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Refugee Protection and Reception Conditions in the Czech Republic

Bakalářská práce

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Declaration of Authorship

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this bachelor thesis and that I have not used any other sources than those presented in the list of sources.

In Olomouc, June 20 2019

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Introduction

In the recent years, there has been a heated debate in the society regarding refugee protection in the Czech Republic. This debate has been mostly fueled by the information from variety of media. In 2015, when the information about migrants coming from African and Middle Eastern countries to Europe started appearing in the mainstream media, the Czech society became divided into two main groups – those who want to accept refugees and help them and those against, referring to the argument of ‘wanting to protect our country’s (as well as European) borders, culture, and values’ at any cost. The topic of migration and refugee protection has influenced the political scene in the country as well. Words such as migrants and refugees were included in most of the campaign programs of candidates in both parliamentary and presidential elections with those promoting anti-migrant arguments being more successful. For example the current Czech president Miloš Zeman stated in his 2015 Christmas message that he is “*profoundly convinced that we are facing an organized invasion and not a spontaneous movement of refugees*”¹. As Dražanová (2018) wrote in her article, despite the fact that immigration was a less worrying issue for Czechs than in the years 2015 and 2016, when it was seen as one of the two most important issues facing the country, it still played an important role in the 2018 presidential election. In the beginning of 2018, Zeman won the election for the second time, with strong support of politicians such as Tomio Okamura, whose political party Freedom and Direct Democracy (SPD in Czech abbreviation) openly criticizes and stands against immigration and reception of any (especially Muslim) refugees.

As a student of humanitarian and social work, I am moved and concerned by this situation and how it affects the professions of humanitarians and/or social workers. There does not seem to be much of a dialogue between the two groups and the information provided in the media has been deepening the gap rather than helping and inviting opportunities for discussion and exchange of opinions. In the beginning, I mentioned a heated debate. However, as some of the speakers from Czech non-governmental organizations such as the Czech office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Organization for Assistance to Refugees, or Association for International Affairs discussed at the International Summer School in Refugee Law and Rights 2018², the debate has really narrowed down only

¹ For details see Khan (2015)

² For more information see www.refugees.upol.cz

to the question of accepting refugees or not accepting them. There has not been anything in between – discussions on how many refugees the country can receive and how to do it well have disappeared. Therefore, the debate I talked about could be better described as a simplified and very irrational argument in a polarized society. Due to the fact that the topic of migration plays such a prominent role in Czech elections and creates division in society, many questions arise on my end and motivated me towards pursuing this research topic. Some questions are more general such as: What are the actual numbers of the refugees and asylum seekers coming to an already residing in the country? What are their backgrounds? Who is representing them and working on their reception? Other are more specific such as: Why has this particular topic generated so much division among people? I would like to take my research and thesis as an opportunity to learn and understand this situation more. Following the discussion above, the objective of my thesis is twofold:

1. to identify to what extent the information about refugees and migrants represented by Czech media corresponds with the reality of refugee influx to the Czech Republic and refugee protection (reception and integration patterns), and

2. to look into the factors, which influence the prevalence of anti-migrant attitudes and demonstrate how they impact the social work and other helping professions concerned with refugee assistance and services in the country

In the introductory part of the thesis, I provide an overview of the modern migration history in the Czech and Czechoslovak Republic and as well as the official numbers of refugees that have arrived to the country in the recent years. This part of the thesis is based on the existent literature review and presentation of the statistics provided by the government and United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. After this part, I present content analysis of the Czech media demonstrating some of the already existing findings and their conclusions.

In the empiric research part, I present the collected fieldwork data from the conducted interviews with social workers and lawyers who assist asylum seekers in the facilities officially provided by the Czech government. The questions during the conducted interviews were based on the information found in the previous research. I tried to focus on the impact of the prevailing attitudes and information about refugees and migrants on the work and experience of my respondents. Data presented builds on the six interviews, conducted during one-month period time at three different locations for the purpose of this

thesis. The interviews were semistructred and guided by questions found in the question manual (see Appendix 1).

In the conclusion and discussion section, I use the results of my research to further discuss the pertaining extent of the information in the media and how it influences the actual situation of the refugees in the Czech Republic. I look at aspects such as how the prevalent perceptions of refugees influence the refugees themselves and their service providers (primarily social workers and lawyers). In this section, my aim is to open up a discussion as to the effect of the media debates on the quality of services provided to the refugees.

I believe this topic is relevant in regard to both Czech social work and humanitarian work since the findings and information collected in my research can play an important role in the way refugees will be treated as our clients as well as possible future members of our society. The hope is that anyone reading this thesis will be more cautious and less biased when it comes to searching for information and creating their own opinion on the matter regardless of the personal inclinations. In the case of refugee reception, this is especially important for practitioners working with this target group, including Czech social and humanitarian workers.

1. Terminology and Key Concepts

This chapter is an introduction to the important terms, including the current legislative terms relevant to the researched topic. Knowledge of these basic terms leads to a better understanding of the problematics described in latter chapters of the thesis.

1.1 Refugees, Asylum Seekers

There are number of existing definitions of the term *refugee*. However, the legal one is derived from the international refugee law literature. Accordingly, the refugee is a legal term for a person who seeks protection for a number of reasons relating to persecution in their home country. It is derived from the 1951 Geneva Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, which is ratified by the majority of countries in the world. In the first paragraph of the Convention a definition is provided as to who is eligible to seek international protection (asylum). According to the Convention, refugee is a person who *“owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it.”*

Asylum seeker then is a person who seeks and applies for international protection in a foreign territory.

The Czech Republic is also a signatory of the Geneva Convention, which translates into national laws for implementation further explained here below.

1.2 Czech Legislation Concerning the Refugee Status Determination and Reception

In the Czech Republic, there are two main laws that determine whether or not and under which conditions a person is allowed to enter the territory of the country, and/or seek asylum (or any kind of international protection) and describe the respective procedures – the

Act No. 326/1999, Collection of Laws, on the Residence of Foreign Nationals in the Czech Republic and Act No. 325/1999, Collection of Laws, on Asylum. The latter one defines:

„ a) conditions of entry and stay of foreign nationals who have applied to the Czech Republic for international protection in the territory of the Czech Republic and the stay of recognised refugees or persons enjoying subsidiary protection in the Territory,

b) proceedings on international protection matters and other proceedings conducted according to this Act,

c) the rights and obligations of applicants for international protection, of recognised refugees and of persons enjoying subsidiary protection in the Territory and the foreign nationals to which this Act applies,

d) the powers of the Ministry of the Interior, and the Police of the Czech Republic in this area of public administration,

e) state integration programme,

f) asylum facilities." (Act No. 325/1999)

Similar to in the Convention introduced above, an *application for international protection* is constituted by an expression of the foreign national's will from which it is evident that the foreign national is seeking protection in the Czech Republic against persecution or against a threat of serious harm. (Act No. 325/1999)

Asylum is a form of international protection provided to a foreign national. A foreign national (asylum seeker) who has been granted asylum pursuant to the Act No. 325/1999, Coll., on Asylum becomes a recognized refugee. In order to obtain asylum status in the Czech Republic the foreign individual (in cooperation with a lawyer) has to prove that he or she

“a) is persecuted for exercising political rights and freedoms, or

b) has legitimate fear of being persecuted on the grounds of race, gender, religion, nationality, belonging to a particular social group or for holding certain political opinions in the state of which he/she is a citizen or, if the foreign national is a stateless person, in the state of his/her last permanent residence” (Act No. 325/1999)

Two other forms of asylum described in the Act are Asylum for the Purpose of the Family Reunification and Humanitarian Asylum (Act No. 325/1999).

Another form of international protection is *subsidiary protection*. Subsidiary protection shall be granted to foreign nationals who do not satisfy the criteria for asylum but legitimate concerns exist that if they return to their country of origin or of their last permanent residence (in case of stateless persons), they will face a risk of serious harm and therefore they are unwilling to return and avail themselves of the protection of these countries. Subsidiary protection can also be granted for the purposes of the family reunification. The status of subsidiary protection is generally granted for a certain amount of time, after which the conditions of the applicant are reexamined. If they remained the same, the status can be extended (Act No. 325/1999).

In addition to the Act on Asylum, the Ministry of the Interior reveals a list of countries origin that are considered safe. The definition of a *safe country of origin* is provided in the Act. If an applicant for the international protection comes from a country that is on the list (or a country that is a member of the European Union), his or her application is very likely to be rejected (Act No. 325/1999).

