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Integration in the Czech regions – Regional Integration Centres

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Abstract:

The article looks at Foreign Nationals Integration Support Centres which were established in six regions of the Czech Republic in 2009. The Centres are responsible for coordinating the integration at a local level of third-country nationals residing legally in the Czech Republic. Such coordination involves providing various services to this group (language courses, legal counselling, etc.), creating a platform for communication between local institutions, including NGOs, and providing information about foreign nationals living in the region. The author focuses on the purpose and activities of these Centres, as well as on the differing opinions on whether their establishment was a good step.

Introduction

The first Foreign Nationals Integration Support Centres (further on referred to as Centres) were established in 2009. Their creation was supported by funding from the European Integration Fund, allocated through the Ministry of the Interior. In total, funding was allocated to six Centres in 2009. Four of them – the Centres in the Pardubice Region, the Plzeň Region, the Zlín Region and the Moravian-Silesian Region – are run by Správa uprchlických zařízení (Refugee Facilities Administration - RFA) based on a grant award procedure; in the Ústí Region the Centre is managed by Poradna pro integraci (The Counselling Centre for Integration, an NGO), and in the South Moravian Region the Centre is run by the regional government. Their opening had been scheduled for the beginning of the year; however, due to delays in evaluating project applications, the Centres officially opened in April 2009 (RFA Centres actually started operating in July 2009, the situation in the other Centres was similar).

This text¹ looks at how the Centres were established, as well as at their purpose and the various opinions concerning their activity. Information for this article was mainly obtained

¹ The article was written in the autumn of 2009. At the time of its publication (December 2009) some facts it mentions may have changed.

through interviews with people involved in the creation or management of the Centres.² For this reason, the article mainly focuses on the Pardubice, Ústí and South Moravia Centres, which the author visited or obtained information about via e-mail. The text also includes views and comments of other individuals and organisations associated with the issue in one way or another. It should be noted that the majority of interviewees were cautious about giving out information. This precaution, in the author's view, may result from the fact that many of them are closely involved in the operation of the Centres, while others have difficulty making an informed opinion, as they do not, as of yet, have enough information about the Centres.

Reasons for establishing the Centres; and their status

The Ministry of the Interior gives the following reason for establishing the Centres: "The idea was to offer a similar range of services across the Czech Republic, creating a clearly structured network of centres."³ Based on a long-term plan of the Ministry of the Interior, one Centre should be established in each region of the Czech Republic, including the capital - Prague.

According to the Ministry of the Interior, the aim is to create a transparent integration policy structure in the Czech Republic, whereby one Centre will operate in each region, coordinating local integration of foreign nationals and serving as the main source of integration-related information in the region.

This is, however, the first unclear point. Who is responsible for creating this structure and deciding on the future of the Centres? Is it the State or, more precisely, the Ministry of the Interior which is now responsible for integration issues in the Czech Republic? Or is it the independent organisations that manage the Centres? This is how the Ministry of the Interior explains the status of the Centres: "Following a selection procedure, one Integration Centre is managed by an NGO, another by local government and others by a government body. The Centres were established on the basis of projects; the implementation of these projects has been continuously monitored and evaluated."⁴ The same question was administered to all the people encountered in the writing of the article. The answers were similar. The Refugee Facilities Administration has made the Centres part of its structure and has created a new department responsible for their operation. The Counselling Centre for Integration in the Ústí Region runs the Centre in addition to its existing activities. The Centre in the South Moravian Region does not have a legal personality either; the responsible body is the regional government and individual activities are carried out by project partners.

² In particular, this includes: Ms Dluhošová and Mr Kepka from the Department for Asylum and Migration Policy of the Ministry of the Interior (the information was provided via e-mail); Mr Vesecký, head of the Integration Centres Department of Refugee Facilities Administration; Ms Baklíková, director of the Pardubice Integration Centre; Mr Kubíček, director of the Ústí Integration Centre; and Ms Vodičková, manager of the project entitled 'South-Moravian Regional Centre for Supporting the Integration of Foreign Nationals'.

