

REFUGEES IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC:

FACTS AND FIGURES

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Abstract

With an immigrant population about 600,000 persons, the Czech Republic is the main target of migrants in Central Europe. However, the country still remains rather omitted by the population of asylum seekers, in both number of applicants for international protection and number of those living there with granted refugee status. This could be in part explained by the fact that the country applies very restrictive policy in this area since more than 20 years. Out of 89,755 persons who applied for the protection between 1997 and 2019, only 2,679 (i.e. 2.98%) were granted asylum. In what concerns the countries of origin, traditionally high share (about 50%) within the asylum seekers have citizens of Ukraine, however, there have been significant changes on the “top ten” positions within last years. The paper examines the latest evolution in the number and in the composition of refugee population, linking it to the European context as well as to the so called “refugee crisis” of 2015-2016.

Key words: refugee, immigration, asylum policy, Czech Republic

JEL Code: F22, K37, J61

Introduction

Nowadays, approximately 60 conflicts worldwide generate about 79.5 million forcibly displaced people worldwide. Out of them, about 2/3 are internally displaced people (i.e. people in refugee-like situation, but without crossing international border; 45.7 million) and about 1/3 are international refugees (26.0 million). About 73 % of the global refugee population lives in the proximity of their country of origin, mostly in the countries of global South (UNCHR, 2020). However, this phenomenon touches more and more also Europe. In this paper we will examine the situation in the neighbour of Germany, the Czech Republic, to see how was this country affected by the so-called migration crisis of 2015-2016 and which factors could lead to the current situation.

1 Opening to refugees

First of all, let's look a little bit in the past and on Europe in general. The influx of asylum seekers to Western Europe has been very variable since the mid-1980s, mainly due to changes in the political situation in many countries of the world – such as the fall of the Communist regime in Central and Eastern Europe (1989-1991), wars in the former Yugoslavia – 1990s), Afghanistan (since 2001), Iraq (since 2003), etc. The trends in particular Western European countries were therefore very different – not only in view of the relatively long time span, the different asylum policies and their changes, but also due to the geographical location of individual countries, the improvement of border controls and the existence of migrant networks – with the prevalence of the increasing number of asylum seekers across Europe.

The countries of Central and Eastern Europe, Czech Republic included, have become available to asylum seekers only after 1990 – until then, they have served as source of asylum seekers in Western European countries. Since the end of the 1990s, these countries have become sufficiently attractive for asylum seekers as desirable destinations – they were formerly taken only as a first step in migrating to the countries of the European Union at that time. The volume of asylum seekers here has been very low for a long time.

The research hypothesis states as follows: *“The influx of refugees into the Czech Republic remains low, and this despite the fact that the country is the neighbour of Germany, the largest receiver of refugee population in Europe since 2015. So, the purely geographical location of the destination is not the most important factor in the decision-making process of refugees about their target”*. Due to the nature of subject and considered extent of this paper, we choose to examine mainly the secondary sources like official statistics and scholar papers to draw the portrait of refugee population in nowadays Czechia. It also has to be stressed out that such complex picture is not often given, especially in language other than Czech.

