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churches' commission for migrants in europe

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**Conference on the occasion of the 20<sup>th</sup> CCME General Assembly  
Churches' Role in the Integration of Refugees and Migrants**

**Prague Thursday 22<sup>nd</sup> June 2017**

**"No longer strangers and aliens,  
but fellow citizens with the saints  
and members of the household of God"  
(Ephesian 2: 19)**



Churches' Commission for Migrants in Europe – Commission des Églises auprès des Migrants en Europe – Kommission der Kirchen für Migranten in Europa

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## Opening

The conference was opened with a prayer and opening remarks by Rev. Daniel Ženatý, Synodal Senior of the Evangelical Church of the Czech Brethren (ECCB) as the host. He made special reference to the context of the Czech Republic, where the current climate and opinion of the government was not favourable for refugee reception. He was therefore very glad to welcome the General Assembly of CCME and the conference.

CCME Moderator Dr. Victoria Kamondji Johnston, expressed thanks to the hosting church, drawing the attention of the audience to the fact that the European Commission had recently opened infringement procedures against, among others, the Czech Republic for not accepting the agreed number of refugees on Czech territory.



## Integration from a Czech perspective

The thematic part of the conference was opened with the panel “Integration from a Czech perspective”. Ms Pavla Novotna, Deputy Director of the Section of Asylum and Migration Policy in the Ministry of Interior of the Czech Republic opened by saying that she would not express a political point of view but one based on the practice.

In her view a number of issues formed together one complex: migration, asylum, integration. Looking on the overall picture there are 500 000 foreigners living in the Czech Republic. Since last year, the Czech Republic has the fastest growing foreign population in the EU.

In order to address this reality, a system of language training and housing has been put in place; it is in its second phase, meaning it is more individualised. While there was some success, she would have hoped for more municipalities on board.

Top five nationalities of third country nationals in the Czech Republic (not asking for asylum) are: Ukrainian, Iraqi, Cubans, Syrian and Chinese.

Top three of nationalities which are granted asylum: Iraqi, Syrian, Ukrainian.

In the Czech Republic, asylum status is the same as a permanent residence status, which is very close to full Czech citizenship in terms of rights (education, social system, etc.) but without the right to vote and the obligation of military service.

Social assistance allocations are not so high, thus it is difficult to cope with housing.

In the second input “Good practice examples” Ms Alena Fendrychova and Mr Tomas Tozicka, Diakonie of the ECCB took the word.

Ms Alena Fendrychova started by introducing herself as a social worker from Diakonie ECCB, the second biggest diaconal organisation in the Czech Republic after Caritas.

The Diakonie ECCB works with refugees, migrant families, undocumented migrants in detention centres, exploited workers (mostly Romanians).

She underlined that there are a lot of migrants in the Czech Republic but few refugees, as the following chart will show:

2015	1525 asylum seekers	470 asylum or subsidiary protection granted
2016	1475 asylum seekers	456 asylum or subsidiary protection granted
2017	590 asylum seekers	67 asylum or subsidiary protection granted

Only 12 out of 2691 people foreseen had arrived according to the EU relocation system and 52 out of 526 through a resettlement procedure.

Many people, a majority, in Czech Republic are concerned about security and terrorism. They are led to think in that way by the government and media. The Diakonie want to change that.

In 2015, the Synod of the ECCB reacted on terrorist attacks and the “refugee” crisis with a declaration of openness for refugees and refusing the logic of fear.

In practical terms, the Diakonie project Doma (“Doma” meaning home in Czech) is running from



March 2017 to August 2019 in 6 Czech regions and Prague. The aim of the project is to make people who arrive here feel at home, feel safe, and have friends, thus contributing to the Integration of recognised refugees.

The 3 main areas of the project are:

- Social assistance: dealing with authorities, jobs, housing etc.
- Volunteers helping the families: tutoring children, sharing experience in personal hobbies or professions, conversation in the language, guiding in the city, etc.
- Regular activities in the congregation once a month so that people can meet each other. Cooking is the perfect occasion for that.

While the programme was still young, there is hope that it will become a success

Mr Tomas Tozicka, Director of Diakonie ECCB started his presentation stating that it is a shame and a huge disappointment for Diakonie that the Czech Republic does nothing whereas 65.5 million people are refugees or internally displaced in the world.

He shared his concern about global injustice. In his opinion the situation is getting worse and countries like the Czech Republic are doing little to solve the problems. He

also expressed strong concern about standards of reception and detention in the Czech Republic.

