



CARIM EAST – CONSORTIUM FOR APPLIED RESEARCH ON INTERNATIONAL MIGRATION

Co-financed by the European Union

Asylum Seekers, Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons in the Republic of Belarus: challenges to social cohesion

Larissa Titarenko

CARIM-East Explanatory Note 13/101

Socio-Political Module

September, 2013



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Introduction

There is a global rise in forced migration resulting from military and ethnic conflicts and natural disasters. Being one of the stable countries in the post-Soviet region the Republic of Belarus attracts attention of forced migrants seeking asylum and/or protection. Thus, the problem of forced migration affects Belarus, as it acts as a recipient country for foreign nationals and stateless persons seeking refuge and/or asylum.

Regulation of problems of refugees and citizens seeking asylum in Belarus

Refugees usually come to Belarus fearing persecution because of race, ethnicity, religion or political beliefs in their countries of origin. The Department for Citizenship and Migration of the Belarusian Ministry of Interior deals with the refugee cases. The State Border Committee and the Ministry of Labor and Social Protection also play an active role in regulating forced migration. The United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) is an international organization that helps refugees settle, consults them and assists in setting up the system of refugee protection.

Belarusian authorities see the main challenge in dividing the flows of forced migrants at the Belarusian border. According to the head of the unit within the International Cooperation Department of the State Border Committee Alexander Svidersky, the task of border officers consists in “dividing mixed migration flows at the border into asylum seekers, illegal migrants and human trafficking victims”, which, in his point of view, means to “ensure that Belarus fulfills its international obligations in the field of migration flow regulation; provide asylum seekers with unobstructed access to the country’s territory and procedure of refugee status identification; ensure observation of the main human rights when dealing with migrants and refugees” (BelaPAN 2013a).

The Republic of Belarus signed key international documents (the 1951 UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and the 1967 UN Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees) touching upon refugees and asylum seekers and constantly improves the national legislation (Fedorako 2012, Kasinsky 2012), thus guaranteeing rights and freedoms mentioned in those documents to the persons coming to Belarus. This is primarily relevant for foreign nationals who are refugees or seek asylum in Belarus. Belarusian legislation gives these persons an opportunity to address a petition to the Belarusian authorities and after going through the necessary procedures obtain the corresponding status. Under the Belarusian laws (earlier the Law on Refugees adopted in 1995 with later amendments and starting from 2009 the Law on Granting Refugee Status, Complementary and Temporary Protection to Foreign Citizens and Stateless Persons in the Republic of Belarus, adopted in 2008), foreign nationals who were granted refugee status or asylum enjoy all main rights and freedoms in the territory of Belarus. There are necessary legal mechanisms to resolve the issues related to filing a petition, obtaining the status and making arrangements for those who obtained the status they came looking for.

In Belarus forced migrants and refugees usually do not create any additional problems for law enforcement agencies, and the population treats them well. Due to low numbers of refugees (see Table 1) and them being generally law-abiding, these foreign nationals are not a ‘challenge’ or ‘threat’ to social cohesion of the Belarusian society. Interaction of the general public with refugees is rather calm and insignificant, and attitude of the population to refugees, according to the study, is generally neutral (Selivanov 2009: 41). Under the law, these persons can get employed in Belarus, have no restrictions for travelling around the country and are not targets of racial or ethnic oppression.

At the same time, Belarusian authorities thoroughly control observation of Belarusian laws by refugees and other foreign nationals. For instance, “Refugees” automated system and “Dacto” identification system serve this purpose. The latter allows identifying foreign nationals apprehended for violation of border legislation, including persons petitioning for refugee status (BelaPAN 2013b).

Statistics of refugees and persons in need of asylum in Belarus

According to the Belarusian Ministry of the Interior (Ministry of Interior 2013), 1030 foreign nationals applied for refugee status or complementary protection in Belarus in 2004-2012 (see Table 1). 106 applications for refugee status or complementary protection were accepted in 2012, 32 were being examined by the beginning of 2012. 59 persons obtained the status by the end of 2012, 46 were denied and examination was ceased in 15 cases. Majority of persons who filed such applications were citizens of Afghanistan (69 persons), followed by citizens of Syria (14) and Georgia (11). Other countries were represented by single digits.

If one examines the whole period (2004-2012), 513 out of those 1030 persons were citizens of Afghanistan, 155 were Georgians, 40 were Ukrainians, 31 Russians, 28 citizens of Pakistan, 28 persons from Iran, 26 persons from Iraq, 26 Azerbaijanis, 21 national of Syria (Ministry of Interior 2013). There is an evident predominance of citizens coming from countries involved in warfare or ethnic conflict. 317 applications came from former USSR countries. Common past renders their adaptation and socialization in Belarus rather easy, especially taking into account that most of them speak Russian, i.e. can communicate, find a job on their own and deal with daily routine. As for citizens of Afghanistan, they also usually speak Russian, as during Soviet times they got their education in the USSR (usually in Belarus). That is why their applications seem reasonable. Their integration is also rather smooth: many have friends in Belarus and are well familiar with Belarusian culture.

Integration of refugees in the Belarusian society

In the cases when voluntary repatriation of refugees from Belarus does not seem possible, one has to ensure their integration in the recipient society. The main tasks are to provide refugees with accommodation and jobs, guarantee their rights and freedoms, as well as give them a chance to preserve and develop their culture, traditions and customs while residing in Belarus. The number of refugees is small, but it is important to provide conditions guaranteed by law and make sure that refugees are not discriminated by Belarusian population, feel comfortable in the country and in the end can fully adapt and integrate in the Belarusian society, despite cultural differences between them and ethnic Belarusians who are the absolute majority in the population (over 80%).

