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Executive summary

Public participation of beneficiaries of international protection is a necessary condition of social cohesion and a practical tool for improving the quality and effectiveness of integration policies. In the EU context, the notion of strengthening the public participation of migrants (including refugees and asylum seekers) is broadly presented as a component of the building bridges dimension of integration policy. Nevertheless, according to National Integration Evaluation Mechanism (NIEM) research, building bridges remains the weakest integration area for beneficiaries of international protection across the 14 participating EU countries (Bulgaria, France, Greece, Spain, the Netherlands, Lithuania, Latvia, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovenia, Sweden, Hungary and Italy). In the national context, governments are reluctant to either involve mainstream society or recognize migrants and refugees as partners in integration policy, strategic planning and decision making. In Poland, one of the leading solutions for refugee leaders to participate in the public sector is the establishment of social organizations. Migrant and refugee social organizations create the opportunity for representation and advocacy and facilitate the development of intercultural dialogue and a sense of belonging. The present analysis focuses on the public activity of beneficiaries of international protection through social organizations. Firstly, it refers to the Common Basic Principles for Immigrant Integration Policy¹ as an element of the EU framework of public participation of residents with migrant and refugee backgrounds. The analysis briefly presents the NIEM research on building bridges. Then, it gives an overview of social organizations of migrants and refugees in Poland, namely the legal aspects of self-organization, the characteristics of associations and the activities they provide, and the challenges refugee leaders face in running organizations. Finally, the analysis provides recommendations for various actors (public administration, social organizations and the media) to strengthen the public participation of beneficiaries of international protection and asylum seekers.

¹ The Common Basic Principles for Immigrant Integration Policy, https://ec.europa.eu/migrant-integration/library-document/common-basic-principles-immigrant-integration-policy-eu_en.

Introduction: Building bridges and the participation of beneficiaries of international protection in the public sphere

The public participation of migrants, beneficiaries of international protection and asylum seekers is the fundament for their integration, enhancing the two-way process of mutual social accommodation and ensuring their impact on the formulation of integration policies and measures at the local and national levels. These assumptions are reflected in the Common Basic Principles for Immigrant Integration Policy in the EU. The seventh basic principle highlights the importance of the intercultural dialogue and interactions between various social groups, shared forums, and education. The ninth Common Basic Principle refers specifically to the public participation of migrants in the democratic process, acknowledging the rights and importance of the political participation and representation of migrants.

The NIEM research project evaluates national policies and the measures state governments apply to integrate beneficiaries of international protection and asylum seekers. Among the 13 dimensions of integration, the project provides evidence of the particular steps governments take to offer a comprehensive policy approach to building bridges: setting the legal framework, creating the policy framework, implementation, and collaboration. The study refers to such components of integration policy as national strategies, the establishment of multi-stakeholder cooperation, the realization of publicly funded campaigns and the participation of status-holders and asylum seekers in the social sector (as volunteers or through social organizations). The proactive role of national governments, awareness-raising of the mainstream population, targeted support of migrants, and refugee civic participation constitute the model of efficient integration policy. The scope and conditions of civic participation may be presented in national and local strategies which define goals and create a framework for the cooperation of various actors in integrating and building social dialogue. Nevertheless, according to the comparative analyses (presented in The European benchmark for refugee integration. Evaluation 2: Comprehensive report²), building bridges remains the weakest integration area for beneficiaries of international protection across the 14 studied countries.

Governments are reluctant to include displaced persons as political and civic counterparts in strategic planning and decision-making processes. The only exception is France, which obtains the highest score overall, as building bridges represents a focal area of its national refugee integration strategy.³ More developed cooperation also appears locally among municipal authorities and social and private sectors in EU states. Migrants and refugees establish associations or join other NGOs. Positive developments have also been noticed in Bulgaria,

² The European benchmark for refugee integration. Evaluation 2: Comprehensive report, <http://www.forintegration.eu/pl/pub>.

³The European benchmark for refugee integration. Evaluation 2: Comprehensive report, p. 118, <http://www.forintegration.eu/pl/pub>.

Czechia (Czechia was studied in the context of the Visegrad countries⁴) and Latvia, where governments enhance the pro-active role of mainstream society through awareness-raising campaigns, state funding support for social activists and, to a small extent, support for the active participation and self-advocacy of migrants in the public sector.

National Level: Building bridges in Poland

In the Polish national context, integration policy – and especially building bridges – remains beyond the scope of the central administration's priorities. At the time of the research, Poland didn't have an integration strategy, so there was no framework that would define a systemic approach to integration and the role of Polish society in that process. Public authorities did not include migrants and refugees as active participants in public life. However, the document "Polish migration policy - Action plan 2021-2022,"⁵ for the first time, defined integration as one of the priorities of the migration policy. In the document, integration was framed as "a complex and dynamic two-way process involving both foreigners and the host society." The goals of integration were also defined as "enabling migrants to function independently in the Republic of Poland, including their activity on the labor market, and independence from social benefits and welfare." The presented definition was broadly criticized by human rights and social organizations as too general, inadequate to the realities and needs of migrants and refugees, and not introducing appropriate principles of including Polish society in integration and social cohesion activities.⁶ It also didn't present any assumptions about what role regional and local authorities should undertake in involving beneficiaries of international protection in consultation and decision-making processes. No public financing support was allocated for implementing such activities.

