

## TRAINING AND WORKING RATHER THAN WAITING!

At the outskirts of the small town of Kostelec nad Orlicí, in what used to be army barracks in the past, lies the largest Czech asylum seekers' housing centre. It can receive up to a maximum of 300 people and is currently hosting around 200 asylum seekers. The centre is relatively new to the town. It was established in 2001. "The creation of the centre was a difficult moment" says Ivana Coufalová, the director of the centre "Many people in Kostelec were against it, as if everyone believed that criminality and insecurity would rise immediately." Fortunately, the situation has changed now and asylum seekers have become part of the town life. "They actively participate in voluntary work organised by the community, such as cleaning and improving the town's park, etc. Often they are participating in higher numbers in these activities than the town inhabitants." adds Ivana Coufalová "the fact that the children who stay in the centre are integrated to Kostelec schools has also improved the relations between the local community and the centre." comments Hana Vyčichlová, the teacher in the "catch-up" class for young asylum seekers. Asylum seekers under the age of 16, the age of compulsory school attendance in the Czech Republic, have the right to education like any other Czech child. "Sometimes they even obtain better results than their Czech peers." she underlines proudly of her students. The EQUAL partnership Human Step is making an important contribution to improving reception conditions for asylum seekers in Kostelec. It has developed a range of activities, including language courses, which enable asylum seekers to better integrate in their host town but also in the Czech society in general.

Kostelec is an open housing centre, meaning that asylum seekers can come and leave it at their discretion. There are four categories of centres which host asylum seekers in the Czech Republic: reception; housing; integration; and second-instance centres. Reception centres are located at the country's borders and in the airport of Prague. These centres receive asylum seekers upon entering the country. They can stay there for several months until a first decision on the admissibility of their asylum application is taken. After this first decision, they are placed either in reception centres, or can opt for hosting families and other, more independent solutions. If their application is approved they may be placed in a so-called integration centre or again choose private housing. If their application is rejected in the first instance, they have the possibility to launch an appeal procedure, which they usually do. Appeal procedures can be very lengthy and require legal advice. Therefore, asylum seekers engaged in an appeal procedure are gradually placed in so-called "second instance housing centres". Asylum seekers' housing and boarding in all the centres, which are public, is free and they receive a small sum of pocket money. All asylum seekers in Czech Republic have access to health care.

The Czech Republic has seen the number of asylum seekers coming to the country increase rapidly over the last decade. Peak numbers have been attained in 2001 with more than 18 000 applications, but many of these did not remain in the country and continued further to the west. Since then, the numbers have dropped to reach little more than 4 000 applications in 2005. The numbers of successful requests remains very low. In 2005, only 251 (0.67%) applications have been accepted, which marked a maximum since 1993. To this should be added the number (73 in 2005) of people who were refused the refugee status but could not reintegrate their countries of origin. Given this very low acceptance rate, national authorities are reluctant to finance any type of activities to support the integration of asylum seekers. "The prevailing policy is to finance recreational activities, but no training or integration projects." indicates Václav Götze, project manager of Human Step. Controversially, projects targeted at the proportionally much smaller group of recognised refugees are much more likely to be financed. Thanks to EQUAL, Human Step is able to develop a set of pilot training and integration activities for asylum seekers.

### LIBRARY AS AN EMPLOYMENT AGENCY

When entering the main building of the centre, the loudspeaker is repeating: "From ten to twelve, in the library, the organisation Human Step offers employment opportunities!" The message is strangely severe but at the same time highly efficient. "That's us!" smiles project manager Václav

Götz “It means that Vlasta and Tereza are already in the library. Let’s go and see them”. At the same time another Human Step activity is also taking place in the centre, namely the Czech language course for Russian speaking women.

Unexpectedly, the library is quite full. Some curious people enter and leave; others remain and wait for their turn. Many of those who are present are women. These are also, in general, more courageous and direct, being the first to sign up for the interviews. Vlasta Bučilová is talking with Aisi from Chechnya who speaks fairly good Czech. “Can you please tell me whether you have completed any studies back in your home country? Would you be ready to move for a job to another town? Is there something that you would particularly like or dislike to do?” are some of the questions asked during the interview. Vlasta Bučilová a Tereza Tóthová have a list of potential employers including large companies like: Skoda (automobile industry), Staropramen (brewery), Moser (porcelain) and Bombardier (aerospace and transportation). They can also count on the participation of private employment agencies and on a number tertiary sector jobs . They first try to identify the most relevant posts for their clients according to a set of criteria: the asylum seekers, Czech language skills, their willingness to move to other parts of the country and their employment preferences and interests. The Human Step team suggests some potential posts, leaving those who qualify with a few placements to choose from. Eventually Vlasta Bučilová and Aisi exchange telephone numbers and agree to organise a joint visit to the employer. “We always accompany them for their first interviews” says Vlasta Bučilová “and we facilitate the first contact with the companies.”

