

Lenka Kériová: Refugee life in Slovakia

Definition of refugee:

A refugee, according to the criteria of the Geneva Convention, is a person who has justifiable fear of persecution on race, religious, national, political reasons or due to membership of a particular social group. Because of these concerns, refugees are unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin, or to use the protection of that country.



Statistics & the historical background:

Given Slovakia's historical context and its long experience with closed borders, the history of foreign migration in Slovakia is relatively short. Before 1990, Slovakia was a traditional emigration country. It was only after the fall of communism and the split-up from the Czech Republic that Slovakia gradually became a country of transit for many foreign migrants.

Foreign migration in Slovakia changed dramatically after 2004, when the Slovak Republic joined the European Union. During the first four years of EU membership, the number of migrants with legal residence in Slovakia nearly tripled. Nevertheless, Slovakia belongs to countries with the lowest number of foreigners. In Slovakia, only 1.3% of the total population consists of foreigners.

Refugees – people who have been forced into migration – make up an even smaller share. Currently, there are 1489 asylum applications registered in Slovakia with the largest groups coming from India, Chechnya, Moldova and Pakistan. Most economic migrants do not wish to stay in Slovakia but consider it a country of transit to other EU countries. Refugees who have a real fear of persecution are interested to stay in Slovakia in order to be protected.

Present status:

Slovakia scores very badly on integration and integration policies when compared to other countries. In the 2010 MIPEx evaluation, Slovakia was ranked as 29th out of 31 evaluated countries. Slovakia did particularly badly concerning the integration of migrants into the labor market (21 points), political participation of migrants (21 points), education (24 points) and the acquisition of citizenship (27 points). On the

upside, the best score obtained Slovakia was in the field of anti-discrimination measures (59 points).

Research results indicate that Slovaks views on migration and migrants are formed on the basis of false ideas, stereotypes and incorrect information. Differentness and migration are not supported, or Slovaks are unaware of its benefits. Migration is perceived as a potential threat to their cultural identity. Slovakia is strongly ethnocentric society.

According to a survey of public attitudes towards foreigners published in 2009, political discourse is focused on protecting the country's security and on border control rather than the benefits of immigration. This is ultimately reflected in public attitude towards migrants, and it is ultimately closely linked to the unwillingness of the population to support any kind of diversity.

Some migrants have indicated that they don't feel safe in Slovakia where there have been racially motivated attacks - verbal and physical – on them. The more different (physiologically, linguistically) they are, the more they are confronted with problems. As a consequence, they avoid public places and stay home in the evening.

Summary:

- The majority population perceives foreigners as people who take their work, threaten their culture and carry diseases.
- We lack “migration ambassadors” among professionals and government representatives who would represent migrants and have a significant impact on policy and society.
- The media is engaged in the process of creating a modern, open society in terms of cultural pluralism. But issues of the integration of foreigners are generally depicted in negative terms.
- Slovakia lacks conceptual and educational programs that would integrate cultural diversity topics into the school curriculum.
- There is little political-administrative readiness to receive and accept foreigners in Slovakia.

Food for thought:

- At the time of the communism we didn't accept refugees and therefore today we are still not accustomed to their presence. The people of Czechoslovakia lived in
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cultural and social isolation. We should remember, too, that this was the time when our country produced quite a lot of refugees who were taken in and cared for by other countries. We should understand that this creates a moral obligation.

- Slovaks fleeing from the communist totalitarianism did not have to face the suspicion that they wanted to disrupt the culture of Western democratic countries. On the contrary, they were met with understanding and provided with generous assistance. While we now live in a country with civil liberties and rights and a democratic political environment, the situation in other countries today is similar to ours during the totalitarian regime. In many cases, it is even more extreme and inhuman.

- If we are lucky enough to find ourselves today in a much better situation, we are under an ethical obligation to try to help people who through no fault of their own find themselves in conditions of repression, persecution and lack of freedom.

- The idea that this small minority of people could somehow threaten our integrity is absurd. On the contrary, refugees do not represent a threat to our society, but a valuable contribution to our economy and cultural life. Diversity is enriching. Historically, it is thanks to the mingling of cultures, that new values were created and human society moved forward. The most advanced countries in the world have multicultural societies which integrate cultural elements of many ethnic groups and nations.