³ All comments from the Ministry of the Interior come from e-mail replies sent by Ms Dluhošová and Mr Kepka, who are responsible for the Centres on the Ministry level. The replies were sent on 17 September 2009.

⁴ The information was provided by the Ministry of the Interior via e-mail on 17 September 2009.

The Centres are thus run by different organisations; all of them are, however, under the supervision of the Ministry of the Interior which has set out the conditions for the projects and monitors their implementation. So, to what extent are the Centres independent, and to what extent are they part of the State integration policy? In a way, the situation resembles a Czech fairy-tale in which the princess is asked to come to the castle dressed and naked at the same time.

Among the reasons for establishing the Centres, the Ministry of the Interior also names “the effort to ensure integration of foreign nationals on a local level and to react to the uneven distribution of NGOs between Prague and the rest of the Czech Republic.”⁵ Leaving aside the debatable question of whether NGOs should replace the role of the State in integrating foreign nationals, or the fact that Caritas, for example, has its local organisations in all regions of the Czech Republic, the support for integrating foreign nationals in the regions seems to be a step in the right direction. On the other hand, doubts as to whether the Centres were really needed in certain regions were already being expressed at the foundation of the first six Centres, namely in the Plzeň and Pardubice Regions.

In the city of Plzeň, the municipal authorities had been actively involved in integration policies for at least six months prior to the creation of the Centres, particularly following the economic crisis, when hundreds of foreigners lost their jobs and often had nowhere to stay. NGOs such as Caritas or Organizace pro pomoc uprchlíkům (Organization for Aid to Refugees) were also active in the region. Since late 2008, the municipal authority had been running a contact centre for foreign nationals.⁶ The new Integration Centre, managed by the Refugee Facilities Administration, took over the existing contact centre, including most of the services it had been providing.

The situation was similar in the Pardubice region, where the NGO Most pro lidská práva (Bridge of Human Rights) was already operating when the new Centre was established; the NGO provided practically the same services as the new Centre; it cooperated with the local government and knew the situation of foreigners in the region. The newly created Centre logically became a competitor and, quite understandably, the NGO is not overjoyed at its presence in the region. On the other hand, the NGO did not participate in the selection procedure.⁷

Both cases mentioned above raise the question of whether the Centres, which presently need to establish new contacts, find clients, and build up a reputation, are really needed in these regions.

⁵ The information was provided by the Ministry of the Interior via e-mail on 17 September 2009.

⁶ Source: <http://zpravodajstvi.plzen.cz/clanky/Dalsi-kontrola-cizincu-v-Plzni-se-zamerila-na-stavby-a-trznici-7471>. Downloaded on 14/10/2009.

⁷ The information was provided by Mr Milan Daniel, executive director of Most pro lidská práva. As he says, he did not know there was a call for proposals concerning the Centres.

Activities of the Centres

The Ministry of the Interior describes the expected activities of the Centres as follows: “information and contact point for foreigners, prevention programmes, legal counselling, courses of the Czech language and socio-cultural basics, monitoring of the area/region, organising cultural, awareness-raising and other events, supporting civil society on a regional level, creating a regional integration platform.”⁸

Each of the organisations managing the Centres has taken a different approach to these activities. The staff of the Counselling Centre for Integration in the Ústí Region try to provide most services of the Integration Centre themselves, including language courses and legal counselling. The Refugee Facilities Administration, on the contrary, hires people from the outside, including language teachers and lawyers. In the South Moravian Region the regional government, which is the managing organisation, provides most services through NGOs that are partners in the project.

Since the start, NGOs have warned that if some service suppliers (NGOs, language teachers, etc.) fell out of favour, it would be very easy to ‘ruin’ them, especially in smaller regions, by not giving them work, which is quite scarce in this service sector. In a situation where integration policy is coordinated by a single organisation that manages the funds, chooses from whom it buys services, the type of services and for how much, abuse of power by such an organisation is a potential threat. There have been indications that such abuses occur, especially in the case of the Refugee Facilities Administration. However, according to some sources,⁹ the situation is improving, partly due to pressure from the Ministry of the Interior. Nevertheless, the contracts need to be closely supervised, ideally by an independent body that would monitor the situation.

