Interior several thousand immigrants would pursue this avenue.



Special attention should be paid to Chechen children who should continue their education in Polish schools. In 2010 there were 8 thousand foreign learners, 650 of which were young refugees, mostly Chechens.

Without a proper integration program, the chances for breaking out of the vicious circle are slim. Poland seems to be willingly producing an underclass for itself. The Chechens, unless they get back to their homeland or illegally travel west, will usually be permanently dependent on social welfare. This state is in conflict with the basic idea of integration.

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