

# Asylum Seekers—Challenges for Estonia in a Post-Modern Europe

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The Illuka Refugee Centre is located in the Estonian forest, about 20 km from the Russian border, where border guards patrol the area. It is not easy to reach the Centre without personal transport as there is no direct public transportation; the closest bus connection is three times a week to the nearest town Jõhvi, the capital of Eastern-Virumaa, a county inhabited by a Russian-speaking majority. There is a small village near the Centre with a Russian Orthodox Church, and no shops. Residents have to shop for food from Jõhvi, approximately a 30-minute car ride from the Centre. The nearest Estonian primary school is 25 km from the Centre and the nearest school with Russian language of instruction is in Jõhvi.

The Centre was built with Finnish funding in 2000. The location was chosen based on its proximity to the Russian border since most asylum seekers immigrate to Estonia from or via Russia. The capacity of the building is for 35 people and the highest number of refugees has been around 23, while the least has been 2 or 3. The head of the Centre thinks that this type of institution should be located near a larger city, closer to the Estonian community. Presently, there are 18 people; among them three families with children (three small children and a sixteen year old boy) from Ingushetia and Abkhazia in Russia. The 16 year old boy attends school in Jõhvi. Initially, he attended the Estonian school, but he was left on the periphery and did not receive adequate attention or guidance. He just came to the classroom and sat there, but nobody helped or taught him. Then he sat in the corridor and then in the school yard, but he still received no attention. When the family got to know about this he was moved to the Russian school in Jõhvi. He can reach the school by school bus. It seems there are also other children in the village near the Centre who attend the Russian school. It is not surprising that the new



immigrants relate and socialize more with the local Russian community rather than the Estonian community. However, there are some volunteers from Tartu who visit the Centre periodically; arrange excursions around Estonia for the asylum seekers, provide them with needed information and offer them various services, for example psychological advice.

The head of the Centre described the residents as lazy; people who sleep until midday, and do not have any interests other than cooking for themselves, watching TV or surfing the internet. They frequently need to visit doctors, family doctors, oculist, and

psychiatrists and so on. There is, however, no social worker or counselor for the refugees, although a psychologist visits the Centre once in a while, and this is voluntary work. According to the head, the fundamental problem is that there is no Estonian language teacher. There used to be a teacher, but she did not do her work well and missed class several times. There is hope that a new Estonian language teacher will be hired soon.

### Group Interview

Four young men from the centre (three from Afghanistan and one from the Democratic Republic of the Congo) and two interviewers participated in the group interview. The interview took place in the Centre's classroom where there was some mathematic sampling and Estonian words written in nice script on the white board as well as stained glass works on the window, painted by the asylum seekers. This is the result of activities led by the Psychologist who visits them from time to time.



The interviewees did not choose to discuss their journey to Estonia except that there were long distances between destinations and they never knew whether someone would pick them up and take them to the next location. They also did not want to speak about their families. Only Yashir (young man

from Afghanistan), whose father and family stays in Norway, agreed to speak about his family. But as for the other three, it seemed that they were concerned for their safety.

Jamar is a 24 year old young man from the Democratic Republic of the Congo and has lived in Estonia for two years. He has some basic conversational English abilities. After the Congo elections in 2006 he became an active member of the opposition to the newly elected presidential power. His life was in danger, and therefore, he had to flee the country; he is now afraid to return. He first sought a Russian visa, because it was believed to be the easiest way to leave the Congo. He had no intention of staying in Russia long-term since he had heard it was a racist country. His aim was to eventually go to France or Belgium, where some of his family members already lived. Since Jamar speaks French these countries were the most desirable for him to live in. Unfortunately, he was arrested by Estonian police and sent to the prison in Harku where he spent over a year. He applied for asylum in Estonia, but was rejected twice; he has appealed both times and in the interim is waiting in Illuka Centre. Jamar is an electrical engineer and he believes he will not have any problem finding a job. He emphasized several times that he does not want to remain in Estonia, as he is not satisfied with his life here and feels like he is treated like a criminal, and he is just waiting for his papers at which point he will immediately leave.