A lively discussion followed the inputs:

- A Czech civil servant highlighted the view that conditions in reception and detention centres are not perfect but they are as good as in other member states.
- Efthalia Pappa wanted to know more about the infringement procedure launched by the EC.
- Katharina Stamm asked a question about the mandatory relocation system, suggesting that instead of forcing states, a bottom-up approach could be used.

Pavla Novotna answered that she does not believe in obligatory relocation because if people are forced to move to a country, it is not good for integration. She reminded the audience of the reality that refugee benefits in Germany are higher than the minimum wage in the Czech Republic, so making refugees stay was difficult. She does not think one can force a country and a society to accept refugees. Changing attitudes cannot be done in two days, but it rather takes time.

Alena Fendrychova recalled that the Czech Parliament voted against a relocation system almost unanimously, but it was due to the political atmosphere and political games; it does not express the reality. They are more favourable to resettlement because it is voluntary for participation and for people on the move.

- David Jakobsson asked a question about foreign people having/using three identities and smuggling.

Pavla Novotna confirmed that there are a lot of foreigners with many identities and a majority of migrants come through smugglers.

- David Jakobsson asked an additional question on integration, employment rate, jobs and vacancies in the Czech Republic.

Alena Fendrychova held that there are few refugees so in that sense, labour market integration is not that much of a problem. But it takes time to learn the language so to integrate the labour market.

Tomas Tozicka slightly disagreed noting that vacancies are a problem. Coming back to the issue on reception and detention, he noted that the Czech Ombudsman has been saying for several years that conditions in centres and camps are worse than in prison. Some children are detained in those camps.

- Michael N. Jagessar asked how the integration process was tailored to change the Czech opinion on integration, so that Czechs would come to the conclusion that it should be a two-way process.

Pavla Novotna confirmed that integration is a two-way process. In order to advance on this in practice there are simple materials for example on definitions of refugees and other migrants for media, schools. There is of course a need to go to secondary schools and practical schools with this. Her office would like to finance projects like that but there are not many proposals from NGOs.

Alena Fendrychova replied that as long as the President (of the Czech Republic) says what he says, all well-meaning efforts are in vain. There is a bottom-up movement for integration as a two way process, but there is no government support.

The conference paused for lunch.

### **Migrants' and Refugees' Integration: opportunities and challenges**

After lunch the panel "Migrants' and Refugees' Integration: opportunities and challenges" started with an input by Mr Thomas Huddleston of the Migration Policy Group.

Huddleston underlined that integration happens all the time, overtime and it is better when governments invest in integration. He introduced the thoughts and mechanisms behind the Migrant Integration Policy Index MIPEX. In the years of working on MIPEX one had seen as many opportunities as challenges.

The general finding was that when states invest in integration or remove obstacles it actually helps integration. Integration policies do in that sense matter.

Communication equally matters: most people are uninformed about migrants: they turn to their governments for guidance. Studies show that where governments have integration policies, people see migrants as an opportunity. So national governments are key factors for integration.



Huddleston pointed out that 2016 was a terrible year because there was a lot of uncertainty from the European Commission and the European Council; there were hysteria about migration in some countries and a disproportional fear of the far right. In his opinion this fear of the

right is treated by politicians in a way that it reached the public. All this had led to a major change in practice: a lot of the refugee-welcome energy has disappeared. One now needed to look at how to find new meaningful opportunities for society to mobilise people: one element could be through sponsorship for resettlement. He then explained the project of a European Citizens' Initiative on a comprehensive European migration policy, which would address among others resettlement sponsorship. He highlighted that the European Citizens' Initiative which MPI and others wanted to launch is still looking for national partners.

The next speaker was Mr David Bradwell from the Church of Scotland. He asked what churches can specifically do in integration? In his view they are called to coordinate and mobilise. His specific experience is the one of working for the Church of Scotland in an inter-faith initiative working together with Muslims and Jews. Small white Christian communities are for example engaging with Syrian Muslim families, Jews talk about antisemitism. An NGO worked with Jewish communities on welcoming cards for refugees. In June, they asked refugees what they'd like to offer to the community: they prepared an iftar meal for everyone and it was a good way of bonding.

Revd Luca Barrato from the Federation of Protestant Churches in Italy referred in his presentation to the specific Italian experience of the so-called “humanitarian corridors” – an initiative by churches in Italy. These are used to facilitate safe and legal access to Italy from outside the EU making use of national validity humanitarian visa as foreseen in article 25 of the Schengen Visa Code. There is currently one operating corridor from Lebanon. One from Ethiopia could open soon with the Catholic Church being in charge, but there is no news from the planned corridor from Morocco.