The role of the *United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees* (UNHCR) is also described in the Act on Asylum. The UNHCR office in Prague, Czechia, is a part of the regional representation in Budapest, Hungary. Their role is to support the efforts to build a complex, sustainable, and independent asylum system, which would allow the country to assess the applications for international protection in line with the internationally approved standards and the international law. They do this through their own programs regarding legal counseling and education of public, and through the support non-governmental organizations (UNHCR, UNHCR v České republice [online]).

According to the Act on Asylum, a representative of the UHNCR office can make contact with a participant at any time of the asylum proceeding, inspect their case file, or be present during interviews with the consent of the participant (Act No. 325/1999).

1.3 Dublin System

The European Union has been working on a common system of application for international protection for all member states. *The Dublin System* is mechanism with a set of rules which should “*determine one state that is responsible for issue of a decision in merits on an application for asylum (application for international protection), i.e., assessing whether an applicant meets the criteria for being granted asylum, i.e. refugee status.*”(MOI, Dublin system [online]) The criteria are divided into five groups – family ties, visa or residence permit, irregular entry and residence, visa waiver, and first application for asylum lodged. The objective of Dublin system is “*to eliminate a phenomenon known as ‘asylum shopping’, i.e., to prevent situations wherein an alien applies for asylum in several Member States*” (MOI, Dublin system [online]).

The Dublin Regulations have already been revised a couple of times (nowadays we mostly talk about Dublin III and Dublin IV) and the work on them continues since the latest suggestion of the migrant quota system – relocation of a certain number of asylum seekers to each Member State – has been rejected by many and therefore malfunctioning. (Centrum pro studium demokracie a kultury, 2018[online]) However, the current Dublin System is still active and mandatory for all EU Member States (included in their asylum laws), and many migrants are being (re)placed to asylum facilities of various countries, including Czechia, due to its regulations.

1.4 Integration

People granted asylum status and subsidiary protection are entitled to the State Integration Program. Through the State Integration Program, the Ministry of the Interior should guarantee assistance with activities mainly in the area of housing and education – the instruction in the Czech language is organized in cooperation with the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports. The assistance in these areas is covered by an “unrepeated offer of housing or financial help” (if the person refuses once, the offer is no longer valid) and free Czech language courses (Act No. 325/1999). Assistance in other areas such as social issues, employment, health care and other is covered by services provided by the Ministry of the Interior and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) with Organization for Assistance to

Refugees being the leading one, contracted by the government to provide legal and social services.

2 Overview of the Czech Modern Migration History

The purpose of this chapter is to look at the history of the Czechoslovak and Czech Republic in context of migration. I divided this part into four sections describing four different periods of the country's history in relation to refugee and migration flows.

2.1 First Half of the 20th Century

From a long-term historical point of view, the area of today's Czech Republic was predominantly an emigration area until the beginning of the 19th century with the exception of short emigration waves caused by armed conflicts. Demographic changes caused by industrialization and urbanization in the 19th century lead to an increase of immigration in the land. Likewise, the historical events in the first half of the 20th century such as industrial and economic migration to specific destinations and the World Wars, especially the expulsion of Jewish and Roma population that perished during the Nazi rule in the World War II, made a significant difference in the Czech landscape (Drbohlav 2010, p. 18-19).

It is significant to mention the post World War II forced migration dynamics, involving the expulsion of almost 3 million of Germans from Czechoslovakia, which to this day has been seen as a controversial and morally questionable step made by the Czechoslovak government. The formerly German populated border regions (Sudeten) were after the mass expulsion settled by migrants of Czech and Slovak origin mostly from the Czech inland and Slovakia, but also from other countries (such as Hungary or Yugoslavia), which made Czechoslovakia ethnically homogenous country (Přidalová & Ouředníček 2015).

While the views of the Czechoslovak President-in-Exile Edvard Beneš on both the post-war expulsion of Germans and the Jewish settlement in Palestine have been well known and documented, the opinions of his Foreign Minister Jan Masaryk have only been revealed in the recent years. According to Cramsey (2018), Masaryk was eager to get completely rid of the German groups in post-war Czechoslovakia, including the German Jews and other victims of the Nazi regime. This was to be done through the establishment of a new Jewish country in Palestine and therefore abridging all displaced persons (especially those of German origin) of the status of statelessness. Even though he was often presented or presenting himself as a friend of Jews, Masaryk's statements in the Jewish and German questions were often

confusing and contradictory. Despite his efforts to solve the problem of statelessness and to protect Czechoslovak Jews, Masaryk (and the rest of the government-in-exile) had no interest in returning German-speaking Jews to post-war Czechoslovakia, even if their prewar citizenship was Czechoslovak. His hopes were that these Jews would gain citizenship elsewhere, ideally in an ethnic Jewish state, so that the plans to create an ethnically homogenous country without any German (political) elements could be realized (Cramsey 2018, p. 17-24). To an extent, it is understandable that the members of the government-in-exile felt frustration after not being able to prevent the war from happening and lacked sympathy for Germans in general. However, if we look at the expulsion of Germans from this perspective, we could say that Masaryk's discrimination against all Germans has a lot of features similar to the attitude of the Nazi Germany towards all Jews in the same historical period.

As Frankl (2014) suggests in his article, the post war expulsion of Germans was not the only questionable step of Czechoslovakia. Despite the often idealized picture of the First Republic (interwar Czechoslovakia, 1918-1938), Frankl talks about the deficits in the country's refugee policy. Selectivity in reception as well as in the care provided to refugees, nationalism and widespread hate towards foreigners, especially those of Jewish origin, were already existing phenomena in the times before the Second World War.

2.2 1948 to 1989

The period from 1948 to 1989 could be described as a period of predominantly political emigration due to the oppressive rule of the Communist party in the country. Both emigration and immigration were strictly controlled by the government and defined by the relationships with other socialist countries, such as the Soviet Union, Poland, Yugoslavia, Vietnam, or Cuba. Despite the mobility-controlling regime, over half a million Czechoslovaks managed to flee the country. Their exile destinations were mostly countries of Western Europe, USA, and Canada (Drbohlav 2010, p. 25-26). The exiled Czechoslovak citizens enjoyed the political asylum on bases of Geneva Convention from 1951 granting the rights to the international protection to those persons oppressed or persecuted based on political opinion in their own country.

On the other hand, as indicated above, the immigration to Czechoslovakia was determined mostly by the intergovernmental cooperation with other countries from the

Eastern bloc. The so called “international aid cooperation” brought international workers and trainees from Poland, Yugoslavia, Hungary, Cuba, Vietnam, Mongolia, Angola and North Korea. Vietnamese people, alongside the Cuban and Polish, created the biggest group of these immigrants but, unlike the other and despite the segregation from the rest of society that these workers experienced, they managed to create permanent settlements and are considered a significant minority in Czechia today (Drbohlav et al. 2009, p. 13-14).

Another group of people that eventually settled in Czechoslovakia are the fourteen thousand Greek civilians and pro-communist partisans fleeing from the northern regions of Greece after the Greek civil war in 1949. Even though these people were expected to go back to Greece, they settled permanently, mostly in Northern Moravia, and were naturalized in the 1990s (Drbohlav et al. 2009, p. 12, 57). The Greeks can be considered as the only significant group of “asylum seekers” in Czechoslovakia in the period 1948 – 1989. However, the motivation of the Soviet Union and its allies (including Czechoslovakia) to accept them for only humanitarian reasons is questionable since most of the refugees were children of leftists. As Víšek (2016) writes in his article, the reasons to accept children refugees were originally also political, as the children were supposed to be educated politically and some, after a military training, sent back into the civil war.

2.3 1990s to Present

After the fall of communism in 1989, the change of political climate in Czechoslovakia and later the Czech Republic brought a lot of new opportunities and led to openness to democratic values, as well as awareness and more information about other people’s war suffering. Therefore, alongside the rising number of economic migrants and returning Czech and Slovak emigrants, the newly democratic country was shortly after its foundation willing to respond to the crisis in Yugoslavia, in particular Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo later on.

Many factors could be discussed when it comes to the help provided to the citizens of former Yugoslavia during the war in the 1990’s. The Czech attitude towards the situation in former Yugoslavia was unique, reflecting the atmosphere of the new regime. As Drbohlav and Rozumek argue in the article of Týden.cz (ČTK 2015), both the government and the citizens were proactive and in favor of helping people of former Yugoslavia. During this time, the Czech Republic took in a couple thousands of refugees from Bosnia and Herzegovina and

Serbia. Majority of them returned to the country after the conflict, a smaller part settled in Czechia (Włodarczyk 2013, p. 27). At the same time, many volunteers and nonprofit organizations with the support of the new government provided humanitarian assistance to civilians in the country. As far as Kosovo is concerned, the Czech Republic also participated on the evacuation of the most vulnerable people and those in need of medical help (MEDEVAC). Similarly to Bosnia, Czech nonprofit organizations such as Caritas, People in Need, and ADRA provided help in the area of conflict (Włodarczyk 2013, p. 30-32).