*"If Estonia would like to be a European country it should develop a refugee policy."*

He mentioned that if Estonia is now part of the European Union, refugees will begin arriving and it has to be prepared to accept them. At this moment the country is not ready or willing to accept new immigrants.

Fahran is an eighteen year old young man from Afghanistan. He was the only interviewee who spoke English relatively well and he translated for the other two participants from Afghanistan (Yashir and Babur). Farhan is from the province where the Taliban is dominant. He almost never attended school, because the Taliban burned down the schools. Perhaps he is even unable to read (particularly Latin letters). He was very friendly and took his translator role very seriously. He did not speak about himself much, though he briefly described his travel from Afghanistan; that it was long, hopping from place to place. He only travelled at night. He was smuggled by people he did not know and he never knew where he would end up next and who would be waiting for him. He was just told: "sit in the bus and you will be picked up by the right person who will direct you to the right place." He explained how he was picked up by an Estonian border guard as he travelled into Tallinn. Actually he did not even know where he was. It was 4 o'clock in the morning and he was sleeping in the bus when the guard asked him to show his passport. He responded, "I have no passport." Then he asked where he is? The answer was "near to Tallinn." He didn't understand what or where Tallinn was? He learned that "Tallinn is the capital of Estonia," but he had not heard of Estonia either. He argued: "I want to go to Norway or Sweden or Finland, I'll go to Europe." Then he was told that this is Europe, "you are in the EU." Then he relaxed and thought he achieved his goal. This was in July 2010, when he was picked up by the border patrol and taken to Illuka. After only four months, he is still optimistic to leave soon and hopes to receive asylum, then find accommodation and a job; in fact one of the other young men from Afghanistan has received asylum recently. It is not easy once they leave Illuka, because they do not

speaking Estonian. Fahran and the other Afghani young men are disappointed because the time they have to wait at Illuka is time lost without any intellectual activity. At least if they could learn Estonian their future after Illuka would be more positive. Unfortunately, the language teaching is extremely poor. There was an Estonian teacher last year, but the classes took place only once a week and between classes they were unable to practice as they had no one to communicate with in Estonian. There is no social worker at the Centre and the only employer besides the head speaks Russian and no English.



Fahran told us that the only topic he does not want to touch upon is his family. So we know nothing about his family, but we can guess they are still in Afghanistan.

Yashir is 22 years old, from Afghanistan, and his father and some other relatives are asylum seekers in Norway. He was also in Norway for some time, but later he was sent back to Estonia where he has to wait for asylum on account of the Dublin rule. Yashir was the most “competent” to answer our questions. He also asked questions about us and the research project. He was also interested in our personal accomplishments; what job we have and what topics we research. He was also able to make comparisons between the situations in Norway versus Estonia. In Norway he started to study Norwegian and even had some progress in this. But here, there is a problem with language. Yashir has completed secondary education; however, he told us that teachers were not very demanding or strict at school, and the conflict situation made studying difficult. Many times they could not attend school and they had to stay at home for weeks.

Babur is also 22 years old and he is the lucky one who has already received asylum after two years of waiting. He also has secondary education, but not much knowledge and skills for a job. He is currently searching for jobs as well as accommodation outside the Centre. In fact, he has no language knowledge, besides Pashto, and he rarely spoke.

The young men told us that most of the time they cook food for themselves. They also offered us to eat Afghan food and drink green tea with them. “This is real Afghan tea that is sent by Yashir’s father regularly.” Once a month Yashir receives a parcel from his father. When the young Yashir asked for a warmer jacket from the head of the Centre he was told “let your father send you a jacket.”

The young men assessed Estonian asylum policy as poorly developed. The general opinion was that soon there will be many more asylum seekers in Estonia, because migration through Russia is quite easy.

*“If you are in the EU, you have to think about asylum seekers, because they will come. Many people from around the world will come here, as they are coming to France, to London, to Italy, to Spain, etc. You cannot tell that you are a small poor country. If you are in the EU that means you have to take the responsibility”.*

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