Barrato explained that after the arrival in Italy, many newly arrived are hosted by the Protestant Church. Among the first groups which arrived, after one year, 20 people found a job. He felt that this was not bad, as it takes time to learn Italian and to adjust to a new country. Some of the first arrived are in universities, some have short contracts, traineeships etc.

The most difficult thing in Barrato’s experience is to deal with expectations – it is important that people have realistic expectations as this makes it easier for resettlement to be a success.

In addition to the corridors, in Sicily, there is the House of Cultures for unaccompanied minors. It is a space of exchange and open to all members of the local community. In the house, Italians and refugees share problems like jobs, housing, etc.: there is a place for all the people – migrants, refugees or natives – facing the same issues.



The last panellist was Ms Elena Timofticiuc, representing Romanian AIDRom. The work of AIDRom’s department of cooperation and development includes work for:

- The prevention of trafficking for forced labour,
- Asylum seekers, third country citizens and models of integration,
- Equal opportunities on the labour market.

AIDRom has counselling centres across the country.

Regarding integration, there had been a shift: in the last five years, as Romania turned from an emigration to an immigration country. AIDRom’s Project Interac-Integration tried to respond to this. It is based on two pillars:

1. Direct assistance: a complementary aid scheme is implemented in cooperation with the General Inspectorate of Immigration on the base of individual case management
2. Capacity building for local authorities and local actors involved in the issues of migration.

Language courses, judicial assistance and cultural orientation are also provided.

In the following discussion

- Adejare Oyewole posed the question if refugees wanted to stay in Romania or not.

Elena Timofticiuc responded that AIDRom's programme starts from the needs of the refugees. Once needs are met step by step, refugees understand that they can live in Romania. Initially, many want to leave for Germany, but once they realise that it is not much better there, they come back and ask to reintegrate with the programme.



Luca Baratto highlighted that the integration of children is very important because they are our future. They are the adults of tomorrow.

- A participant asked if it helped in Italy that the Catholic Church is really present. Background of the question was that they are trying to start sponsorship in the UK but it is very slow.

Luca Baratto reminded the audience that the programme was mostly created because so many people were dying in the sea and because so many incidents happened, they had to do something.

- A question was asked about legislation on humanitarian visas.

Thomas Huddleston picked up this question, explaining that member states do not have an obligation to deliver humanitarian visas but rather this is a gap in the EU legislation. States often felt the need to put barriers preventing private sponsorship. One therefore needed to make governments and EU leaders understand that people are willing to have and integrate more refugees.

The conference paused for coffee/tea.

### **Integrating Refugees in a difficult environment**

After the break the conference continued with the panel "Integrating Refugees in a difficult environment". It was opened by Ms Olivera Vutokic, UNHCR Budapest office. She opened by recognising that there is a bad perception of Central European countries by refugees: governments in the region say that refugees don't want to stay so they don't invest in integration; when they're asked, refugees say they don't want to stay because there is no integration process – it becomes a vicious circle.

She underlined that UNHCR is in Hungary for advocacy purpose. Refugees have a lot to say and to do. UNHCR advocate for their messages to governments and NGOs. The keyword for them in these efforts is: partnership in integration.

In their advocacy work, UNHCR was using good examples of integration: the Czech government will be looking at the Finnish programme; materials such as the "integration guide" made by the city and mayor of Gdansk were being shared.

An additional issue is that there are jobs but they are not accessible to refugees, except low paid ones that cannot support a family.

The second panellist was Mr Bořivoj Tydlitát from the Caritas Parish organization in Prague. He shared his practical experiences of working for and with refugees. In their work, they try to cultivate and educate the public on people on the move. There are for example public discussions with volunteers.

He went on to counter some of the prevailing anti-refugee argument. In his experience, there is no interfaith problem: in their work they have beautiful Christian-Muslim faith discussions. This work is a resistance against the political hate circulating.

The third input on the panel came from Ms Dóra Kanizsai-Nagy representing the Reformed Church and Kalunba Charity from Hungary. In her experience, the needs in Hungary are psychological counselling, personal language courses and tutorials etc.



She explained that since the Paris attacks on “Charlie Hebdo” there are government-led campaigns of communication to confuse people, so they are not able to make the

distinctions between asylum seekers, refugees and economic migrants.

In this difficult context, all the attention which had been on churches in Hungary, particularly by other churches, the requests for partnership, messages of solidarity and other support had helped to remind the church in Hungary of its role in welcoming the stranger.

In practical life there are a number of challenges for adult refugees:

- There is no more financial assistance for integration provided;
- Difficulty in home rentals leading to a lack of sustainable housing;
- Access to health insurance;
- There is a revision of protection status after 3 years, leading to uncertainty;
- Many refugees are in a limbo situation within Europe, for example due to the Dublin system.