2 Context of immigration in Czechia

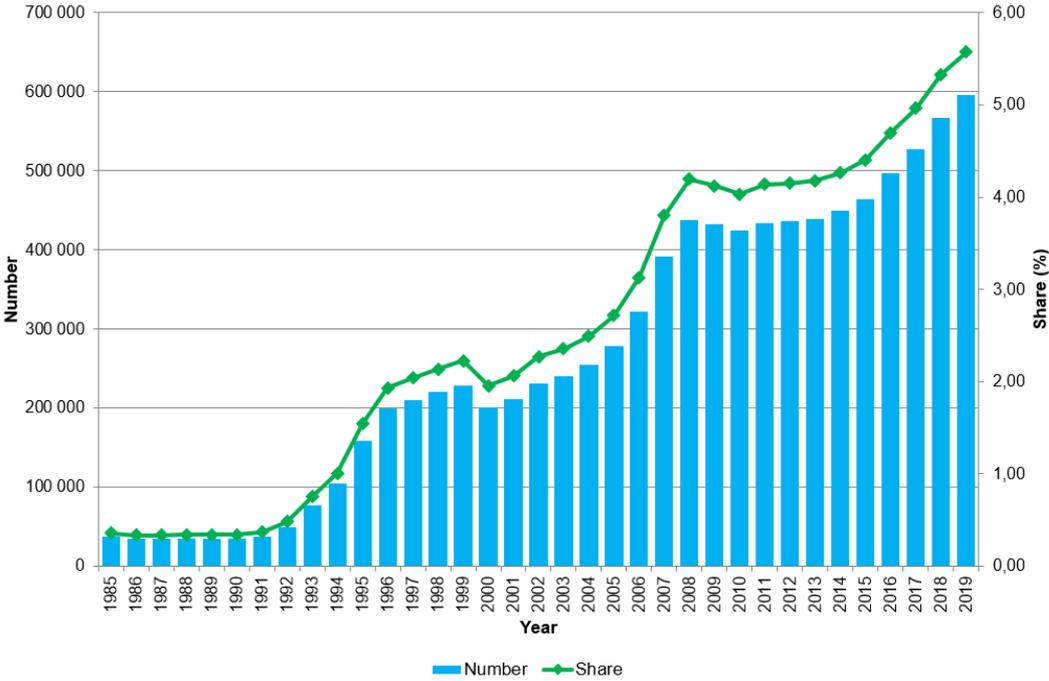
Before speaking only about refugees, let us give an insight into the general situation in immigration and its evolution in the country. Czechia, traditionally a country of emigration rather than immigration and with almost no foreign population over the decades (since the end of the World War II till the beginning of the 1990s), is currently by far the most attractive country for long-term and permanent immigrants within the Central European post-communist region. Nowadays, immigrants make up about 6% of the population of Czechia

(based on citizenship), with Ukrainians the most numerous group, followed by Slovaks, Vietnamese and Russians (MV CR, 2020a).

The main factor in the radical change as far as (not only) migration patterns in Czechia are concerned was the ‘Velvet Revolution’ in 1989 which brought in its wake a new political, economic and societal regime based on a free democratic society and a free-market economy (Barsova, 2009). Since the very beginning of the 1990s, the deep-reaching transformation of society and its globalisation (along with the milestones of the establishment of an independent Czechia by separation from Slovakia in 1993, entering NATO in 1999, joining the European Union in 2004 and the Schengen area in 2007) has gone hand in hand with changes in migration flows. Hence, in the course of time, Czechia became first a transit country for Western Europe and then an immigration country (with positive net migration). A unique combination of factors such as the speed of economic and political transformation, particular migration policies (or non-policies) along with good economic performance and demand in the labour market (especially between 1993 and 1997 and then 2004 and 2008), has made the most of the pull factor of this country for immigrants (Drbohlav, 2011; Kusnirakova, Cizinsky, 2011; Seidlova, 2018; CSU, 2019).

The turn in migration flows and dependence on adopted policy is clear if we look at the simple number of immigrants. In 1993 only 78,000 foreigners lived in Czechia and they represented 0.8% of the population. One year later, in 1994, there were already about 104,343 foreigners living in Czechia, coming mainly from Poland (20,021 persons; 19.2% of foreigners), Slovakia (16,778 persons; 16.1%), Ukraine (14,230 persons; 13.6%), Vietnam (9,633 persons; 9.2%) and Germany (4,195 persons; 4.0%) (CSU, 2020). At the end of 2019, a total of 595,881 foreigners lived in Czechia representing 5.6% of inhabitants (based on citizenship; MV CR, 2020a) (see fig. 1).