In the Czech Republic, asylum seekers can work after being one year in the country. However, while many wait longer than that for a final decision on their application, only few have declared jobs. This is a peculiar situation given that many industries in the Czech Republic are lacking a lower skilled workforce and are willing to employ foreigners. Vlasta Bučilová a Tereza Tóthová both participate in the EQUAL project through their partner organisation Human resources. It is a recruitment agency with direct access to employers and job opportunities asylum seekers could easily fit in. During the two hour session in the library of the housing centre, Vlasta Bučilová a Tereza Tóthová interview around fifteen people. Not all of them are ready to meet the potential employers - some still have to improve their command of the Czech language in order to comply with the minimum employment requirements. Others have not yet been in the country for the minimum period of one year.

Despite a legislative framework which allows asylum seekers to work after one year, actually getting them into employment is not easy. Asylum seekers do not face the same restriction as most other third country nationals, who can only access a job opening when there are no national or EU citizens available to fill the position. However, many public employment agencies, responsible for issuing employment permits to any non-EU national, are not aware of these differences in legislation for asylum seekers and third country nationals and are therefore delaying the procedures. Employers themselves are rarely aware of the possibility to employ asylum seekers. That’s why the EQUAL partner Human resources is trying to help bringing the demand and supply together.

But legislation and administrative procedures are not the only obstacles to inserting asylum seekers in the labour market. As Václav Götz remarks, often the motivation of asylum seekers, after one year of inactivity, drops drastically. “When they arrive in the country they all want to learn the language and are eager to work. After one year, some of them find small jobs on the black market, which enable them to keep their social benefits. Others give up hope and decide to survive on the benefits they receive from the state.” These are not substantial: they include housing and food services in the centre, plus some pocket money, which they might lose once they obtain regular revenues.

As many asylum seekers, at one point during the interview Aisi asks Vlasta: “But if I work will I have to pay for the housing here in the centre?” The response is yes. As soon as the revenue of asylum seekers exceeds 7600 CK net per month (276 euro), they have to pay for the services they receive. Even though this payment is proportional to their salary, the fact that the threshold is set very close to the minimum wage level creates adverse effects. Asylum seekers are most likely to only find a low-paid job paid and some therefore prefer to remain inactive. “We are now in contact with several companies which might be willing to contribute to the housing of their new

employees outside the centre.” Vlasta Bučilová continues “This should improve their financial situation and facilitate their access to employment.”

## DIFFERENT APPROACH TO TEACHING CZECH

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Human Step develops different types of activities to integrate and train asylum seekers, with labour market insertion just being one of the features of this EQUAL partnership. Another very important activity is Czech language teaching. Jana Čemusová from the Institute for Language and Preparatory studies of Charles University (UJOP) has long-term experience with teaching the Czech language to non-native speakers. Throughout the years she and her colleagues have identified the weaknesses of the existing language teaching methodologies, often poorly adapted to heterogeneous groups such as asylum seekers. Within Human Step they are developing and testing two new, very flexible, methodologies.

“One very obvious issue we identified when looking at ways to teach Czech to asylum seekers or refugees was the need to divide them into two groups: those that are Russian speaking and those that use the Latin alphabet.” Since 1990, more than 40% of the population of asylum seekers coming to the Czech Republic are natives from ex-USSR countries, such as the Ukraine, Belorussia, Moldavia, Armenia, Kazakhstan or Russia. Given the linguistic proximity between Czech and Russian, Russian speaking asylum seekers learn Czech much quicker than those from other than Slavonic languages. However, this language proximity may also be an obstacle. Russian speakers need much more pronunciation exercises and they also need to learn to use the Latin alphabet. One might think that pronunciation difficulties are marginal when starting to learn a language, but due to the recent events in Czech history, Russian speakers are not well perceived in the Czech society. They may easily meet hostility simply because of their heavy Russian accent. Hence, providing them with a solid language basis is very important.

Another original feature of the teaching method is its adaptation to “unstable” groups. Contrary to classic language courses based on the idea that the group progresses more or less simultaneously at a stable pace, this method takes into account the potential irregular attendance and different language skills of participants. This makes it a flexible tool for teachers confronted with heterogeneous groups. Besides being a pure language method it also familiarises participants with the Czech society.