The Reformed Church and Kalunba are trying to offer a practical complex programme: rented apartments, Hungarian lessons, assistance to get schooled (8<sup>th</sup> grade or vocational course), employment coaching, placements, mentoring, in kind or financial assistance, food and accessories for the refugees’ flats.

The last speaker on the panel was Ms Seda Tonoyan, WCC Armenia Round Table (ART). She started with a few words about the general situation in Armenia, characterized by high poverty, little and slow economic development, only partly free democracy, great gender gap and high unemployment.

Against this background the presence of 5.22 refugees per 1000 inhabitants has led to great challenges: there is no housing, no available jobs and limited welfare (health, education, etc.). However, as most refugees are ethnic Armenians from Syria, the connectors are strong: there is the nationality, common culture and history.

In 2012-2013 ART was involved in providing aid to 6,000 refugees; psychological and social support was offered. In 2014, a public discussion centered on ways of providing help to internally displaced people in Syria.

The programmes have developed:

- Humanitarian aid (food and other items) are provided to 8,000 refugees,
- There is a vivid cooperation with the private sector like supermarkets,
- Progress is made in social inclusion: psychological and social discussions for refugees take place, home visits are organized as well as events, e.g. pilgrimages, public awareness raising activities are carried out, for example with documental theatre;
- There are activities aiming at economic empowerment: vocational trainings are provided (in IT leading to jobs or in applied arts), there is provision of equipment and help with marketing.

Despite these important efforts, many challenges remain including the generally volatile economic and social situation, the unstable peace in the region, lack of housing and of job opportunities, access to healthcare, and last not least the lack of funds.

- Marja-Liisa Laihia asked the panellists about opportunities as there are so many obstacles to get a job.

In Finland for example, you need to have a passport. Do they face this problem?

Elena Timofticiuc replied that in her experience access to a job is mostly a problem of language.

- Efthalia Pappa expressed that when one talks about integration, one has to start from the very beginning, namely with asylum seekers in the camps.
- Peter Karlsson raised the 'challenge of xenophobia among members of the Church? In his reality in Sweden, the Populist Party is using the Church as a platform to spread xenophobia.



## Conclusions

As a summary of the day, Dr Torsten Moritz, CCME offered a number of conclusions. He apologized that it had for a number of reasons not been possible to have a refugee representative addressing the conference, which CCME would have preferred. Moritz highlighted that it was good to have speakers from practical and political levels, from churches, NGOs and government. Making reference to various speakers he held that the main issue across Europe at the moment is fear and that churches are in a unique role to address this. For the success of integration it was important that integration has to start from day 1.

He issued a word of caution about the hope to “manage” expectations: while information provision was always good the reality of refugees often was that they are in a difficult situation and once they receive an alternative, they choose the offer.

Despite the practical and political challenges, Moritz closed with underlining the need of principles: approaching the issue with an open mind and open heart would certainly help.



A concluding prayer was led by: Mgr. Petr Jan Vinš, General Secretary of the Ecumenical Council of Churches in the Czech Republic

## Churches' Role in the Integration of Refugees and Migrants

- 11.00 Welcome and prayer:  
Revd Daniel Ženatý, Synodal Senior ECCB  
Dr Victoria Kamondji Johnston, Moderator CCME
- 11.30 Integration from a Czech perspective  
Ms Pavla Novotna, Deputy Director of the Section of Asylum and Migration Policy in the Ministry of Interior of the Czech Republic  
Good practice examples  
Ms Alena Fendrychova and Mr Tomas Tozicka, Diakonie of the ECCB  
Discussion
- 13.00 Lunch
- 14.30 **Migrants' and Refugees' Integration: opportunities and challenges**  
Mr Thomas Huddleston, Migration Policy Group  
Scotland: Mr David Bradwell, Church of Scotland  
Italy: Revd Luca Barrato, Federation of Protestant Churches Italy  
Romania: Ms Elena Timofticiuc AIDRom  
Discussion
- 16.00 Coffee/tea
- 16.30 **Integrating Refugees in a difficult environment**  
Ms Olivera Vutokic, UNHCR Budapest office  
Czech Republic: Mr Bořivoj Tydlitát, Caritas Parish organization, Prague  
Hungary: Ms Dóra Kanizsai-Nagy, Reformed Church/Kalunba  
Armenia: Ms Seda Tonoyan, WCC Armenia Round Table  
Discussion
- 18.00 Conclusions: Dr Torsten Moritz, CCME  
*Concluding prayer.* Mgr. Petr Jan Vinš  
General Secretary of the Ecumenical Council of Churches in the Czech Republic