Alongside other important documents, the Czech Republic upon its independence ratified the 1951 Geneva Convention and the 1967 Protocol relating to the status of refugee. In addition, the Czech Charter of Fundamental Rights and Basic Freedoms refers to asylum in the article 43. During 1990's, as a new member of international organizations and alliances, and a future member of the European Union, the country started adjusting its migration policy in order to become an equal partner with conditions similar to the ones of other democratic European countries. By becoming a member state of the EU and a member of the Schengen area, the country has agreed to participate on the Common European Asylum System and cooperate with other member states on the protection of asylum seekers on its own territory as well as the outside borders of the EU (European Commission, Common European Asylum System [online]).

As far as recent refugee and other migration are concerned, our membership in the United Nations (UN), the European Union, as well as the Visegrad group cannot be overlooked. Both the EU and the UN have suggested possible ways of solving global migration issues, to which the Czech government, together with other Visegrad countries (Poland, Slovakia, Hungary), responded negatively, and therefore rejected cooperation at all levels. First, in September 2015, a temporary relocation scheme was established and adopted by the European Asylum Support Office, in which EU member states committed to relocate asylum seekers from Italy and Greece (European Commission 2017[online]). According to the so called EU quota, the Czech Republic should have relocated 2691 people, but it only relocated 12. Similar situation was in the other Visegrad countries as Slovakia relocated 16 out of 902, Hungary and Poland refused to relocate any of the 1294 and 7082 people they were supposed to relocate. As a result of this, Czechia, Hungary, and Poland were referred to the European Court of Justice for non-compliance with their legal obligations. As the reason for rejection of the EU quota, the Czech Prime Minister Andrej Babiš stated that the situation

should be solved primarily through assistance in the place of origin and migratory routes, and through protection of external European borders. The government of Hungary has gone even further and proposed a legislative (so called Stop Soros) package, which would, for the reason of ‘organizing illegal migration’, restrict activities of organizations financed from abroad that deal with migration (Zachová et al. 2018 [online]).

On the global level, through the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants, which was adapted at the 2016 UN summit, two other documents were proposed – the Global Compact on Refugees and the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration. The essential idea of the Global Compact on Refugees is *„to improve the way in which the international community responds to large movements of refugees and protracted refugee situations, most notably by providing for more equitable and predictable burden- and responsibility-sharing in support of countries and communities particularly affected”*(UHNCR, The New York Declaration [online]). The Global Compact on Migration is *„the first-ever UN global agreement on a common approach to migration in all its dimensions“* which presents *“23 objectives for better managing migration at local, national, regional and global levels”*(UN, Global compact for migration [online]). Both documents are not legally binding for the signatory countries but, if adopted, serve as international agreement on how to deal better with all large movements of refugees (UNHCR, The New York Declaration [online]). However, similarly to the quota situation, Czech and other Visegrad group representatives refused to adopt these compacts, while promoting the need to protect their national sovereignty in their countries (Gotev 2018 [online]). Such reactions within the Visegrad group could play a significant role in the future direction of these countries not only in regards to solutions of migration issues in the world, but also access to and practice of the refugee and human rights in general.

According to Mazák (2017), racism and resistance to immigration cannot be underestimated when it comes to trust in EU institutions and the attitude of Czechs towards European integration. His findings show that Czechs *“do not perceive immigration only within cost/benefit equation, but they fear for their culture, religion and identity”* (Mazák 2017, p. 44). The level of racism regarding the European integration makes it difficult to respond to the need of solving the current migration issues both on the EU level and beyond.

3 Czech Media and Refugees

As I learned about the situation in the Czech Republic in the 1990's and the help provided for the refugees from former Yugoslavia, it is clear that the positive attitude of the government and the new political situation had a big impact on public opinion on refugee reception and helping in general. Due to the lack of experience with living in a multicultural society or contact with actual refugees, politicians and the media have been the main agents in terms of shaping the opinion of public. In this chapter, I want to describe the role of media in refugee reception and present results of some of the media analyses that have been done regarding the current plight of refugees coming to Europe. The analyses and other information presented in this part of my thesis will be mostly from the years 2015 and 2016, when the topic was relatively new and most talked about. Therefore, this period could be considered as the one when the most prevailing opinions were being created.

3.1 Media and Anti-refugee Discourse

Despite the fact that the Czech Republic has not been experiencing any significant increase of asylum seekers, the topic of refugees and immigration played an important role in both the parliamentary and the recent presidential elections. The results of these elections showed that the candidates promoting anti-migrant arguments are more successful than those (carefully) suggesting any kind of refugee protection or reception as a possible solution of the most recent “refugee crises” in Europe. Media naturally plays an important role in presenting these arguments and events to the public. According to Date Pijlman (2015), the Czech media did not really differ from the Czech politicians in the way of presenting the situation around the refugee influx to Europe. He also refers to the conclusion of the research by the European Journalist Observatory from 2016, which affirms that, similarly to most of the Eastern European and Baltic media, the Czech media “*remained generally negative, unemotional and anti-EU*”³ in comparison to the Western European media, which had shown more compassion towards the topic.

Moreover, it is a known fact that many of the mainstream Czech media are owned by politicians such as the Prime Minister Andrej Babiš, or entrepreneurs with connections to them. Among other examples of strictly setting the agenda and going against the codes of

³ For details see European Journalist Observatory (2015 [online])

journalism, a Czech website HlídaciPes.org released a recording from a meeting during which the management of the Czech TV station Prima explained to the employees why they should present the topic of refugees as a threat. The presented arguments of the editor in chief Obzinová and deputy chairman of the executive board of the FTV Prima Holding Jetmar were mostly bad experiences from their vacations in Arab countries, differences between their and Czech culture (perception of women, religious views, etc.), and worries that there will be even more refugees from these countries coming to Europe. Obzinová reminded everyone that they would put together an official stance of the station, and if anyone does not agree with it, there is no reason for them to keep working for Prima (Břešťan 2016[online]).

TV Prima belongs to the most watched and influential TV stations in the country and its owner Ivan Zach is considered close to the president Miloš Zeman. No too long after the incident, Zeman praised TV Prima on one of its programs for not “getting intimidated” by the investigation of The Council for Radio and Television Broadcasting and other discussions on the topic (Neumann 2016 [online]).

3.2 Media Analyses – Criminalization Rather than Humanitarian and Human Rights‘ Perspective

In his dissertation, Tkaczyk (2018) described how the agenda of media was built and how two different newspapers presented the migration crises. I primarily focused on his analysis of the media presentation of the so called ‘refugee crisis’. His results and conclusions were very similar to the conclusions of other analyses and so I would like to present a summary of them as the most frequent topics, actors, and issues presented in the media. I will mention another complementary work on the media content analysis also conducted also by Tkaczyk together with Macek and Pospěch (2015), which was focused on the TV news by two popular TV stations – Česká televize and TV Nova.

3.2.1 Who Talks the Most

In terms of actors (people cited in the articles who shared their opinions on the crises), both analyses showed that Czech and foreign politicians had the most space in the media. From the Czech government, it was the Prime Minister Bohuslav Sobotka and the Minister of Interior Milan Chovanec (both held offices until 2017) who were mentioned most often. The representatives of opposition and the President Miloš Zeman also got to share their

opinions. As far as foreign politicians are concerned, Angela Merkel and Viktor Orban can be named as the most significant actors representing two main divergent opinions and attitudes towards the refugee crisis. Second most represented were the security forces, primarily the spokesperson of Czech foreign police. These two groups created over 50% of the opinions cited or paraphrased in the media. On the other hand, opinions of experts, ministers of Humans rights or Social affairs, NGO representatives, or refugees themselves took up a very little space. Moreover, the opinions of refugees could be especially in the TV news analysis considered more as brief and often even untranslated sentences or exclamations. Their role was therefore mostly passive. These results again suggest that refugees were portrayed more as a safety issue than as persons in a need of international protection in accordance with the Geneva Convention. The causes of the crises were mentioned in less than 30% of the news of both TV stations. (Tkaczyk, Macek, Pospěch 2015)

3.2.2 What Are the Topics

Tkaczyk (2018) talks about four different categories or reference frames in which the topics of the refugee crises can be found. I find these helpful for creating an overview of the issues that were presented in the media and should therefore be considered when we talk about the refugee reception and protection conditions in Czechia.

