

# The role of the state in refugee integration and settlement: Italy and the Netherlands compared

by Maja Korac

Refugees from former  
Yugoslavia

In the course of research in 2000-2001 among refugees from former Yugoslavia in Italy and the Netherlands, I met a Bosnian medical doctor in Amsterdam. This 35 year old fled to the Netherlands in 1992, became a Dutch citizen and was working as a hospital doctor. He was among those refugees, I thought, who were very successful in reconstructing their lives in a new society. When I asked him, however, about his experience of integration he said:

*I am employed in a Dutch medical firm, I speak the Dutch language well, my child goes to a Dutch school and soon he will speak Dutch better than his mother tongue but we live here a parallel existence because we do not have real contact with Dutch society. We are neither accepted nor rejected. I have a flat in Amsterdam, I live here, but I do not have any ties with Dutch people. I do what I am told to do, and everything proceeds according to 'integration' rules that we 'refugees' have to follow. We did not have to integrate really, you see; we just had to do what we were told.*

The Dutch model of reception and integration of refugees is based on a number of state interventions intended to meet the immediate needs of refugees and to facilitate their gradual integration into Dutch society. Those seeking asylum in the country usually experience a two-stage admission and reception procedure involving an up to 48 hours in an investigation centre followed by a stay of several months in an asylum centre. For some, in cases when a provisional permit to stay is granted, the reception procedure involves a third stage. This stage usually lasts up to three years and provides housing and a modest allowance but no practical help to integrate into Dutch society such as professional language training or the right to re-train and to work. This phased state-led settlement process



may last for years. Thus, it took the Bosnian doctor seven years to obtain refugee status, learn the language and get his diploma recognised in order to continue with his profession. Meanwhile, relaxation of naturalisation policies allowed him to obtain citizenship.

Research reveals that refugees from former Yugoslavia who are now in Rome experience different admission and reception systems and settlement problems. A 29 year old Bosnian man who had just graduated from an Italian university explained the difficulties he had encountered since fleeing to Italy in 1992. Almost immediately after his arrival he was granted a temporary permit allowing him to stay, study and work. His first months in exile were a constant struggle to find shelter, to earn enough to sustain himself and to learn the language. He even had to spend some nights at a Rome train station because he had nowhere else to go. Between 1992 and 1999 he worked as an assistant in a photo-shop gradually saving enough to afford to study part time. Since graduating in 1999 he has been employed in his profession on a short-term contract basis. When I met him after eight years in Italy he still had a humanitarian residence permit.



He explained his situation in Rome in the following way:

*The only time I do not feel at home in Rome is prior to the expiry date of my residence permit to stay. Then I really feel a foreigner. Otherwise, I feel at home. My social contacts have always been almost entirely with Italians, except that my partner is also from Bosnia. I feel that I belong here in many ways and Italians accept me as such. But when I am faced with state institutions, I feel humiliated and that is when I feel that I do not belong here.*

Hardly any of the refugees I interviewed in Rome had Italian citizenship. Almost all had temporary, humanitarian permits to stay which are usually granted without any

lengthy determination procedure and which include the immediate right to work and study. However, the vast majority received no assistance to settle in Italy and therefore encountered profound problems in making ends meet during their first years in Rome. It was particularly difficult for those with small children and for older people to survive in the city and most had left before my research took place. While refugees I interviewed prized the right to work, they also argued that it was the lack of an initial reception system which forced them to become self-sufficient even though it meant accepting menial work unsuited to their education and skills. For those whose education had been interrupted, cost was the major factor leading to their delaying or abandoning the continuation of their education. A majority had lowly-paid jobs in the service sector.

Hardly anyone felt that they had succeeded in settling in Italy or could plan for the future. When asked to define the losses involved in their flight and exile they all mentioned the lack of economic welfare and their uncertain prospects rather than social isolation. A few, like the 29 year old Bosnian man mentioned above, who might be considered 'successful' because they eventually succeeded in getting jobs suited to their skills, spent approximately the same number of years struggling to integrate into the labour market in a meaningful way as their counterparts in Amsterdam. Unlike those in Amsterdam, however, refugees in Rome developed considerably strong social ties outside their ethnic groups through informal day-to-day contacts in their neighbourhoods, at work and through many other social encounters with Italians. Some refugees in Rome — in contrast to those in Amsterdam — had found local partners or spouses.

A majority of the refugees interviewed in Amsterdam stayed at asylum centres for several months, sometimes over a year. Most of them, including older people, the less-educated or those with small children, felt that their pressing initial needs were met reasonably well during the first stages of the admission and reception procedure. However, they almost unanimously described their experience at asylum centres as a waste of time because of the limited rights of access to language and vocational

training and the humiliating experience of isolation from the 'outside world'. This gave rise to feelings of alienation from the receiving society which subsequently increased as they failed to establish closer ties with the Dutch.

## Conclusion

The testimony of the refugees I encountered attests to the fact that integration, as it is perceived and desired by the refugees themselves, is about functional aspects such as education, re-training and employment, as well as other aspects of social participation in the wider society. Refugee narratives document their need to become part of the social fabric of life of the receiving societies through contacts and communication with the native population, while retaining a sense of their distinct identity. They also show their conscious effort to establish such contacts, and different levels of success among the refugees in Amsterdam and Rome in achieving this important goal of integration. Although the nature of the cultures and life-styles of both the countries of origin and the receiving societies played a role in the process of wider social integration this research also revealed the importance of the character of the policy and reception systems in Italy and the Netherlands.

The lack of state-organised initiatives in Rome forces refugees to rely on their personal skills and resources in order to enter Italian society. Their contacts with Italians are not mediated through professional social service providers as they are in the Netherlands. In Italy, encounters with the new environment are spontaneous and individualised and allow greater scope for fulfilling refugees' individual needs. This type of social encounters with Italians helps guard against a perception that the native and the new culture are set in opposition. This strengthens the adaptability of refugees in Rome to the new environment as it encourages openness to cultural differences.

Dutch policies essentially approach integration as a process in which refugees are policy objects rather than a vital resource. As a result, many remain unemployable and dependent on social funds or stay unemployed because they are not motivated to enter the labour market and earn

more than they can get from benefits. Many more are not able to continue with their professions not so much because their skills are not needed in the Dutch labour market but because of the many structural barriers that prevent their entry. Even those who may be considered successful remain in many ways excluded from society. While it may be argued that Dutch policy interventions address many of the requirements identified by refugees as important for integration to begin, they do not in themselves make refugees feel integrated as they do not provide a strategy for wider social inclusion.

Disadvantages involved in the lack of an organised programme of assistance and integration of refugees interviewed in Rome, although profound, also entailed potential advantages because the absence of a programme permitted and indeed enhanced their personal agency in reconstructing their lives. This, however, should not be understood as an apology for the absence of a strategy for integration. Rather, this is a call to rethink the structural limitations inherent in the currently prevailing state-controlled and phased approaches to assisting and integrating refugees in receiving societies. Current EU efforts to harmonise entry procedures and reception and settlement systems make it even more important to rethink current policy directions. It is important, therefore, to examine not only how governments manage large influxes of refugees but also how these policy instruments — or their absence — help or hinder the process of social inclusion from the point of view of refugees themselves. Furthermore, research findings strongly indicate that settlement policies should provide strategies for wider social inclusion and integration. Without such strategies, even after gaining full citizenship rights, newcomers will remain fundamentally excluded from society no matter how well they are integrated into the labour market.

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