Since September 2006, Human Step is successfully testing this unique method in the housing centre Kostelec and Orlici. Originally the pilot teaching started with two groups following the above categorisation. A third group was soon added: a large proportion of the Russian speaking asylum seekers in the centre are Muslim Kazakhs. The EQUAL partnership quickly noted that only the men from this group seemed to attend the language courses, as they considered it inappropriate for their wives to join. The third group was created especially for these women, which proved to be a good strategy. The interest in attending the course was and still is very high. “My Kazakh students are very motivated” says Karla Kubíčková, who teaches Czech to these women “I can nearly see their eyes twinkle. For example during the Ramadan season, when the attendance of the men became very irregular, the women still kept coming.” The group has now around twenty participants. “I am very happy to learn Czech” says one of the participants in Czech “I go to the shop. I go to the doctor. It helps me a lot to speak a little Czech”. She has been in the Czech Republic for nearly one year now. After having spoken with Vlasta, she is considering some of the employment positions offered to her.

One might think that when considering that only a very small percentage of asylum seekers obtain a status, it might be a waste of money and time to teach them Czech. “The position of our government is: We’d better teach them English as they will return to their countries anyway” comments Václav Götz. Therefore, Czech language courses for asylum seekers are not subsidised by the Ministry of Home Affairs (in charge of asylum). A few NGOs are active in this field but there is no systematic approach. “But the demand is high”, says Ivana Coufalová, the director of the centre “We used to provide a Czech course some time ago but had to stop due to lack of financial resources. For more than one year afterwards asylum seekers were coming to see me, asking whether there was a Czech language course in the centre.” Indeed, even though only a small part of the asylum seekers will actually remain in the country, it should be remembered that while waiting for a decision they may be living here for a couple of years. In the

meantime, they can actively contribute to the society in many ways, for example through working or volunteering, which requires some knowledge of Czech.

## **VARIOUS PARTNERS, COMPLEMENTARY TASKS, SEPARATE RESPONSIBILITIES**

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Human Step gathers six Czech organisations, each working in a different area, around the goals of identifying appropriate and effective integration approaches for asylum seekers and facilitating their return home. There are the two partners presented earlier: ÚJOP, in charge of language training and Human Resources, responsible for labour market insertion. Four more partners have signed up to the EQUAL partnership: Step by step is a Czech NGO active in the field of education and training. Their contribution to Human Step is ensured through orientation and training courses. They are developing a handbook entitled “How to live in the Czech Republic”, which will give asylum seekers information on the socio-economic and political background of the country and practical information about whom to contact in which situation. On the basis of this handbook, Step by step will deliver interactive training sessions to asylum seekers aiming to familiarise them with the new country they live in. The training will also enhance their skills in areas such as communication or computer literacy. Step by step’s activities also include a training-of-trainers component for staff working with asylum seekers.

The training and employment-oriented tasks of Human Step are complemented by a legal advice component, delivered by the Archdiocese of Prague, which has long-term experience with assisting asylum seekers in legal matters. Human Step also involves a media partner, FG Forest, who is responsible for dissemination activities, publications and the EQUAL partnership’s website.

In addition to the organisations that focus on working with asylum seekers while they are in the Czech Republic, the Czech Red Cross is developing a framework on how to support the reintegration of unsuccessful asylum seekers’ to their home country. Through their worldwide network of Red Cross organisations, they are attempting to establish relations which could facilitate asylum seekers’ return. The returnees can use the skills and competences acquired through their participation in the Czech labour market as valuable assets that could make a difference back in their country of origin.

Human Step brings together a university centre, a national as well as an international NGO, a charity organisation and private companies. This great diversity of expertise and experience of these partners enables Human Step to develop a comprehensive and tailor-fit approach to integration. The project is divided into six separated modules corresponding to the different activities (language courses, orientation and vocational training, labour market insertion, legal advice, reintegration and dissemination). Each partner within the project has full responsibility for one particular module. The partners all have different experiences of working with asylum seekers or with other disadvantaged groups. While some have been providing support to this client group for several years now, such as the Archdiocese of Prague, for other partners it is a new target group, with new challenges. Even a partner with little prior experience with asylum seekers, such as Human Resources, may be highly valuable for the project. They can provide accurate information on the labour market and, even more importantly, contacts with potential employers. The EQUAL partnership is a learning experience not only for the asylum seekers but also for the different participating organisations.

## **CONTACT DETAILS**

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Human Step  
[www.humanstep.cz](http://www.humanstep.cz)  
Charles University - ÚJOP  
Vratislavova 13  
128 00 Prague 2  
Czech Republic  
tel.: 224 911 148

Project manager:  
Ing. Václav Götze  
e-mail: [vaclav.gotz@ujop.cuni.cz](mailto:vaclav.gotz@ujop.cuni.cz)