The first and highly represented is the *politically-administrative* reference frame. In this context, refugees and migrants are seen mostly as an administrative burden. Given the actors covering the refugee crisis in media as mentioned above, the main topics they referred to were strategies of handling the crisis. Refugees were often talked about as grey and undefined groups or masses of people. Their nationalities and background were hardly ever mentioned while numbers played an important role. The language used in the articles (especially through the opinions of Sobotka and Chovanec) was mostly neutral, without much of any moral evaluation. The emphasis was on the attempts of providing stability, control over the situation, and promoting interests of the country through different administrative steps and procedures. Refugees were portrayed as objects rather than persons (Tkaczyk 2018, p. 167-173). In other words, refugees were the objects of migration management strategy from the state perspective focusing protection of its borders from alien intruders.

Another significant area is *securitization*. A topic that was frequently mentioned in relation to migrants and refugees in this area was protection of the European borders.

Questions of placing patrols and military at the borders, building of fences, detention, or fighting smugglers were discussed often. The analyzed articles often talked about militarization and the EU member states cooperating to guard the borders and speculated on the possible threats connected with migration. Disruption of the country's integrity was the most often mentioned threat (Tkaczyk 2018, p. 174-181).

The third frame talks about question of *illegality*. In connection to the two previous frames, the analyzed news paid attention illegal activities related to the crises. Among the highlighted activities were smuggling, illegal residence, and illegal border crossing (Tkaczyk 2018, p. 181-186).

The least frequent frame out of the four was the *humanitarian* frame. Unlike the other mentioned frames, where words such as “influx” or “wave” were often used, this one talks more about migrants and refugees as individuals. It focuses on the questions of their basic needs of and human rights. That means in a number of cases the analyzed media actually did talk about the situation in the countries of their origin as well as the refugee camps, where they were waiting for another steps and decisions to be made. However, this number is significantly smaller than the one of other topics discussed. The presentation of refugees as people or victims of tragic events, stories of their journey and background was also relatively small (smaller than in the Western media). Another topic recognized within this frame was help to refugees and migrants in camps, their home countries, or on the way. Due to meagre representation of humanitarians, social workers, other experts, or Czech volunteers, this topic did not get much space and attention in the media (Tkaczyk 2018, p. 186-193).

3.2.3 Comparative Historic View of Media Contents Regarding Refugees

In terms of long-term development of the media representation, it was relevant to look at the analysis of Janderka (2016). He compared the rhetoric in articles of the newspaper *Mladá Fronta Dnes* from 1992, regarding refugees from Yugoslavia, to the ones from 2015, when the current “refugee crisis” started appearing in media. One of the outcomes of his research was that generally, refugees in 1992 were seen as victims while the majority of articles from 2015 described them as a threat. When referring to victims, articles from 1992 portrayed refugees predominantly as victims of the Yugoslav war, while those in 2015 rather

referred to victims of smugglers and gangs (Janderka 2016, p. 79). This means that the criminalization focus rather than the humanitarian one took over.

The last aspect from this author's analysis discusses a causing of moral panic through distortion, negative prediction and symbolization. All three were more frequent in 2015. Distortion was analyzed mostly through the usage of metaphors (such as water – flow, wave, etc.) and other ways of using the language to deviate from the original meaning. Negative prediction, the news that say “things will get worse” (i.e. there will be more refugees), were also significantly more present in 2015. On the other hand, there was not a major difference in usage of symbolization in both periods scrutinized. In this case, symbolization was analyzed through the focus on migrants' and refugees' difficulties of integration. However, different cultural backgrounds and religion were more emphasized as reasons for inability to integrate in 2015 (Janderka 2016, p. 80). Other mentioned reasons were for example lack of education and knowledge of the Czech language, dissimilar views on sexuality and relationships with women, or criminality. Especially in case of Muslim refugees and their Islamic faith, who were seen more as a source of potential radicalization and terrorism (Janderka 2016, p. 68). This is also caused by the increase of jihadist terrorism (two deadly attacks in France in 2015 among others) and frequent news about what The Islamic State and other terrorist organizations do in the Middle East. (ČTK 2015 [online]) Refugees were framed to be prone to terrorism rather than seen as victims of terrorism they were fleeing from in the Middle East and Sub-Saharan countries.

4 Asylum Procedure in the Czech Republic

In this chapter, I want to briefly describe the process of refugee reception and the pathway towards granting asylum in the Czech Republic. For the purposes of this thesis, I will not talk about the details of the legislative procedures and terms (key terms were already introduced in the previous chapters). I want to introduce the process through the work of the Refugee Facilities Administration of the Ministry of the Interior.

In the other part of this chapter the statistics from previous years are demonstrated to present the overview of asylum seekers in these facilities and their backgrounds.

4.1 Asylum Facilities

The Refugee Facilities Administration of the Ministry of the Interior (RFA MOI) is organizational section of the Ministry which closely cooperates with its other departments - Department for Asylum and Migration Policy, Police of the Czech Republic, and Health Facilities Department of the Ministry of the Interior. RFA MOI operates several different types of facilities, which provide services to applicants for international protection, international protection holders (asylees), or detained foreigners. The main functions of the facilities, how they are operated, the rights and obligations of the people accommodated in them, roles of all actors, and other are described in the Act No. 325/1999, Coll., on Asylum (RFAMOI [online]).

4.1.1 Reception Center

The first one of the RFA MOI facilities is the Reception Center. In these centers, the newly arrived applicants for international protection are accommodated during the initial entry procedures – identification, filing applications, health examinations. Besides accommodation, reception centers provide also food, space for basic hygiene, health care, social and psychological services, and leisure time activities. There are two reception centers in Czechia – one at the Václav Havel airport in Prague and second in Zastávka near the city of Brno (RFAMOI [online]).

4.1.2 Residential Center

After the completion of the entry procedures, applicants can choose to stay at one of the Residential Centers (unless they can afford their own accommodation). Here they wait for the decision of the Ministry of the Interior to be made according to the laws No. 326/1999 Coll. on the Residence of Foreign Nationals in the Czech Republic and No. 325/1999, Coll., on Asylum. The applicant can leave the facilities freely. They receive financial allowances (30 CZK per day), but prepare their food themselves. They can also use services of social workers, legal and psychological assistance, and choose from a number of leisure time activities, including voluntary Czech language courses. There are four residential centers, in Kostelec nad Orlicí, Havířov, Zastávka, and Bělá pod Bezdězem (RFAMOI [online]).

4.1.3 Integration Asylum Center

In case asylum or subsidiary protection is granted, Integration Asylum Centers are usually the first place of integration. These are described as smaller accommodation facilities with flats located in cities. At this point of the asylum seekers' journey, the State Integration Program takes place. Social workers in Integration Asylum Centers provide counselling and other services in order to assist clients with these activities and support their integration into the Czech society. International protection holders, who choose to live in a different accommodation, can use a network of counselling centers, which provide integration services in the respective regions. The centers are located in Jaroměř, Předlice, Brno, and Havířov (RFAMOI [online]).

4.1.4 Facility for the Detention of Foreigners

In case the asylum seekers obtain the decision on administrative expulsion from the Immigration Police, they must leave the Czech Republic. Facilities for the Detention of Foreigners are designed for detention of people who obtained this decision. In these facilities, they are provided with accommodation, food, and other material needs. They can use the services of social workers, psychological and legal services and urgent health care. Foreigners in detention must not leave the facilities. Through the Facilities for the Detention of Foreigners, the Czech government should provide dignified conditions and space for them until they leave the country. These facilities are located in Bělá pod Bezdězem, Vyšní Lhoty, and Balková (RFAMOI [online]).

4.2 Statistical overview of asylum seekers and refugees in Czech Republic

The UNHCR statistics from the end of 2017 show, that there were about 6000 persons of concern in the territory of the Czech Republic. (UNHCR, Population Statistics [online]) The RFA MOI asylum facilities hosted over 1 300 of these people. Most of them were from Ukraine (close to 400), Georgia (127), Azerbaijan, and Armenia (both 125 people). There were over 600 people in the RFA MOI detention centers. Most were from Ukraine (367), Moldova (61), Vietnam (39), and Nigeria (38). In 2018, Ukrainians and Georgians were still the two biggest groups of asylum applicants arriving to the asylum facilities. In comparison to the numbers from 2017, there was a significant increase in arrival of people from Cuba (143 in 2018, 66 in 2017) and Uzbekistan (98 in 2018, 6 in 2017) and a decrease in arrival of Azerbaijanis (45 in 2018). Similarly, in detention centers, Ukraine and Moldova still dominated the statistics of 2018. These show that there were more Iraqis (76 in 2018, 12 in 2017) and Uzbekistanis (42 in 2018, 7 in 2017) in detention awaiting deportation from Czech Republic due to asylum application rejections than the previous year (SUZ, Naši klienti [online]).