Fig. 1: Rising numbers of immigrants in Czechia (1985 – 2019)



Source: Based on data from CSU, 2020

Two thirds of current immigrant population (65.2%) came from 5 countries (when comparing 1994 to 2019, only Russia replaced Germany among the top 5), whilst almost one quarter came from just one country – Ukraine (145,518 persons; 24.4%). So Ukrainians are currently the most numerous group of immigrants, well established in Czechia for more than 20 years. The second biggest group are Slovaks (121,278 persons; 20.4%), the third Vietnamese (61,952 persons; 10.4%), the fourth Russians (38,207 persons; 6.4%) and the fifth Poles (21,767 persons; 3.7%) (MV CR, 2020a). In other words, nearly half of all foreigners (41.2%) are citizens of three countries outside the EU (Ukraine, Vietnam and Russia), one quarter (27.6%) are citizens of three neighbouring EU member states (Slovakia, Poland and Germany) and about a third (31.2%) is made up of citizens of all other countries in the world.

3 The population of asylum seekers and of refugees

Now, when we have seen the overall immigration context in the Czech Republic, let us go back to our target population, the asylum seekers and refugees. This population is, due to the nature of its movement, completely different from the population of voluntarily immigrants, searching the country mainly for economic or familial reasons and staying there based on permanent or long-term residence permit. People fleeing before the persecution, claims

international protection (asylum or subsidiary protection) and they are usually designed in a shortened term of “asylum seekers” or, once the protection received, as refugees.

In the years of so-called “refugee crisis”, 2015-2016, headed to the European Union as a whole more than 1 million refugees per year, most of them desiring to reach Germany. In 2017-2018, the number has lower to some 700 thousands per year, but Germany still remained the main target and it is the target no. 1 till nowadays (see tab. 1).

Tab. 1: The number of asylum seekers in the countries of EU (2015 – 2019)

	2015		2016		2017		2018		2019	
	Country	Number	Country	Number	Country	Number	Country	Number	Country	Number
1	Germany	476,510	Germany	745,155	Germany	222,560	Germany	184,180	Germany	165,615
2	Hungary	177,135	Italy	123,370	Italy	128,850	France	119,190	France	128,940
3	Sweden	162,450	France	83,485	France	99,330	Greece	66,965	Spain	117,795
4	Austria	88,160	Greece	51,110	Greece	58,650	Spain	54,050	Greece	77,275
5	Italy	83,540	Austria	41,950	Spain	36,605	Italy	53,700	United Kingdom	44,835
6	France	76,165	United Kingdom	38,785	United Kingdom	34,780	United Kingdom	37,730	Italy	43,770
7	Netherlands	44,970	Hungary	29,430	Sweden	26,325	Netherlands	24,025	Belgium	27,460
8	Belgium	44,660	Sweden	28,790	Austria	24,715	Belgium	22,530	Sweden	26,255
9	United Kingdom	40,160	Netherlands	20,945	Belgium	18,340	Sweden	21,560	Netherlands	25,195
10	Finland	32,345	Bulgaria	19,420	Netherlands	18,210	Austria	13,375	Cyprus	13,650
	other EU countries	96,730	other EU countries	76,425	other EU countries	43 870	other EU countries	40,935	other EU countries	50,280
	Total EU	1,322,825	Total EU	1,258,865	Total EU	712,235	Total EU	638,240	Total EU	721,070