Integration measures are primarily undertaken by Belarusian authorities and refugee organizations. International organizations allocating funds for these tasks also play an active role. In 2005-2011 four projects were developed and implemented with the total budget exceeding 5 mln. USD. The second stage of the project “Integration of Refugees in Belarus, Moldova and Ukraine (phase I)” was launched in 2012. Belarusian Ministry of Interior also supported the UNHCR project “Asylum Quality Initiative in Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus” for 2013—2014 (BelaPAN 2013a).

Up until now there have been practically no cases of rights violations and discrimination of refugees in Belarus or hostility towards them. According to one of the refugee studies, they themselves do not complain to authorities about that (Selivanov 2009: 40). An important reason for conflict-free adaptation of refugees is that many of them speak Russian. Let us show this using two most numerous refugee groups as an example, namely Afghans and Georgians. Most Afghani refugees studied in the Soviet Union, many have Belarusian wives and friends and know Belarusian customs. As for Georgian refugees, their Soviet past combined with knowledge of Russian makes it rather easy for this group to integrate (provided that they are willing to adapt in Belarus).

Refugees who are not willing to adapt try to communicate mostly with their own communities and refugee associations created by many ethnic groups. For instance, international charity organization “Afghan Community”, international association “Afghan Community, Association and Refugees”, and Foundation for Support of Forced Migrants and Refugees “Integration-A” work with Afghan refugees. Georgian non-governmental organizations are also active: Grodno non-governmental association of Georgians, Georgian cultural and enlightenment society “Mamuli”. Such organizations support national culture, bring refugees together, assist in their integration in the recipient society, support their members financially and morally.

There are no refugee camps in Belarus, only temporary accommodation centers, where refugees do not usually stay for a long time. They are accommodated either in places recommended by Belarusian administration (in this case they are provided with financial assistance for relocation), or where their compatriots already reside. Majority of refugees live in Minsk (Selivanov 2009: 44) and other large cities (Gomel, Grodno, Vitebsk). Refugees do not have to stay at recommended locations, as there are no restrictions on the choice of residence. In the latter case the main financial assistance is provided by associations of fellow-countrymen. If refugees have no money, they can continue staying in temporary accommodation centers (in Vitebsk and Gomel), where housing is paid for by the Belarusian government. After seven years and provided that general conditions are met (knowledge of the state language, available source of subsistence, respect for the national legislation etc.), refugees can apply for Belarusian citizenship. Such cases already took place, especially when refugees had Belarusian relatives.

Children of refugees enjoy the right to attend preschool and school institutions free of charge. Two schools in Minsk and Gomel have special programs for children of refugees aimed to facilitate their education and provide assistance. These programs are funded by the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees. As for higher education institutions, refugees have no benefits and file their documents in accordance with the usual procedure, which makes entry difficult, primarily because instruction is in the state language.

Medical care is provided to refugees on the same basis as to other foreign nationals residing in Belarus. Refugees have a right to free-of-charge medical assistance at outpatient and polyclinic institutions in their place of registration or temporary residence. Belarusian Red Cross Society also provides refugees with some assistance in medical issues.

Refugees can get assistance of the state employment service when looking for a job. This means that refugees registered by the service can get unemployment benefits, do paid social work, and undergo professional training and retraining. However, many refugees prefer to be self-employed. In that case if they do not reside in their place of registration, they lose the right to state assistance in employment. Some refugees used UNHCR grants to start their own business. For instance, billiard club “Golden Ball” was established in Gomel that way and now it employs 24 persons, 14 of whom are refugees. The club became the center of culture and sports for many forced migrants and hosted national holidays, cultural events and sports competitions. Grodno non-governmental organization of Georgians is another example, it helped 9 Georgian refugees get employed at the pita workshop (Selivanov 2009: 46).

By and large, the most successful cases of integration are cases of refugees who have studied at the Belarusian universities during the Soviet period, established sufficiently solid ties with the community and found jobs. At the same time, judging by the results of research (Selivanov 2009), many refugees consider Belarus only as a temporary refuge place and do not intend to integrate there. In an interview I conducted in October 2012, a young forced migrant from Iran, who was at the time residing in Minsk, expressed his strong intention to leave for the European Union.

Conclusion

At present, Belarus is witnessing a rise in the number of applications for refugee status. 854 foreign nationals were granted refugee status in Belarus in 1997-2012, and 1,030 applications were filed in 2004-2012. These figures demonstrate that Belarus currently fulfills its international obligations in the field.

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Table 1. Information on the number of foreign nationals who applied for refugee status or complementary protection in the Republic of Belarus in 2004-2012 (selectively – only countries with 5 and more applications)

Country	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	Total for 2004-2012
Azerbaijan	8	2	1	1	4	3	3	3	1	26
Armenia	6		4		1				1	12
Afghanistan	72	64	44	34	33	83	91	34	58	513
Bangladesh			4		2					6
Georgia	32	23	7	7	14	21	22	18	11	155
Egypt						1		1	4	6
Iraq	5	2	9	2	5	1		2		26
Iran		1	1	1	9	9	2	4	1	28
Kazakhstan				2		1	1	1		5
DR Congo					1	4		2		7
Kyrgyzstan		4	1			1	2			8
Moldova	2		1		1	1		1		6
Pakistan	1				4	7	6	8	2	28
Palestine	3	1			1					5
Poland	1		3		2		5		1	12
Russia					1	8	14	5	3	31
Syria	5			1		1			14	21
Sudan		5	1		1	1	2			10
Tajikistan	7	4		1		1			1	14
Uzbekistan	4			1		2	2			9
Ukraine	1	5	6	1	10	9	3	2	3	40
Ethiopia	1	8							1	10
.....									
Total	156	125	95	55	93	160	155	85	106	1030

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