Since these were only statistics from the RFA MOI – numbers of people, who stayed in the RFA facilities, I also looked at other statistics that provided a bigger picture. The Czech Statistical Office statistics regarding numbers of foreigners in Czechia from 2017 show that as of December 31 2017, there were 526 811 foreigners living in the country. 307 103 of these people were from other than the 28 EU countries, and 2669 of them had obtained asylum status. Again the numbers show that most of the asylees in the country are from Ukraine (419). Among other nationalities with most asylum statuses in the Czech Republic are Syrians (410), Belarusians (250), Iraqis (207) and Russians (198). When comparing statistics from years 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016, and 2017, I did not find any significant increase of granted asylums or any bigger changes in the demography of the asylees in the Czech Republic (CSO, Foreigners in the CR [online]). They predominately come from post-Soviet countries and there is no increase in refugees from neither war-affected Middle Eastern countries nor African countries.

One last set of statistics that I compared was one of the numbers of applications for international protection and decisions of international protection. These are the official statistics of the Ministry of the Interior and show us the high rejection rate as well as indicate

the attitude of the Czech government towards asylum seekers in the country. In the year 2017, a total number of 1450 people applied for international protection in Czechia. 308 of these were repeated applications⁴. In the same year, only 29 people were granted asylum and 118 were granted subsidiary protection. 635 people received a negative decision on their case and in 726 cases the proceedings were discontinued. In 2018 the number of applications was a little bit higher than in the four previous years – a total of 1702 applications (304 of these were repeated applications). However, the number of granted asylums remained low. 49 people obtained asylum statuses and 118 subsidiary protections while 750 applications were rejected and in 816 cases the proceedings were discontinued. For comparison there were 82 asylums granted in 2014 (1156 applications total), in 71 in 2015 (1524 applied), and 148 in 2016 (1478 applied) (MVČR, Souhrnná zpráva o mezinárodní ochraně za rok 2014 - 2018 [online]).

The statistics are clear. There has not been any significant increase of asylum seekers in Czechia in the recent years and the numbers of granted international protection remains very low in comparison to the number of negative decisions and discontinued proceedings.

An article of iRozhlas mentions this issue, saying the chances to obtain asylum are three times higher in any other country in the EU as only 11% (9 out of 10) of the applicants became successful in 2018. The Ministry of the Interior states that two of the main reasons for the low numbers are because the most of the applicants in Czechia come from countries such as Ukraine or Georgia, and already have lived in the country for a while with a visa or other type of residence permit, that has expired (unlike in the other European countries). On the other hand, a leader of the legal team of the Organization for Assistance to Refugees Hana Franková argues that this explanation is not sufficient as the abnormally strict decision making has been a long-term practice and that the Ministry often gives a negative decision on a case that should have been positive for granting an asylum (Hlaváčová, Kočí 2019 [online]).

⁴ Repeated asylum applicant is a person who made a further application for international protection after a final decision (positive/negative/discontinuation) has been made on their previous application. (Eurostat, Glossary [online])

5 Empirical Research

In the previous part of my thesis, I introduced the topic through the historical experience of the Czech and Czechoslovak Republic with migrants and refugee reception and mentioned some of the important terms, legal definitions and laws relating to the contemporary protection and reception of refugees. Then I described the current perception and attitude of Czech mainstream media as well as the facilities provided by the government, which many of the incoming asylum seekers go through. In this empirical part, I will present the data collected through my fieldwork and reflect on it in the context of information from the previous part.

The key informants are employees of the Organization for Assistance to Refugees (OPU in Czech abbreviation). OPU is a non-governmental, non-profit organization founded in 1991, providing support and assistance to refugees and foreigners in the Czech Republic through special social and legal counseling in the whole territory of the country. The services are provided in ambulatory form in the offices of OPU as well as through fieldwork and counselling in all types asylum facilities of RFA MOI. OPU has over 25 years of experience of work with foreigners in the country in cooperation with the Czech government, the UNHCR and others. That is the longest experience of all Czech organizations, and therefore OPU employees (especially lawyers) can be and are considered experts on the questions of refugee reception and protection in the country. The organization also aims to create positive relationship between foreigners and the Czech society through various forms of education and volunteering opportunities (OPU leaflet).

My focus was on those OPU employees who work directly with asylum seekers and travel to the asylum facilities to provide legal and social counseling there. I contacted OPU lawyers and social workers from OPU offices in Praha, Brno, and Ostrava, who provide services in most of the asylum facilities. The reason for this was to have a chance collect data from various regions of Czechia and see whether the experiences of the respondents vary due to location. This method is called the purposive sampling. Mioviský (2006, p.135) describes it as a method where the researchers choose as participants only those people who fit a certain set of criteria (features, statuses, etc.) and are willing to join the research. My main criteria were OPU employees (all work for the same organization), in direct contact with asylum seekers, and work with clients in asylum facilities. I collected data from six OPU employees –

lawyers and social workers who provide services in reception centers, residential centers, and detention facilities. Instead of their names, I use marks R1 to R6.

R1	Lawyer, male, 3 years with OPU, provides legal counseling in the Bělá-Jezová residential center
R2	Social worker, female, 3 years with OPU, originally provided social counseling in Kostelec nad Orlicí residential center, now primarily counsels English speaking applicants for international protection directly at the OPU office and leads other projects, field work with the Vietnamese community in the city (part time)
R3	Lawyer, female, 1.5 years with OPU, provides legal counseling in the Vyšní Lhoty detention facility
R4	Lawyer, female, 2.5 years with OPU, provides legal counseling in the Havířov residential center
R5	Lawyer, female, 4 years with OPU, provides legal counseling in the Zastávka reception center
R6	Social worker, female, 3 years with OPU, provides social counseling in the Havířov residential center

Table 1: Professional backgrounds of respondents

My secondary informants were supposed to be asylum seekers in asylum facilities. However, due to communication difficulties and a time constraint in collecting this data, I chose not to involve asylum seekers in my research. I consider this the weakness of my research, as having opinions of the asylum seekers would have made the research more comprehensive. It would be vital to include their views in further research. Nevertheless, I found the answers of my current respondents relevant and sufficient considering the research questions and the objectives of the thesis.

5.1 Research Design and Methods

My empirical research is focused on personal experience of the respondents with the given conditions and context. I wanted the respondents to have enough space to share their

individual stories and experience. Therefore, I see qualitative research design as an appropriate one for this research. According to Strauss and Corbin (2008), qualitative research “allows researchers to get at the inner experience of participants, to determine how meanings are formed through and in culture, and to discover rather than test variables” (Strauss & Corbin 2008, p. 10). Qualitative methods are used to describe, analyze and interpret the psychological phenomena of our inner and outer reality that are not or cannot be quantified (Miovský 2006, p. 18).

For the data analysis, I used the method of open coding which is a way of categorization of terms through a thorough studying of the collected data. (Strauss & Corbin 1999, p.43) Alongside open coding, I used the clustering method, which is based on comparison and aggregation of data. A common sign of individual clusters is an overlaying of topics, space, time, or people (Miovský 2006, p. 221). This method helped me to compile the data into more general categories – significant topics already indicated by the objectives and research questions. In the end, I summarized the collected data into five different topical areas, through which I present the data in the next chapter.

5.1.1 Research Question

Since qualitative studies are meant to discover rather than test, it is important to frame the research questions in the manner that provides enough space to explore the given topic. The research question should therefore be broad enough to provide this freedom but it should also identify the topic area and tell readers what it is that the researcher is particularly interested in. “*The purpose of the question is to lead the researcher into the data where the issues and problems important to the person, organizations, groups, and communities under investigation can be explored*” (Straus & Corbin 2008, p.25).

Based on the information provided in the previous chapters, in the empirical chapter I focused on the one main research question: How does the attitude of Czech society and politicians presented in media influence reception conditions of the current refugees in the Czech Republic?

