

## ASYLUM SEEKERS IN LATVIA

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### **Introduction: Latvia's asylum policy record**

Until recently Latvia's asylum policy, while much more stringent than in most other EU countries, remained largely outside the scope of public attention because very few people from the so-called third countries - countries outside the EU - applied for asylum in Latvia. The number of asylum seekers in Latvia has grown in recent years, but the total numbers of asylum applications still remained very low, on par with Slovenia and slightly above Estonia. Between 2011 and October 2015, 1259 persons have applied for asylum in Latvia, which constitutes 343% of the total of applications in 1998-2010 (367 applications). Of the total number of 1134 applications in 2010-2014, only 43 were accorded refugee status, and 98 were accorded alternative status. This constitutes roughly 12.4% positive response rate, which became slightly higher in 2014 – at 26%. For comparison, in Belgium in 2014, 39% of first instance decisions on asylum ended in a positive response, in Denmark - 68%, and in Estonia 36% of decisions were positive in 2014.

At this rate, one cannot say that Laimdota Straujuma's government declaration (2014), promising a stringent asylum and migration policy, proposed anything new regarding the Latvian asylum system. Before the European Commission began to promote the plan to relocate refugees from Italy and Greece to other EU member states and before the action plan for receiving persons in need of international protection was adopted, the political consensus in Latvia remained in favour of a very strict asylum policy which would make positive decisions exceptional.

The action plan for receiving persons in need of international protection - the national document under the EU refugee plan - covers most aspects of the new procedure for refugees to be relocated from Italy and Greece. Its implementation may have impact on some of the aspects of asylum process and integration of the current asylum seekers who are already in Latvia. Its main target group, however, are refugees who have not yet arrived in the country.

Despite that, public debates often include statements on all asylum seekers being uneducated, indifferent or hostile to human rights, and interested in a life sustained from social benefits of the EU member state welcoming them. While we cannot provide an analysis of asylum seekers that Latvia is ready to welcome early in 2016, a brief analysis of the situation of current asylum seekers in Latvia and their profile may provide some background for the national authorities and society to enable evidence-based decision making. This background paper could also be of interest to European and international partners following Latvia's asylum policy and practice given that migration policy by definition requires international cooperation.

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## A snapshot of asylum seekers' experience in Latvia

In order to have a more detailed profile of asylum seekers currently waiting for a response from the Latvian authorities, as well as to assess the main issues of concern for the asylum seekers in the initial stages of asylum procedure, PROVIDUS in October and early November 2015 interviewed 21 asylum seekers in the Mucenieki centre for asylum seekers and refugees.

This background paper is based on these interviews, as well as data from the Office of Citizenship and Migration Affairs.

Currently there are 95 asylum seekers in the Mucenieki centre. Of those, the majority comes from Iraq (51 persons or 53.7%). A relatively small number (17%) are from the countries of the former Soviet Union, while the number of asylum seekers from Syria is still very low (3 persons). About

35% of asylum seekers are women. While most are waiting for a response of the national authorities regarding their status, there are also 10 persons who have already received a positive decision on their asylum status, but are still living in the Mucenieki centre (5 of them are from Iraq).

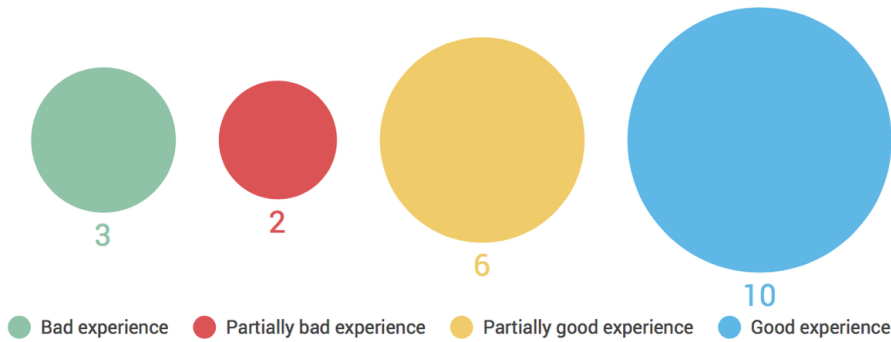
### Countries from which asylum seekers have arrived



