

Centrum Pomocy Prawnej im. Haliny Nieć

Centrum Pomocy Prawnej im. Haliny Nieć is a non-profit, non-governmental organisation established in Kraków in 2002, whose main aim is to provide free legal council for the poor, victims of social discrimination and domestic violence, foreigners, refugees and asylum seekers. The legal experts collaborating with specialists and volunteers are involved in protecting human rights, monitoring human rights standards, legal interventions and preventing human trafficking. The Organisation is named after the late dr Halina Nieć - human rights activist and the founder of the Human Rights Centre at the Jagiellonian University.

The Centrum's activities, though its mission statement is quite broad, are currently focused on refugees from Chechnya, who comprise the single biggest group of people seeking asylum in Poland, usually attempting to enter the country through the Polish-Belarussian border at Terespol - contrary to popular belief, there have been next to no Syrian refugees coming to Poland. Although Chechnya has re-entered the news only recently because of the oppression of its gay community, it has been a troubled country for decades, with many of its citizens in open opposition to the government, and some guerrilla fighting continuing since the end of the Second Chechen War.

As we learned during our visit in the Centrum, the majority of work is done outside the Kraków headquarters, in refugee camps. The first, most direct and possibly toughest part of the job, is reasoning with the border guards on Polish-Belarussian border on the admission procedure so as to ensure that as many people as possible can apply for the official status of a refugee because of the political persecutions those people have to face on a daily basis in Belarus.

If a refugee is let through the borders, members of Centrum Pomocy Prawnej help them with filling all the obligatory paperwork – they go together through the documents, consider the credibility of their stories, and wait for the decision, which most of the time is a denial of the refugee status. After that the workers appeal and continue to voluntarily assist the asylum seekers.

In a special facility those who applied for the refugee status undergo medical evaluations, are cleaned and fed. Some people have gone through terrible traumas and workers of Centrum Pomocy Prawnej are also there to listen to their stories and comfort them. One of the main objectives of Centrum Pomocy Prawnej is making sure the law and human dignity are being respected.