

NIEM Coalition meeting about the impact of COVID-19 emergency situation in Latvia on beneficiaries of international protection¹

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NIEM partner, Center for Public Policy PROVIDUS organised the first coalition meeting of 2020 held online on the Zoom platform. NIEM Coalition meetings are held three times a year and the invited parties included the Ministry of Culture, the Ministry of Welfare, the Ministry of Interior, UNHCR as well as several NGOs. The topic of the meeting was the impact COVID-19 has had on the situation of beneficiaries of international protection since the government announced an emergency situation on March 12th. In total the meeting was attended by 23 participants.

The asylum procedure

The representative from the Ministry of Interior – Sandis Barks – reported that in general the asylum procedure during the emergency situation has not changed. Currently the borders are closed with Russia and Belarus whereas movement on the borders with EU countries is restricted. Currently no attempts to cross the ‘green border’ have been registered. Thus during the emergency situation only application for asylum has been received before April 14th. Interviews for assessing the applications for asylum are currently held online. Border guards have been instructed about the appropriate safety measures in interaction with people travelling to the country as they pertain to COVID-19.

Conditions in the Asylum Seekers’ Centre ‘Mucenieki’

The director of the Centre – Pēteris Grūbe – reported that currently there are 72 people residing in the Centre and several safety measures have been implemented:

- Interviews for the asylum application are held online,
- There is a doctor and a nurse present at the Centre and the body temperature is regularly measured,
- Only two members from the Latvian Red Cross who provide social support are allowed to simultaneously be at the Centre,
- There are infographics distributed around the Centre containing the information about the situation as well as the required hygienic measures provided in several languages. The infographics have been prepared by the Latvia Red Cross in cooperation with the “Shelter “Safe House”” and UNHCR,
- Face masks will be distributed to the residents of the Centre,
- There are no mobility restrictions imposed upon the residents of the Centre, however the number of public transport tickets has been reduced,
- The Centre provides some computers that are available for e-learning, however the overall number of computers is limited.

¹ The project is funded by the Asylum, Migration and Integration fund and co-financed by the Ministry of Culture.

However, no action plan or instructions regarding the necessary actions during the emergency situation has not been provided by any of the responsible Ministries.

Health care

The residents of the Centre have access to a doctor and a nurse. Those living outside the Centre experience similar issues like the rest of the people: doctors' appointments have been either cancelled or postponed which increases the workload of social mentors. The employees at health care institutions inform about the cancelled visits in Latvian which then subsequently requires the intermediation of mentors and translators to make new appointments.

In general, all of the beneficiaries of international protection are well-informed about the situation, actively follow the news and try to learn about the restrictions and recommendations issued by the government on their own. Two WhatsApp groups have been launched in Arabic and Dari for informal communication.

However, a certain psychological tension exists as family reunification is currently not possible and no information about the future plans is available. Moreover, in case of a rejected asylum application and an expected deportation, there is a lack of information about when it will take place and thus how long one will have to stay in any of the detention centres for foreigners.

Currently, the Centre does not provide the services of a psychologist, however this will be rectified in the near future as a procurement procedure will be underway. Once these services are available, their delivery will have to be in some way adjusted as occasionally the presence of a translator is necessary increasing the number of people in a room. All of the beneficiaries of international protection have access to the services of a psychologist at the 'Information Centre for Newcomers' that are currently provided online.

Education

The delivery of educational services to pupils and adults that continue or have just begun the integration process has been complicated. Pupils have to attend classes online, however the platform is accessible only in Latvian, smart devices are not always available and Latvian language assistant is also not always offered. Social mentors may offer help, however not meaningfully as the learning process is time-consuming and their ability to dedicate many hours to do it is limited. Parents are also restricted in their ability to provide assistance due to the language difficulties. Not all of the educational institutions are forthcoming and do not ensure the services of a Latvian language assistant. The situation in minority schools is easier since communication can also take place in Russian. Due to these challenges the acquisition of the learning material is exacerbated and there are worries children may not be able to finish their respective grades.