Another question is whether the creation of the Centres was necessary, as they only re-distribute work among existing organisations that had been performing it up to now. This applies particularly to the Centres managed by the Refugee Facilities Administration and by the South Moravian Region. It is certainly good for the region to be represented by one actor, as this makes the situation more transparent; on the other hand, there are doubts about the need to create a whole Centre with its own premises and staff.

When asked whether the Centres are expected to start providing their services themselves in the future, the Ministry of the Interior replied: “If the Centres do not ensure service provision themselves, they have the possibility to buy them from other organisations. In some cases, due to the absence of partner organisations in the region (NGOs), the Centres have to rely on commercial services. Future cooperation will depend on the quality of the services and the availability of partner organisations.”¹⁰ The Ministry adds that given the scope of the Centres’

⁸ The information was provided by the Ministry of the Interior via e-mail on 17 September 2009.

⁹ These sources have provided the information off record. Nevertheless, I consider it important to mention them, while preserving their anonymity.

¹⁰ The information was provided by the Ministry of the Interior via e-mail on 17 September 2009.

activities and the limited staff capacity, cooperation of the Centres with other organisations is expected to continue. One might object that the availability of partner organisations often depends on funding, provided, inter alia, by the State.

In terms of services provided, all Centres, whether themselves or through partner organisations and individuals, currently provide Czech courses and legal counselling. Most actors agree that socio-cultural courses are problematic due to a lack of suitable methodology and teachers in the Czech Republic, as well as delays in project implementation. The Centres also seek to ensure wider cooperation with other institutions. As interviews with the actors show, so far they have been more or less successful in doing so.

Staff capacity of the Centres

Each Centre has its own conception. In the Ústí Region the services of the Centre are provided by staff of the Counselling Centre for Integration. According to its director, Mr Kubíček, the Centre is run by a dozen people. The Refugee Facilities Administration has three employees in each of its Centres: the director, a social worker and an administrative officer. The South Moravian regional government employs one person to provide information; other services are provided by partner organisations.

According to the Ministry of the Interior the number of employees in the Centres is not fixed and it is possible to hire more staff if necessary. The need to hire more staff has already been expressed in the Pardubice region, where it has become clear that one social worker is not enough to provide counselling services and assist foreigners in dealing with public authorities.

The recruitment process for the Centres was not based on any centralised requirements as to the candidates' qualification or experience. There was no emphasis on proficiency in foreign languages, especially those spoken in third countries such as Vietnam, Ukraine and Mongolia, where growing numbers of migrants currently come from. To communicate with people from these countries, when necessary, the Centres hire interpreters. Recruitment conditions were set out by individual managing organisations themselves.

Complications and controversies surrounding the creation and operation of the Centres

Delays in project implementation have been a major setback for all Centres. Originally the project was scheduled to run for the whole of 2009. Due to delays, however, the results were only known in the spring of 2009 and the Centres officially started operating in the summer of that year. Nevertheless, the activities described in the project were left unchanged. This lack of coordination has led to situations where a number of activities, including research and cultural events, which had been planned for the whole year, must be accomplished within a shorter period of time.

Another difficulty consists in the condition, set at the very beginning, that all Centres have to meet the same monitoring criteria, e.g. the number of foreign nationals having received legal counselling. Different regions have different migrant populations, and it is unrealistic to expect that the Zlín Region, where relatively few foreigners live, would have the same results as the Plzeň Region with its industrial zones employing hundreds of foreign workers. When asked about this, most Centre managers shrugged, confirming that they know about the condition, but are not sure they will be able to meet it.

Another contentious point is the promotion of the Centres on the Internet. The Refugee Facilities Administration has been very successful in this respect, having registered for itself the domain www.integracnicentra.cz ('integracni centra' meaning 'integration centres'). The website certainly has very good graphic design. But, surprisingly enough, it does not mention that two other Centres exist, run by the Counselling Centre for Integration and the South Moravian Region. Site visitors thus get the impression that besides the four Centres managed by the Refugee Facilities Administration, no other Centres have been created in the Czech Republic. Mr Vesecký, head of Refugee Facilities Administration's Regional Integration Centres Department, claims that he would be happy to include links to his colleagues' websites, but no such websites have been launched yet.