5.2 Research Method and Data Collection

For the collection of data, I chose to conduct semi-structured interviews, which is the most common type of interview. Unlike a non-structured one, a semi-structured interview requires a more intensive preparation in form of a scheme, which is then binding for the respondents. This scheme usually specifies the question topics that the respondents will be asked. The order of questions is interchangeable; the researcher can in some parts of the interview leave more space for the respondent and then eventually ask additional questions. The prepared scheme defines the core of the interview and assures us that all given topics will be talked about. The flexibility and creativity of this type of interview, based on the possibility to still use the convenient aspects of the other two types (non and fully structured) of interviews, allows us to gain the most from the interview (Miovský 2006: 159 –161).

For the purpose of my interviews, I formed following questions, that framed the mentioned scheme, and which the respondents knew before the beginning of their interviews:

1. Tell me something about yourself, your education and previous work as a social worker or other. What is your interest and motivation behind social work profession? Where did you work before and how did you start to work here? Did you work with similar populations (asylum seekers and refugees) before?
2. How long have you worked for OPU and what do your work tasks consist of?
3. Who are your clients? What is your experience of working with refugees? How do you understand the refugee situation as a social worker/lawyer - vulnerability, strengths, social protection needs?
4. What influences your work the most? State policies, directives of the organization?
5. How does information from media (usually negative on refugees) influence your work?
6. Are there any specific platforms, seminars, or other ways of learning more about refugees and how to work with this target group provided to you?

7. If you could describe the most exciting and most demanding aspects of your work what would they be? Do you have any suggestions on how to improve and/or influence them? Which programs in your opinion support refugees the most?

5.2.1 Data collection procedure

Here I will describe the process of contacting my respondents and conducting interviews in regards to the ethical aspects of research. I divided the process into four different phases.

Preparation - Creating Contact and Introduction

In the preparation phase, I tried to connect with as many OPU employees as possible, mostly via e-mail. In my initial message, I introduced myself, the topic of my thesis, my main research questions, and which respondents I am looking for. I also provided a question manual with the above mentioned questions (see Appendix 1). Those who responded either provided another contacts in case they did not meet my criteria or agreed with being interviewed. Then we agreed on a day and time of the interview. Some of my respondents accepted my offer to send them a document with further details about my work.

Beginning of the Meeting – Ethical Concerns

From this part to the end of the interview, it was particularly important to consider the ethical aspects of the research, as described by Hendl (2008, p. 153-155). At the beginning of the arranged meeting, I made sure that the respondents understood the purpose of my interview and asked if they had any questions. Then I had them read and sign an informed consent (see Appendix 2), which ensures their anonymity and provides the option to terminate the interview at any moment (Hendl 2008, p. 153). Another important aspect was emotional safety. It is important for the researcher to keep in mind that some parts of the interview can be more personal and emotional for the respondents. The researcher has to be aware of this possibility and ready to provide enough space for the respondent to process and explain their emotions (Hendl 2008, p. 154). Two of my respondents asked me to not reveal the full transcriptions of our interviews in my thesis. For this reason, and in order to protect the rest of my respondents, I decided not to include any of the transcriptions in the Attachments and only use parts of their statements in the text.

Interview

My goal was to do my research in a way that is most convenient for my respondents. The interviews were conducted in the places of my respondents' choice. Most of the interviews were in person in the OPU office, two were via Skype due to business of my respondents. All interviews were semi-structured and carried out accordingly.

Conclusion of the Cooperation

Another ethical aspect Hendl (2008, p. 154) talks about is reciprocity. Qualitative research is often about a more personal and longer relationship between the researcher and respondents than quantitative research. In the conclusion of the interview, I thanked the respondents and informed them about the following steps in my research. We also talked about possible ways of reconnecting in the future in regards to the thesis or different collaboration.

5.2.2 Data Management

Data management is what Miovský (2006, p. 195) calls all small components of handling the data from the process of collecting to the point when all data is prepared for the analysis.

For the fixation of all data, I used a voice recorder. All recorded interviews were afterwards transcribed into text form. Literal transcription of recorded interviews is a demanding and time-consuming procedure, which is, however, necessary for a good and detailed evaluation as it provides the possibilities to highlight and compare important passages, add comments on the side of the text, etc. (Hendl 2008, p. 208).

The last phase of data management is so called systemization of qualitative data, which includes final organizing of the data before the beginning of the analysis. However, the process of systemization cannot be strictly bounded or excluded from the analysis itself, for we often return to it and extend it based on our findings during the analysis. Many different methods and techniques can be used for the systematization of the data. Miovský (2006, p. 209) divides them in two general steps.

The first step involves processing and sorting of the data. This mostly means sorting data according to different categories, which are given at the beginning but can be reconsidered during the analysis (as new facts arise). In my case it was sorting of the data according to the original research questions, which defined the topics (categories), that I intended to cover. The second step involves different methods of editing techniques, which make working with the data easier (Miovský 2006, p. 209). For the purposes of my research, I chose three main techniques – data reduction, coding, and editing of the data.

Reduction of the data means deleting of those parts that are not relevant. They were for example different noises, breaks, repeated questions, words, or expressions that disrupt or do not explicitly carry any information in the interview. The purpose of reduction is to make the transcription more fluent and easier to work with in the analytical part (Miovský 2006, p. 209-2010).

Data coding is a process during which the original data are being converted into different segments, which we can work with in the further analysis. Each segment has a specific name and serves as a category to which the researcher assigns a relevant piece of data. Coding is a demanding and ongoing process that requires consistency and capability to search for similarities or see distinctions. Editing of the data goes hand in hand with the process of coding and involves many different methods. I mostly used commentary on different segments and coloring of the text (Miovský 2006, p. 210-211).

6 Empirical Data Presentation

During the data analysis, I named five most frequent topical areas relating to the objectives of the thesis. Through those, I will present the collected empirical data.

6.1 Conditions of Work

This topic focuses primarily on the conditions of work of the respondents, their perception of the people they work with, and experience with the asylum procedures.

The respondents confirmed the numbers provided above in the statistics section. Most of the asylum seekers in Czech asylum facilities come from countries of the former Soviet Union (Ukraine, Georgia, Armenia, Russia). Other smaller groups are then from the Middle East (Iraq, Iran, Yemen, Afghanistan), East Asia (Vietnam, Mongolia), and Africa (Nigeria, Libya). In the residential centers, there are predominantly whole families seeking asylum or older people, who lack financial means to afford any other kind of accommodation during the process. People with connections in the country and enough finances try to move to a private accommodation.

“From those who come to consult with me, it is mostly people from Georgia, and then it varies... people from Azerbaijan or Armenia, Russian speaking countries often show up. Sometimes there is someone from Africa, mainly Nigeria. And recently, there has been an increased number of people from Libya; the security situation there has gotten worse. Then people from the Middle East, so Syria, Afghanistan...Yemen. Also Iran.” R5

“People, who don’t have the means, go to a residential center. That means there are often people who are old, sick, and so on... Here in Prague we can say that it’s mostly younger people, working age, who can work and are interested in finding a job, they are more flexible, have more options, better social network... So I can say that in Prague, it’s people of working age.” R2

It is important to say that only a small number of these people become actual asylum cases as the criteria for obtaining asylum (or international protection in general) is quite specific and often does not cover problems that the clients have in their countries of origin.

The lawyers said that it is often problematic to find the reasons for asylum with their clients and to prove that they are legitimate.

“It is definitely minority, it can be circa 10%... They apply for many different reasons but not everyone actually has a problem at home or fears something. Asylum is also a way for people who, somehow ended up here illegally... Some have applied for asylum because their visa expired, or residence...and they didn’t extend it. So for a lot of them this is a way to legalize their stay for some time. People with real and relevant reasons for asylum are minority. I would say 10-20% of those we meet in Zastávka.” R5

“...we have a problem with the whole procedure in the sense that they don’t state the asylum reasons...reasons they migrated. Asylum or international protection is a very specific type of protection and it’s definitely good that it is here. But it only serves a very small number of people.”R3

“...when there is a concrete story, a concrete problem, there has to be information from the country of origin that confirms the words of the person... Quite a lot of people from residential centers apply for asylum to get healthcare here. Because when you’re an applicant for asylum, you have health insurance. The Ministry calls it health tourism...”R4

While the OPU lawyers provide legal counseling and file complaints for any client, they can choose whether they want to represent the client at the court. However, even when the person OPU lawyers work with and represent is proven eligible for asylum, it does not mean the applicant will be successful. There are clients who have been waiting for any kind of decision for years. The length of the process, despite the client’s eligibility, definitely has an impact on the state of mind of the client but also complicates the work of the service providers.