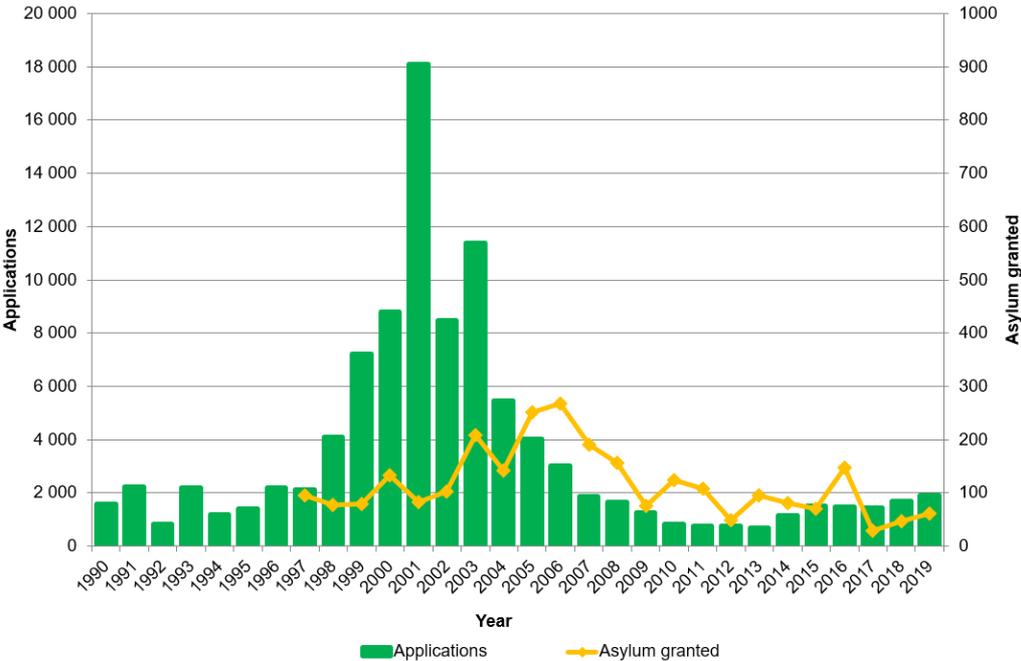
NB: EU = 28 countries

Source: Based on data from Eurostat, 2020

As the overall figures for last 30 years suggests (see fig. 2), Czechia has never been an important target of asylum seekers, and this despite its position in the very heart of Europe and right next to Germany. However, one can notice that there has been one important increase of demands for asylum: but already in 2001 and not in 2015 or 2016. This peak was caused by changes in legislation: new immigration and asylum laws were entering into force on 1st January 2000. These laws changed the rules for foreigners living in the country and, at the same time, brought them considerable difficulties. As result of this tightening, applying for asylum became a very popular strategy as it allowed to foreigners to stay in the territory of Czechia until a decision about asylum is made (and for some short time, also the possibility to enter the Czech labour market immediately after the asylum application has been submitted). And it is this change in legislation, also supported by turmoil in Chechnya, that explains the considerable increase of demands for asylum in 2001 (Seidlova, 2018).

Besides low numbers of demands, which continued to be recorded despite the so-called migration crisis in 2015-2016 – which in fact didn't bring in any significant changes in the long term evolution –, Czechia has also traditionally applied rather a very restrictive policy in terms of granting asylum or international protection. This fact is, apparently, well known to all possibly implied persons, i.e. to the asylum seekers themselves as well as to those helping them in legal or illegal way. Out of 89,755 persons who applied for such status between 1997 and 2019, only 2,679 (i.e. 2.98%) received it. And the trend remains still the same: in the year 2019, from those 1,922 persons applying for protection, only 61 persons were granted asylum (MV CR, 2020b).

Fig. 2: Asylum seekers in Czechia (1990 – 2019)



Source: Based on data from MV CR, 2020b

In what concerns the countries of origin, traditionally high share (about 50%) within the asylum seekers have citizens of Ukraine (Drbohlav, Seidlova, 2016). Other positions in the ‘top 10’ ranking are then changing within the time and reflecting current political (and other) events in all countries of the world, or even Czech policy in regard to asylum seekers (as, for example, the decision in 2016 to grant asylum to 20 families of Iraqis of Christian origin). These evolution and constant changes can be seen from the data in the table no. 2 below.