## How are asylum seekers welcomed?

To evaluate the reception by Latvian authorities and asylum procedure, PROVIDUS asked the interviewed asylum seekers to evaluate their overall experience of seeking asylum in Latvia, including reception by and communication with the Office of Citizenship and Migration Affairs. We also asked them about the living conditions in the Mucenieki centre, and the services available to them as asylum seekers in Latvia. Of the 21 asylum seekers interviewed, two thirds evaluated their experience of seeking asylum in Latvia so far as 'good' and 'partially good', while a minority (5 persons) said it was a 'bad' or 'partially bad' experience.

## Reception of asylum seekers in Latvia



Some asylum seekers had negative experiences linked to detention. However, none of the interviewed persons pointed out specific features in the legal asylum procedure. This may either be because of lack of material for criticism or because hypothetically they may not wish to endanger their chances of receiving a positive response due to disagreement with the Latvian asylum system.

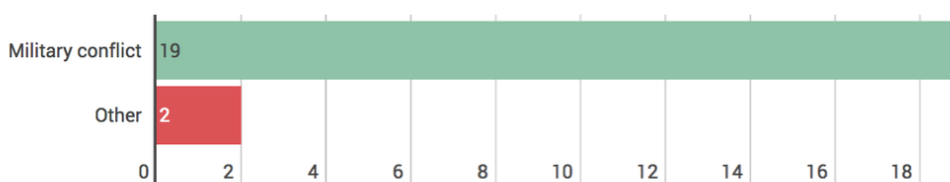
For those who evaluated their experience as negative, the following reasons played a role:

- Very limited access to medical care beyond emergencies;
- School for children living in Mucenieki is far away, and transportation cost is not covered by the state or municipality;
- There is limited access to internet in the Mucenieki centre (no free wireless access).

## Why are they seeking asylum?

The absolute majority of asylum seekers quoted military conflict as the main reason for leaving their country or the country where they stayed prior to applying for asylum in Latvia. This was the reason quoted, among others, by all asylum seekers from Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan, independently of the country where they stayed previously (e.g. some made their way to the EU after having lived in Russia).

## Reason for leaving



Individual stories of the asylum seekers from Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan confirm that war and terrorism in those countries are seen as main factors causing people to seek asylum.

The endangered situation of those belonging to the Kurdish minority and/ or Christian minority has led some individuals and families to seek asylum twice during their lifetime:

***„We first escaped from Iraq during the war [of 2003]. We went to Germany where we stayed several years in a refugee centre. My wife learned German. I too learned a little German and also learned some Russian from other asylum seekers in the centre. Later when Germany considered that Iraq has become safe, we were sent back. Now we decided to leave Iraq again due to terror of Islamic state, because my wife is a Christian, and because of fear of kidnappings [of our children]. I cannot live thinking all the time whether my children are still safe at home.”***

**Asylum seeker, Iraq**

In several cases, asylum was sought by the nationals of these countries already residing abroad (e.g. in Russia or Uzbekistan) when they were threatened with deportation to their country of origin due to expired passports or residence permits, e.g.:

*„I was studying in St Petersburg. My Syrian passport expired, and the Syrian consulate in Russia suggested that I return to Syria to renew the passport. I knew that in Syria I would be sent to the army to fight in the civil war. I escaped from Russia together with several others. We had a guide. We crossed Latvian and then Estonian border on foot, seeking to go to Sweden on a ferry. We were detained and sent back to Latvia, where we first crossed EU border.”*