The interview with Mr Vesecký took place in September 2009, when it was in fact difficult to find information about the remaining two Centres on the Internet. However, in November 2009, websites of varying quality describing the activities of these Centres already existed, and the domain www.integracnicentra.cz still did not include links to them. When asked, the Ministry of the Interior replied that websites are the responsibility of the managing organisations and the Ministry is not responsible for them.

Out of all Centres, the promotion of the Ústí Centre is the weakest. Its activities are difficult to distinguish from the activities of the Counselling Centre for Integration. A separate website could not be found, nor a link to the Centre's activities on the website of the Counselling Centre for Integration. The only available and well-organized source of information on the Centre is the website of the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, <www.cizinci.cz>.

A presentation of the South Moravian Centre is easier to find through the regional web portal, <www.kr-jihomoravsky.cz>. However, the easiest way is to enter 'Jihomoravské centrum pro integraci' (South Moravian Integration Centre) directly into the search engine box.

The fact that out of six winning project applications, four had been submitted by the Refugee Facilities Administration, also raises controversy, given that this institution is directly responsible to the Ministry of the Interior – which had issued the call for proposals – and receives funding from the Ministry's budget. No wonder that this 'success' met with criticism from different stakeholders.

Long-term prospects for the Centres

Since the Centres were established as one-year projects, the question arises of what their long-term prospects are, and whether their creation has been the right systemic step, as claimed by the Ministry of the Interior.

According to the Ministry, funding for the Centres will be provided from the European Fund for the Integration of Third-Country Nationals until 2013. Unless the Centres fail to comply with conditions set out for the projects, they are not likely to be closed. Even if that happened, they would be taken over by another organisation.¹¹

Centre managers themselves are generally optimistic. They say there is no reason why their Centres should not receive funding next year, if they do not make a mistake. For example, Mr Vesecký says: “I think our projects are good; that is why we believe we will get the grant next year, too.”¹² His optimism is astonishing if one remembers how many NGOs had to cut down on their services at the beginning of 2009 because they did not receive State funding for services such as legal and social counselling. These services were needed, the organisations had been providing them for years, and it was unlikely they had made any serious mistakes.

Conclusion

Many questions and concerns remain. It is not certain who will manage the Centres next year, even though – despite the individual stakeholders’ statements and the close cooperation with the Ministry of the Interior – a change in the *status quo* is unlikely. Neither is it clear how the Centres will be funded after 2013, when funding from the European Integration Fund will end, and whether they will become an official part of the Government structure. The Ministry of the Interior has not answered this question unequivocally.

Likewise, there is no clear answer as to whether the Centres are needed in the individual regions. It is certainly good that the Centres were established, for example, in the Zlín Region and the Moravian-Silesian Region, where services for migrants were scarce; on the other hand, it is not clear whether their creation in the Pardubice and Plzeň Regions was absolutely necessary.

However, arguably the greatest problem lies in the unclear status of the Centres and in their subordination to the Ministry of the Interior. If they had been created as part of the government structure, the situation would have been much more transparent. Currently they exist within the framework of EU-funded projects but, at the same time, the Ministry of the Interior has decision-making powers. Another question is whether migrants will trust the Centres if they perceive them as part of the public administration system.

¹¹ The information was provided by the Ministry of the Interior on 17 September 2009.

¹² The information was provided in an interview on 17 September 2009.

The author does not agree with the Ministry of the Interior when they say that “it is not about ... who founded the Centres. It is mainly about giving the target group an opportunity to integrate and make integration measures available to them.”¹³ This seems to illustrate one of the shortcomings of the Czech integration policy, namely the excessive concentration of powers in the hands of the Ministry of the Interior. Greater plurality helps to increase competitiveness thus improving the quality of services, which benefits everyone – migrants, NGOs, public institutions and other stakeholders.

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¹³ The comment was made in reply to the author’s e-mailed questions on 17 September 2009.