
Erasmus Students with Visa Problems

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1. 11. 2012; By: Ivana Herglová; Proof-reading: Maria Constanza Labra-Odde a Andrew Sweeney; Section: English Digest

The Erasmus programme is the easiest way to spend one or two semesters abroad for the majority of students from the countries of the European Union, the EEA/EFTA and the candidate countries of the European Union. The rules of the Erasmus programme ensure participating students don't have to pay any tuition fees, and usually, they also have top priority in receiving university accommodation. Additionally, host universities in countries where the native language is less frequently spoken in Europe (such as Czech), organize a sufficient amount of courses in English (or other frequently-spoken European languages) for students.

For students requiring a student visa however, the situation becomes more difficult, as participation in the Erasmus programme or even arrival into the country of their host university is more complicated.

For a series of articles of the 25th anniversary of the Erasmus Programme, we have asked Turkish students studying at Charles University in Prague in the year 2011/12 to share their experiences in obtaining their visa: Nilüfer Deniz Baş studies English at the Ça? University in Mersin and during 2011/12 was enrolled as an Erasmus student at the Faculty of Education of Charles University. Zerrin Gurkaya comes from Hacettepe University in Ankara, and through 2011/12 studied English at the Faculty of Arts, also at the Charles University in Prague.

Nilüfer, Zerrin, you are one of several students who had considerable problems in getting their Czech study visa on time. The Czech Ministry of Internal Affairs, which is responsible for issuing the long-term visa in the Czech Republic has a 60-day limit to issue a student visa. How long did it take in your case?

Zerrin: I was able to apply for the Czech long-term visa on the 27th July 2011. The embassy called me saying that the visa was ready as late as the 10th October 2011. I said that I was able to apply for the visa because even getting an appointment at the Visapoint website took a really long time (*note: Visapoint is an online system on which visa applicants to the Czech Republic must apply for an appointment at a Czech embassy to be able to apply for a visa*).

Nilüfer: I received my letter of admission for the Erasmus Programme at Charles University in the second week of August 2011. Actually, I was expecting my documents to reach me earlier, but unfortunately the post took quite long to transport my letter from Czech Republic to Turkey. Then, on 15th August 2011, I entered the website of the Visapoint system to arrange a visit at the Czech embassy.

I got an appointment for the 19th of September, which was more than one month later; and I started waiting for the appointment day. On the 19th of September, I went to Ankara to apply for my visa. I applied both for the short-term (Schengen) and long-term visa. I had to apply for the "touristic" Schengen visa next to the "study" visa because it takes more than 60 days to get the long-term visa. But it takes only one week to get the Schengen visa – which is valid for 90 days. (*note: since summer semester 2011/12, students cannot apply simultaneously for the Schengen and the longterm visa, what makes the process even more complicated.*)

After one week, on 26th September, my Schengen visa was issued and I finally bought my plane ticket to Prague for the 1st October, as I really did not want to miss the very first week of the courses at Charles University. Once in Prague, I was waiting and hoping for my long-term visa to be approved soon.

The weird thing is that when you are informed that your long-term visa has been approved, you have to return back to Turkey to get this visa, which means paying for the transportation (plane-tickets) again. As I am just a student and only have a limited amount of money, it was really difficult for me to pay such a high amount of money for transportation again. I still cannot figure out why it is so hard to get a visa for a student.

The European Office of Charles University sends letters of admission to visa students usually at the beginning of July (in the case of winter semester and full-year arrivals) or at the beginning of November (in the case of summer semester arrivals). If the 60-day limit to issue the student visa would always be honoured, then all our Turkish students would be able to arrive in the Czech Republic on time. Are there any other time losses?

Zerrin: I was able to gather all the documents necessary for the visa application just before my appointment at the Czech embassy (I applied for the appointment in advance to spare the time). My admission letter for the Erasmus study stay was ready on the 19th of July of 2011. Luckily, my instructor was in Prague at that time and she didn't mind picking it up for me and bringing my documents to Turkey. Otherwise, I wouldn't be able to go to my appointment at the embassy since the shipment of letters between Czech Republic and Turkey takes at least ten days. So, it was a race against time. I hope nobody will experience this problem anymore...