“I cannot really estimate the success... It happens is that even if the client succeeds at the court it doesn’t mean that he stays here. The Ministry can reject his application and so the whole process can last years... Last month I had a client who gained asylum immediately, without filing a complaint, but otherwise I cannot think of other person, who would get asylum like that... So you can definitely win at the court but that still doesn’t guarantee success. For example my colleagues in Prague have clients they’ve been representing even for 7 years...they win something, the court returns it to the Ministry, the Ministry rejects it again...this can be going on for years.”R5

The list of safe countries of origin did not use to play such an important role in the decision-making until March of this year when it was extended. As it now also includes countries such as Ukraine and Georgia (with the exception of the known conflict territories), more clients will be affected by the list and their applications will be rejected. The concept of country of origin also plays a role when the applicants come from war-torn countries. Most Syrian applicants automatically obtain subsidiary protection. This also used to be but no longer is the case of people from Iraq or Afghanistan.

6.2 Refugee Needs

Oftentimes the assessment of the needs of clients is made together by a lawyer and a social worker who commute to a given facility, as the needs of social and legal help usually overlay.

“I provide social counseling in the area of housing, health, financial and material safety. We also accompany our clients to doctors.”R6

“I focus on the legal side. I explain the clients how the asylum procedure works, what the Ministry does, what to do if the application is rejected. A big part of our work is filing complaints or appeals, we help them use available legal remedies. So counseling and legal service... most often it's the rejection of their application. At the same time, they try to figure out what types of financial help they can get, because they cannot work for the first 6 months. They deal with moving to a private place, education, then look for jobs. Often people ask for transition into a different facility.”R5

R5 mentioned the problem of many facilities being at their full capacity and we discussed the reason why, since the numbers of arriving refugees has not increased dramatically in comparison to other European countries. The length of waiting for a decision of the Ministry seemed to have big impact on this issue.

“I know there was supposed to be some reconstruction work in Kostelec, so their capacity was restricted and another reason I think can be that the asylum procedures take so long... because at the first level, at the Ministry, the person is for about 6 months, and then at the courts it takes really long time...the legal proceedings can take a year but also more...and during this whole time the person has the right to be accommodated in the residential

center... so people stay there for a long time and it's harder to accommodate the new ones who arrive... So I think this could be the critical factor... ”R5

The length of the process and the insecurity of outcomes coming any time soon create some of the biggest barriers in the lives of the clients. For financial reasons, and inability to find a job, the applicants stay in residential centers, which are mostly located in the outskirts of towns, for a long time. They only get pocket money – 30 CZK per day, which allows them to travel to the town only a couple times a week and decreases the chances to interact with the outside world, learn the language, explore the new culture, etc. This kind of isolation often causes depression and demotivation. It also leads to addictions.

“The whole asylum procedure is really long... sooner or later a lot of clients become inclined to alcohol or other addiction...” R6

“...it is of course better when the people find their own place out of the residential centers...when they are outside and exposed to the society and they have to function...and the society is exposed to them and has to participate. But given the finances they get, it is impossible for many of them...I don't have a problem with the concept of residential centers...But I do have a problem with the way they work with the people, where they're located, what they offer. That, I think, could be way better. If you want an example, Bělá has a new residential center and, even though I like the center, the location of it doesn't make any sense. Those people simply live in the woods. They get 30 CZK per day and the bus to the village costs 34... So if you wanted to meet with someone there every day, you're at -4 every day...And there they go shopping, to the post office, the labor office... So the person has to consider each trip. And now imagine that you have depression and you're at home, you have no money and so you actually don't even want to go out. And so you're sticking to this environment and getting into even bigger depression. The person counts every koruna, so worrying about interacting with the society?... So you separate them and then, after a year or so, you say goodbye to them. I don't think this is the impression they should get from the Czech Republic.” R1

The psychological aspect of refugee reception and protection should not be underestimated especially, but not only, when it comes to vulnerable groups, such as victims of organized crimes, people with disabilities, elderly, single mothers, unaccompanied minor

or even children in general. Psychological help is not frequently used, as it is only provided to those clients who specifically ask for it.

“Where I see a problem is for example that the Ministry of the Interior isn’t sometimes able to identify those, who are vulnerable and in need of psychological or other help. They identify the people when it’s obvious, for example they have a mental disorder and so they provide psychological help. But if it’s for example a victim of torture, even when he says it during the interview and describes it...often no one further works with it...even we don’t. Only a few people use psychological help and when they ask for it, we help them look for a psychologist...”R5

“The problem is that even when you try to help the person...you try to find more information supporting the case...the person sometimes doesn’t make it emotionally and runs away...then because of the Dublin Resolution they are sent back to the Czech Republic and you see them again. And when it just one man or a woman, it doesn’t mean it’s easy but when it’s a whole family, then it’s terrible. Because they’re once in Czech, once in Norway...and you see them after a year, you see that the kids are in a really bad condition. That’s the worst, when kids are involved...”R4

6.3 Prevailing Mood in Society

Clearly, the mood in the society has been mostly negative towards refugees and anyone who works with them. The word ‘refugee’ is often perceived as a trigger word and so it causes less upheaval when the respondents say that they work with foreigners. The name of the organization, Organization for Assistance to Refugees, therefore sometimes becomes a target for people with complaints about refugees.

“...OPU was founded in the 90’s. And everyone treated the refugees from Bosnia well and even back then OPU was helping them...the mood in society was completely different 15 years ago. Even just the word...it bothers them now. If you tell someone that you work for Organization for Assistance to Refugees, the person immediately stops... When I talk to people I say that I work with foreigners...and then the mood is different...but I avoid the words refugee and migrant...” R3

“No it definitely isn’t a dialogue. It’s just a person who wants to complain. One colleague who is in charge of our public e-mail, she could tell you about other information that you really don’t want to read. We have quite an unpleasant name, the word refugee really resonates in it. We try to use OPU, that doesn’t trigger too much, but Organization for Assistance to Refugees is something really hard to even pronounce in this society.”R2

The clients of OPU often struggle to find a job of any kind (often unequal to their education) and deal with discrimination and unwillingness of people to help or provide services. The respondents themselves feel a change in the attitude of Czechs towards certain groups of foreigners in comparison to the years before 2015. While this does not directly influence the way they provide their services (on the contrary it affirms and motivates some of them to continue working with this target group), it does make their work more demanding as they have to deal with negative and offensive opinions on their work online via social media, but also in person.

“Even just the mood in society...it causes that the employer doesn’t want to accept the foreigner because of what they say in the TV, or what their parents at home said...and that a person cannot go to the doctor, because the doctor has racist comments about what the person’s doing there...it happened to me personally, I went to the doctor and faced hateful comments for where I work, because they asked me there what my occupation was... The clients can really be discriminated at every step of the way...by the employer, at the doctor, or many times at the labor office, when they just kicked them out because the official language is Czech. No one tried to help, even though they spoke English.”R2

“I will tell you a concrete story...I had a reunion with my schoolmates from elementary school and after we had some wine we started having some kind of discussion and my former schoolmate started saying how it is with those refugees and I just said ‘yes, okay, but you can’t just lump them all together’... and other schoolmates, I have to say she has university education, she said ‘well we know who you associate with’. I felt like it was 1936. And at that moment I realized, that it can be dangerous for me too, because I don’t know what will be in 10 or 15 years and those people know and see it this way. And at that moment you won’t explain to them who a refugee is or what the Geneva Convention is.” R3

6.4 Agents of Influence

Politicians and media have proven to be the biggest influencers in this area. Despite the fact that an increase of migration or applications for international protection has not been a problem on the national level, it has been talked about and receives strong reactions from people (especially on social media). In case of media, it is often incorrect, incomplete, simplified information that are the root of fear and negative opinions of people.

“Of course we are aware of the discourse in society, the negative view on who are refugees, migrants... I think it is logical that the society is scared of something new. I cannot hate them for that. The problem is how we work with that fear and what politicians and media do with it...but if we make it a big scary monster, then logically, people will be afraid.”R1

“For example social benefits are a huge topic...clients think that they will come and receive benefits...and that’s what’s talked about in media, that we will sustain them with the benefits, but these people are not entitled to benefits...If they live in Kostelec, they have no chance to receive benefits. If they live in a private place, then they can get benefits after 365 days. So people get the information about how we feed them from our taxes, but that’s just not true. It’s the same like when they say that migrants steal our jobs...that’s exactly what changes the mood of the society.” R2

As politicians have been the main commentators on the current migration situation in the public spaces, their impact on the society is undisputed. The respondents pointed out the period of elections, during which the migration problematics is always brought into discussion. The problem here is that some of the political parties choose more populist rhetoric instead of providing objective information about the actual situation in the country. The lack of information about the work with applicants for asylum affects the clients, their providers, as well as the public.