One of the temporary solutions pursued by the Latvian Red Cross is involving pedagogy students from the University of Latvia to assist in the learning process while earning the necessary credit points.

Similar problems exist for adults who have just started or continue learning Latvian or attend other integration courses. However, as pointed out by the representative from the Ministry of Culture, several AMIF project implementers continue offering the services online and more

information is available with each respective institution. Additionally, the Latvian Language agency provides various informational resources online.

During the coalition meeting the director of the Asylum Seekers' Centre and the representative from "Shelter "Safe House"" agreed to offer integration courses online to the residents of the Centre.

Employment and financial support

Until the Coalition meeting, no one from the beneficiaries of international protection had lost their job due to the emergency situation. However, it is expected that those who have received the refugee or subsidiary of international protection status only recently will encounter difficulties securing employment which will complicate the integration process as well. Moreover, as noted above, the delay in acquiring Latvian will have a negative impact on one's employment prospects as well. Similarly, finding housing during the emergency situation is also fraught with challenges.

As the socio-economic integration is currently faced with obstacles, extending the duration of benefits should be considered. Taking into account that the distribution of benefits has been extended in other areas as well, this approach should be applied to beneficiaries of international protection too.

However, if any beneficiary of international protection would lose other income, they have the opportunity to apply for assistance from the municipality. In accordance with Article 35 in "the Law on the functioning of State institutions during the emergency situation due to COVID-19" passed on April 5th, during the emergency situation municipalities may grant social services and assistance to target groups not specified in the Law on Social Services and Social Assistance. The grant is intended to cover the costs of basic needs. However, the grant is available only if one has declared residence in the respective municipality which is not always possible due to: lack of finances, the unwillingness of landlords to formally register the rent contract, etc. This requirement has to be re-assessed in order to ensure efficient availability of financial support during the emergency situation.

Domestic violence

Taking into account the increasing material and psychological tension, the issue of domestic violence has to be highlighted. Members from the Latvia Red Cross noted that recently the question was addressed in a training led by UNHCR, however it remains difficult to identify. It has to be noted that during these conditions the burden on women is increased as not only they have to take part in the integration process, but also have to help children at school, prepare food, clean house, etc.

Court administrative proceedings

In the light of the emergency situation, the asylum cases are currently processed in writing which presents new challenges as bringing up new evidence or inviting witnesses is difficult if not impossible. The Human Rights Centre is informed about this, however the law permits it.

Availability of services

Latvian Red Cross continues to offer the services of social workers and mentors online. Representatives from “Shelter “Safe House”” indicated that the services of a translator are now available 18 hours a week instead of 10. Translation services are also delivered online. Attention has to be paid to the ways in which the integration process and reception of newcomers is impacted by these developments.

Recommendations for further actions:

- The Ministry of Interior should prepare an action plan regarding a potential outbreak of COVID-19 in the Asylum Seekers’ Centre. As can be seen from the experience of other countries², refugee camps and shelters are among the critical sites, much like care homes and dormitories.
- The Ministry of Welfare should assess the possibility of extending the duration of monthly benefits to those beneficiaries of international protection who receive the benefit during the emergency situation as the socio-economic integration process is currently fraught with challenges.
- The Ministry of Education and Science should ensure the availability of Latvian language assistants for distant learning to ensure the inclusion of children of beneficiaries of international protection in the education process.
- Latvian Red Cross and “Shelter “Safe House”” should periodically update information about the forms of available support for beneficiaries of international protection on www.beglis.lv and www.integration.lv as well as on the respective social media platforms.
- Municipalities should review the requirement for declared residence as prerequisite for available financial support among beneficiaries of international protection.

² In Portugal, the virus spread in a hostel where asylum seekers had been staying:

<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-portugal-asylum/coronavirus-sweeps-through-portuguese-hostel-housing-asylum-seekers-idUSKBN2221SH>

In Greece, quarantine measures were implemented in several refugee camps after positive COVID-19 cases: <https://www.euractiv.com/section/justice-home-affairs/news/greece-quarantines-second-migrant-camp-after-covid-19-case-confirmed/>.