As I have said earlier, it may take really long (several weeks or even a full month) to arrange an appointment at the Czech embassy via the Visapoint website – it is not an exaggeration. You have to try it all the time, sit at the computer, checking the website again and again, to see if there was possibly a cancellation or an appointment time added.

When I asked the people at the Czech embassy in Turkey why it is so hard to even make an appointment there, they answered that the Visapoint system – which we have to use – is not managed by them but run directly from the Czech Republic and no one can control it directly in Turkey. That is why they cannot increase the number of the offered appointment times. This is the real problem. I was able to arrange my appointment on 20th of June 2011 for the next week, which seemed quite okay. However, my visa process took more than 60 days in the end.

Nilüfer: Unfortunately, I got my letter of admission as late as in the second week of August. I didn't want to arrange the appointment at the Czech embassy via the Visapoint system before I got my letter from the Charles University. It would have been meaningless if I had applied for the visa appointment earlier, since I didn't know when I would finally receive my admission documents.

I do not think that the distance between Czech Republic and Turkey is so big, but I got my post from Charles University more than one month after the European Office sent it to me. Because of that, I was too late to get an earlier appointment in the Visapoint system.

To explain briefly, Visapoint system is a website used by the Czech embassy in Turkey. It enables visa applicants to arrange an appointment at the embassy. You enter the website, choose the type of visa you need, and then the free appointment dates are offered to you. Normally, it is quite easy to get an appointment via the Visapoint system.

But in certain times, for example, when future Erasmus students are applying for a visa, the Visapoint system may either not work at all, or give you a free appointment time that is too distant in the future. You can be offered an appointment date as late as one and a half month later, which makes the visa application process more difficult and postpones the arrival to your destination, in my case, to the Faculty of Education of Charles University.

How long did it finally take you – from the time you received your letter of admission from Charles University – to receive the visa?

Zerrin: Despite all the problems of shipping my admission documents or the Visapoint system, I was able to get a really good appointment date. However, since my visa process took longer than usual, I was only able to get my visa in 76 days.

Nilüfer: It took only one week to get my Schengen visa issued, which was valid for 90 days. This short-term visa expired at the end of December 2011. Then I had to return back to Turkey to get my long-term visa which was finally prepared at the end of autumn, on the 18th of November. I visited the Czech embassy in Ankara to get my visa in the first week of January 2012. So, it took me approximately 5 months to get my long-term visa (if I would have returned to Turkey immediately when the visa was prepared, it would be exactly 60 days; but as I have explained before, the plane tickets are expensive and I couldn't afford to go home twice in such a short period of time – in November and then again for the Christmas and part of the winter examination period in late December and January). In the beginning of February I came back to Prague for the summer semester. I tried really hard to get the Czech long-term visa since the beginning of August 2011. But I think coming to Prague was worth it.

Your friends went on an Erasmus exchange to other European countries at the same time as you left for Prague. If you compare the length of time they needed to get their study visas issued – was it about the same, longer, or shorter, compared to the Czech Republic?

Zerrin: Definitely shorter, at most it took them one month.

Nilüfer: Most of my friends went to the University of Poznan in Poland. And fortunately, they did not have any problems with getting their visas issued at the Polish embassy. They got their long-term visa approximately in one week time, which is much shorter than getting a visa for the Czech Republic.

One of my best friends also applied for a study stay in Prague in the summer semester 2010/11, but unfortunately the Czech embassy did not approve his visa. In the winter semester 2011/12, he got his visa for Portugal easily and studied there.

You both decided to prolong your study stay at Charles University from one semester to the whole year. Nilüfer, you tried to apply for the prolongation of your study-visa back home in Turkey, and, Zerrin, you tried at the Foreign Police in Prague. Were there any differences in procedure?