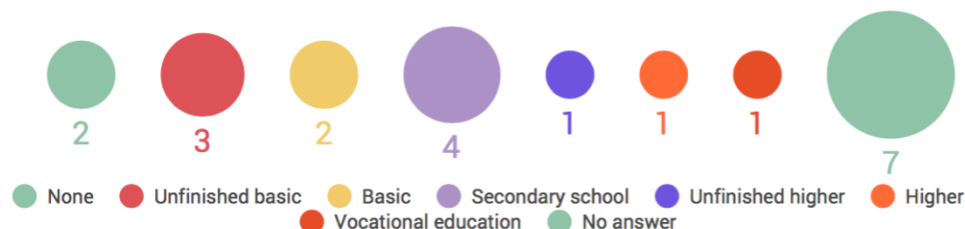
Asylum seeker, Syria

Interviews indicate that the majority of asylum seekers did not initially aim to ask for asylum specifically in Latvia, but it turned out to be the first EU country that they entered and were returned to. Trafficking plays a significant role in the stories of crossing the EU border – e.g. crossing on foot from Russia with a group of asylum seekers and a ‘guide’, or arriving by plane from Turkey with a counterfeited EU passport.

## What is their education and professional background?

The educational and professional background of asylum seekers is varied. Most adult asylum seekers from Iraq and 2 from Syria have at least school education, while some have technical, vocational or higher education. The overall picture does not confirm the myth of ‘uneducated’, ‘unqualified’ migrants occasionally reproduced in the media or in public debates.

### Education



### Profession



Asylum seekers’ professional background is also varied, including several representatives of technical professionals and service sector employees, qualified and unqualified workers, and one policeman. The majority of asylum seekers say that as long as they can find a job in Latvia, they would consider staying in the country given the refugee status is granted, and they say they would not seek to move to another EU country. This,

however, depends on many factors, including favourable conditions for settlement and the availability of jobs.

## Conclusions and recommendations

The majority of asylum seekers currently in Latvia have not chosen Latvia specifically because of its asylum system or other features, but found themselves in circumstances when they had to apply for asylum in Latvia as the nearest safe country or the country where they crossed EU border.

The majority of asylum seekers in Latvia currently are from Iraq. Some asylum seekers, from Iraq and Afghanistan, have crossed the border from Russia without documents, when threatened by expulsion to their countries of origin. Given the substantial presence of citizens of countries that have suffered from military conflict (Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan) in Russia, and the still occasionally porous condition of the EU eastern border, it would be realistic to expect that more asylum seekers from these countries, currently temporarily living in Russia, will apply for asylum in Latvia in the near future, independently of the EU relocation plan.

About half of the interviewed asylum seekers have found their experience in Latvia so far, including their living conditions in the Mucenieki centre, rather positive than negative. There are, however, several features that make the conditions of living for asylum seekers rather problematic:

- Insufficient access to regular medical services;
- Lack of free transportation to school for children;
- Insufficient access to the Internet.

It is important to address these concerns in the process of implementing the action plan for receiving persons in need of international protection, and to make necessary steps ensuring that access to health, education and information necessary for asylum seekers' well-being, as well as adaptation and integration (including online information), is provided.

It is also essential that the staffs of the Office of Citizenship and Migration Affairs and of the Mucenieki centre is strengthened by interpreters from Arabic, Farsi and Kurdish (currently there is limited availability of interpreters and translators, leading to the asylum seekers having to act as interpreters for each other). Information materials on asylum procedures and migration and integration policies in Latvia should be made fully available in these languages.

### Sources:

1. Cabinet of Ministers (2015) [Patvēruma meklētāji Latvijā](#) (Asylum seekers in Latvia).
2. Eurostat (2015), [First instance decisions on \(non-EU\) asylum applications](#).
3. Declaration of the Planned Activities of the Cabinet of Ministers of Laimdota Straujuma (2014).
4. Cabinet of Ministers (2015), [Apstiprina rīcības plānu patvēruma meklētāju pārvietošanai un uzņemšanai Latvijā](#) (Action plan to resettle and welcome asylum seekers in Latvia adopted).