“Somehow it always comes up during elections. There has been no crisis here, but it was still a hot topic, everyone talked about it...but has never been here as it was described.” R2

“...even just the location of the centers is crucial, they have to be in an appropriate building... but I think that many people don’t know, where the residential centers are, and

what is really going on there. And I think that this fog, that no one really knows... is partially intentional... but I think that if there was more information, it would be much easier to work with it.” R1

6.5 Perception Change

An important fact is that at this point, there is not only one social group or class in the country that has this kind of perception of asylum seekers or migrants. The misconception of these people as well as the assistance provided to them is present across the whole spectrum – no matter the education, age, or social status. That is one of the reasons why a possible change in the society will require complex steps and a lot of time. While there have been many education projects and events trying to reach the public, the service providers are often skeptical and think that the actual change in attitude needs to be initiated by politicians and promoted through mainstream media. Only if the work of NGOs is supported and not mocked by politicians and media, then all other efforts to pursue change at all levels can become more successful.

“In case we bring objective information and there will be a constructive discussion, then why not. There is something new, let’s talk about it and face it...” R1

“There are a lot of projects, for instance now...we have one that is focused on raising awareness. Through our projects we try to pursue tearing down of the barriers and stereotypes in society and fight xenophobia, racism, and so on. So if these projects keep on going, it’s worth it but it’s a long haul...if the politicians and media keep pouring into this already messy situation, then it will be really hard...we are trying to connect the majority with minority groups. I believe that things can change in Prague, at least I feel the situation is different here than in the countryside, small towns...” R2

“I don’t know if the mood can be changed, because if you look at the discussions on the Internet, you see that no one who already can be convinced about the opposite, that there will be no Muslims coming to shoot us all. A person who is convinced, votes for SPD and listens to Ortel⁵...that’s a person who can’t be changed. The only thing that could help is if the media stopped doing what they are doing.” R4

⁵ Czech rock band popular among supporters of far-right politics

Conclusion and Discussion

The objectives of my thesis were to identify to what extent the information about refugees and migrants represented by Czech media corresponds with the reality of refugee influx to the Czech Republic and refugee protection (reception and integration patterns), and to look into the factors which influence the prevalence of anti-migrant attitudes and demonstrate how they impact the social work and other helping professions concerned with refugee assistance and services in the country. Both theoretical and empirical parts of my thesis were complementary, leading towards achievement of these objectives.

As far as the first objective is concerned, the information in this thesis shows that oftentimes refugees and migrants are presented as masses that burden our systems and threaten our security. Seldom-times there were NGOs or other agencies working directly with asylum seekers given the opportunity to speak about the current situation in Czechia in any of the Czech mainstream media. The same applies to asylum seekers themselves. Given the relatively small numbers of asylum applicants present in Czechia in the recent years and the high rejection rate, terms such as ‘refugee (or migrant) crisis’, ‘security threat’, or ‘administrative burden’ are not relevant in the Czech context. Some of these can be relevant when speaking of different countries such as Greece or Italy, which have been experiencing the arrival of migrants from Sub-Saharan or Middle Eastern countries. However, even in this case the question arises whether we receive complex or rather more of panic causing information if the media speak of the situations in other countries only through the lens of security and administration.

This question brings me to the second objective, which focused on identification of the factors influencing the anti-migrant attitudes among some Czechs. Due to the lack of personal (direct) experience of Czech society with asylum seekers in the country, it is politicians going hand-in-hand with mainstream media, who have the biggest impact on the prevalence of these attitudes in the country. The Internet and especially social media then provide a space where the information can be shared but also discussed and further misinterpreted. Not only the incorrect information but also the actual political and administrative decisions made at national and international levels impact both the attitude of society and refugee reception and protection conditions in Czechia.

As far as the national (local) level is concerned, the negative opinions of people do not influence the actual work of service providers as much as the length of the asylum procedures, which relates to the (often negative) decision-making of the Ministry of the Interior. The insecurity that the asylum seekers experience often leads to demotivation, depression, and other kinds of deprivation. It also creates many barriers in possible integration efforts of the clients, as they never know, when and what kind of decision they will obtain. To work with a client, whose foreseeable future in this country is very uncertain due to unexplainable reasons, is already hard. This fact in combination with groups in the society that build barriers out of fear and prejudice, create conditions that cannot guarantee much of a progress in the situation of asylum seekers.

At the international level, the Czech Republic together with other Visegrad countries rejected both the EU and UN's suggestions of international cooperation on common strategies and sustainable solutions of refugee movements and situations. These steps speak a concerning message to all humanitarians, social workers, lawyers, and other service providers. The rejection of the Global Compacts as well as of the solidarity among the EU countries in form of the relocation quotas leaves us guessing what the attitude of the country towards refugee rights and the Geneva Convention will be in the future years.

I took the topic of this bachelor thesis as an opportunity to learn as much as possible about reception and protection of refugees. While I tried to present as much information as I found relevant and significant, I do realize there is a lot more that could be explored and addressed in regards to the issue. For example, I would like to see a further research done with the former and current asylum seekers in the country to find out whether the refugee reception and protection conditions have improved or worsened since 5, 10, or 15 years ago. And if the Czech government (respectively the Prime Minister Babiš) is ambitious enough to rank Czechia as one the most successful countries of the EU⁶, then there should also be a comparison of these conditions with other countries, especially those of the Western Europe, since migration has been an important topic in the past elections (including this year's European Parliament elections).

⁶ For details see Novák (2019 [online])

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Appendix

Appendix 1: Question Manual for Respondents (English version)

Question manual: social workers/lawyers

Interviews for the bachelor thesis

The main research question: How does the attitude of Czech society and politicians presented in media influence reception conditions of the current refugees in the Czech Republic?

Questions:

1. Tell me something about yourself, your education and previous work as a social worker or other. What is your interest and motivation behind social work profession? Where did you work before and how did you start to work here? Did you work with similar populations (asylum seekers and refugees) before?
2. How long have you worked for OPU and what do your work tasks consist of?
3. Who are your clients? What is your experience of working with refugees? How do you understand the refugee situation as a social worker/lawyer - vulnerability, strengths, social protection needs?
4. What influences your work the most? State policies, directives of the organization?
5. How does information from media (usually negative on refugees) influence your work?
6. Are there any specific platforms, seminars, or other ways of learning more about refugees and how to work with this target group provided to you?
7. If you could describe the most exciting and most demanding aspects of your work what would they be? Do you have any suggestions on how to improve and/or influence them? Which programs in your opinion support refugees the most?

INFORMOVANÝ SOUHLAS

Vážená paní, vážený pane,

obracím se na Vás s žádostí o spolupráci na výzkumném projektu, který je součástí mé bakalářské práce s názvem Podmínky přijímání a ochrany uprchlíků v České republice. Tento výzkum na základě metod kvalitativního paradigmatu bude probíhat formou rozhovoru. Zvukový záznam rozhovoru bude zaznamenáván na nahrávací zařízení. Pokud s účastí na výzkumu souhlasíte, připojte prosím svůj podpis, kterým vyslovujete souhlas s níže uvedeným prohlášením.

Prohlášení

Prohlašuji, že souhlasím s účastí na výše uvedeném výzkumném projektu. Řešitelka výzkumu mě informovala o podstatě výzkumu a seznámila mě s cíli, metodami a postupy, které budou při výzkumu používány. Souhlasím s tím, aby všechny získané údaje byly anonymně zpracovány a použity pouze pro účely tohoto výzkumu. Zároveň souhlasím s tím, že výsledky výzkumu mohou být v bakalářské práci anonymně publikovány. Jakákoliv možná identifikace mé osoby bude odstraněna i z přepisu rozhovoru; záznam rozhovoru bude sloužit výhradně této činnosti, nebude poskytován třetí straně.

Svou účast ve výzkumu jsem měl/a jsem možnost řádně, v klidu a v dostatečně poskytnutém čase zvážit, měl/a jsem možnost se řešitelky zeptat na vše, co jsem považoval/a za pro mne podstatné a potřebné vědět. Na tyto mé dotazy jsem dostal/a jasnou a srozumitelnou odpověď. Jsem informován/a o tom, že mohu kdykoliv od účasti na výzkumu odstoupit, a to i bez udání důvodu.

Tento informovaný souhlas je vyhotoven ve dvou stejnopisech, každý s platností originálu, z nichž jeden obdrží moje osoba a druhý řešitelka výzkumu.

Jméno, příjmení a podpis řešitelky výzkumu:

Podpis účastníka výzkumu:

V _____ dne: _____