Nilüfer: Since I got my long-term visa as late as in January (and used my Schengen visa for the winter semester period, till middle of December), the Czech embassy in Ankara only took my prolongation documents issued at Charles University (Admission Letter and Accommodation Contract for the summer semester period along with several other documents), and never told me that I should apply for the prolongation of the long-term visa. The problem was that at the end of the summer semester 2011/12, I had realized that my visa was valid only for 108 days and not the expected, and usually approved 180 days – so finally I had to apply for a prolongation of the validity of my visa anyway, in the Czech Republic.

Zerrin: You don't have to deal with registration on any websites or other technical things when applying for prolongation in Prague which is a good thing, and the required documents are the same. However, it is almost impossible to find a person who speaks English at the Foreign Police office, so this was the biggest problem for me. It is also the main reason why I couldn't get my visa prolongation up until the end of summer semester, since I was not able to ask all the important questions in the beginning, but this wasn't actually a huge problem. If the police know that your prolongation is in process, you are safe. However, I can say that the process is even slower when you apply from Prague.

On the other hand, there is another issue which I cannot pass without mentioning. I think that some of the staff at the Foreign Police office don't know the exact rules of the visa prolongation process. During my first appointment, the

officer didn't tell me that I need a proof of health insurance. Later, when I was in Turkey for a visit, they sent me a letter stating that I need health insurance. This is why I had to complete my documents later on.

At the same time, one officer accepted one of my prolongation documents, but another officer didn't accept my friend's document, although they were exactly the same. Later, I also had to change my document like my friend, because it was considered invalid.

To sum it up, what were the biggest problems for you during the visa process?

Nilüfer: Waiting and killing time were the biggest damages of the the visa process. Sometimes I think it is unfair because European people do not have any problems to enter any EU country they want to. But we are not a part of European Union, so it's alright. I accept I have to deal with many documents. But waiting for a visa for 60 or more days is too long, I think. We live in the 21st century. There is internet, any technology that one can imagine – it would be great if it could speed the process a bit.

Zerrin: In one word, time. Correspondingly, financial and emotional damage.

Has studying through Erasmus in Prague been worth all the trouble?

Nilüfer: Even though I had difficulties with getting the visa issued and admission documents delivered on time, I am really happy to be here, in Prague. I think it has been worth all the difficulties I had faced. I have good relations with my teachers and friends. Everyday, I am learning new things and I am thankful to the Erasmus Programme for it. I have many new friends and I am learning about different cultures from them.

I also have good friends among Czech people. I love to see the smile in their faces when I say "ahoj." They also like to learn about my country. I can say that Prague is my second hometown now. I love the life here. Especially, I like to feel the atmosphere when I walk in the streets.

My friends and I had the chance to see also other cities in the Czech Republic with the perfect organization of the Erasmus Club (*of the Faculty of Arts*). I went on a trip to Karlovy Vary, Olomouc, Karlštejn, Český Šternberk and Kutná Hora. I also had the chance to see many perfect ballets and operas with the Erasmus Theatre Club.

Yes, it was definitely worth it!

Zerrin: The moment I stepped to Prague, I forgot all my troubles; this city has charmed me. After the stressful and wearisome period of the visa process, I had lost all my enthusiasm and I was regretfull that I had chosen Prague for my Erasmus study stay; but now I am so content that I have even prolonged my studies here. Prague is so beautiful, alive and also mysterious, that I enjoyed exploring it until the end of my Erasmus period. It amazes me everyday!

At the same time, I am also very happy about studying at Charles University; my department, the International Relations offices, International and Erasmus clubs and organizations work a lot to make it possible for us to have a good time here. Thanks to the Erasmus Theatre Club, I have developed a habit of going to operas and ballets very often. And also other events, trips, the equipment of the university, libraries, etc. are the things that I am very content with.

Thank you for the interview.