Tab. 2: Number of applications for international protection in Czech Republic by citizenship and years 2009 – 2019

Rank	Citizenship	Year											Total 2009-2019
		2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	
1	Ukraine	203	115	152	174	146	515	694	507	435	418	311	3,670
2	Viet Nam	63	44	46	54	49	64	80	67	82	100	143	792
3	Mongolia	159	96	41	22	13	18	15	9	8	23	26	430
4	Turkey	66	49	32	12	16	8	10	23	32	39	25	312
5	Syrian Arab Republic/ Syria	45	16	23	68	69	108	135	78	76	37	40	695
6	Russian Federation	57	51	47	40	53	43	43	61	57	90	90	632
7	Cuba	11	17	20	15	39	42	128	85	68	154	32	611
8	Belarus	54	56	71	54	22	31	19	12	19	13	19	370
9	Armenia	20	16	11	22	43	28	44	60	129	117	372	862
10	Georgia	33	8	17	9	16	19	20	49	129	170	224	694
11	Kazakhstan	186	46	17	23	22	7	18	18	38	31	109	515
12	Iraq	11	5	9	5	11	22	38	158	52	65	22	398
13	Nigeria	41	32	18	12	22	26	27	29	18	19	19	263
14	Kyrgyzstan	23	33	32	16	12	13	14	11	10	15	28	207
15	China	17	8	7	7	8	9	40	68	9	6	24	203
16	Uzbekistan	16	13	26	11	6	6	5	18	9	98	85	293
17	Afghanistan	4	7	26	10	8	13	24	37	13	27	23	192
18	Moldova (the Republic of)	20	13	8	10	11	8	21	9	17	13	43	173
19	Myanmar	23	42	23	30	5	5	2	5	4	3	2	144
20	Algeria	9	14	10	20	6	10	11	11	7	19	13	130
	Other	400	267	272	313	276	676	831	670	238	245	272	4,460
	Total	1,258	833	756	753	707	1,156	1,525	1,478	1,450	1,702	1,922	13,540

Source: Based on data from MV CR, 2020b

In 2019, a total of 1,922 persons have claimed international protection in Czechia. Out of them, almost one fifth were Armenians (372 persons – 19.4 %), taking for the first time since 2009 the first place to Ukrainians. The Ukrainians were hence the second most represented groups (311 persons – 16.2 %). The third were the citizens of Georgia (224 persons, i.e. 11.7%) and the fourth one was made by the citizens of Vietnam (143 persons – 7.4%), confirming the theories about the same destinations of migrants and asylum seekers of one origin (see table 3).

Tab. 3: TOP 10 citizenship of applicants for international protection in Czechia in 2019

2019			
Rank	Citizenship	Number	Share (%)
1	Armenia	372	19.4
2	Ukraine	311	16.2
3	Georgia	224	11.7
4	Vietnam	143	7.4
5	Kazakhstan	109	5.7
6	Russia	90	4.7
7	Uzbekistan	85	4.4
8	Azerbaijan	47	2.4
9	Moldova	43	2.2
10	Syria	40	2.1
	Other	458	23.8
	Total	1,922	100.0

Source: Based on data from MV CR, 2020b

As these figures indicates, Czechia is still not within the main targets of asylum seekers coming to Europe, and this although the geographical position right next to the biggest receiver, Germany, with its 165,615 applications for international protection in 2019. The Czech numbers are also well behind France on second place (129 thousands of applications in 2019) or even Spain on third place (117 thousands of applications in 2019), where we could pretend the impact of ancient colonial ties not only in the direction of legal immigrants subsequently creating large communities, but also of the refugees, together with their geographical position, making the real outer border of European Union.

Conclusion

In this paper, we presented overall situation in immigration in the Czech Republic and we have paid special attention to the population of asylum seekers. The numbers presented

proved that the politics of (not)welcome and the overall image of country within these fleeing populations alike within the (il)legal converters have much more importance than the only geographical position of a country. We also proved that an existing community of expatriates plays significant role in the process of destination decision making of refugees. So our research hypothesis was confirmed. Obviously, such short paper have mainly the introductory role for the subject, especially for non-Czech speakers for whom such figures and context could be difficultly accessible. The issues which are needed to be more covered by following papers, ranges from the overall setting of the procedure of seeking asylum in the Czech Republic through the pitfalls of social work with this particular group to the labour market participation of recognised refugees.

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