In view of the lack of central administration engagement, some municipalities have independently initiated activity in multi-stakeholder cooperation and policymaking through, for example, consultative bodies or coalitions. Nevertheless, such initiatives refer to social integration on a more general level. The collaboration of various public actors (including migrant and refugee initiatives) has been included in documents introduced by the city halls of Warsaw (e.g., the diversity policy adopted in April 2022), Kraków (the city's Open Krakow Program), Wrocław (Strategy for Intercultural Dialogue 2018-2022) and Gdansk (Immigrant Integration Model). Nonetheless, there is a lack of a centralized approach toward social inclusion or increasing the civic participation of migrants with protection status in Poland. The

⁴ See: Béla Soltész (ed.), Eva Kaličinská, Vivien Vadasi, Kseniya Homel, Jarmila Karak Vargová, *The role of local governments in the integration of refugees in the V4 countries*, February 2021, URL: <http://www.forintegration.eu/pl/pub/the-role-of-local-governments-in-the-integration-of-refugees-in-the-v4-countries/dnl/64>.

⁵ Draft resolution of the Council of Ministers on the adoption of the document "Polish migration policy - Action plan 2021-2022" (ID179) <https://www.gov.pl/web/mswia/projekt-uchwaly-rady-ministrow-w-sprawie-przyjecia-dokumentu-polityka-migracyjna-polski-kierunki-dzialan-2021-2022-id179>.

⁶ The Statement of the Consortium of social organizations working for migrants, <https://konsorcjum.org.pl/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/uwagi-konsorcjum-do-rzadowej-polityki-migracyjnej-1.pdf>.

possibilities for refugee leaders to be involved in the consultation and decision-making processes in areas related to the situation and experience of beneficiaries of international protection and asylum seekers remain limited.

Public participation: Social associations

Filling the gap left by the lack of a building bridges dimension of integration policy on the main level, migrant and refugee leaders enhance their public participation through bottom-up activities – establishing social organizations or acting informally. In Poland, such organizations represent various migrant and refugee communities: African, Tajik, Kosovar, Belarusian, Palestinian, Vietnamese, Ukrainian, Turkish, Nepalese, Chechen, Russian, etc.

Refugee associations

Civic participation through social organizations represents an alternative opportunity for migrant and refugee communities to provide advocacy and self-representation. Thanks to social initiatives, migrant communities can present their voice in a situation where dialog with the public authorities is missing. The working definition of the refugee association adopted for the current analysis refers to the definition of “migrant organization”⁷ and includes such components as an initiative set up by the person or group of people with the experience of forced migration, representing their interests and providing targeted assistance and activities to refugees and asylum seekers.

In Poland, various migrant communities have established informal or more formalized initiatives. Beneficiaries of international protection in Poland have established social organizations as informal initiatives (e.g., groups organized in social media forums) and registered organizations (in particular, associations or foundations). Increased public activity among refugee communities was noticed in 2021-2022 in response to migration and the political situation in Poland. The most significant events that enhanced this wave of fundraising campaigns, public appearances of refugee leaders and registration of social organizations were the forced migration from Belarus due to the political crisis and mass repressions, the relocation from Afghanistan of people who had helped the Polish and EU missions, the humanitarian crisis on Polish-Belarus border and, finally, the war in Ukraine.

Civic participation in national law

⁷ The definition of an immigrant or refugee organization is the following: a social initiative, founded and coordinated by a person with a migration or refugee experience, representing the interests of the immigrant or refugee community and carrying out activities for this community or group (Nowosielski 2020; Rodriguez-Fraticelli et al. 1991; Pawlak, Matusz-Protasiewicz 2015). Organizations can be formal (associations, ordinary associations, foundations) as well as informal social initiatives.

In Poland, beneficiaries of international protection have the right to establish social organizations (primarily foundations or associations) or act as informal groups.

The primary legal acts regulating the functioning of social organizations in Poland are the following:

- Law on foundations of April 6, 1984 (Dz. U. z 2020 r. poz. 2167). As was stated in art. 2, sec. 1, “Foundations may be established by individuals regardless of their citizenship and domicile, or by legal entities with offices in Poland or abroad.”⁸
- Law on associations of April 7, 1989 (Dz.U.2020.2261 t.j). Art. 4, sec. 1 states, “Foreigners who are residents of the Republic of Poland may become members of associations by the regulations binding on Polish citizens”; sec. 2. “Foreigners who are not residents of the Republic of Poland may become members of associations whose statutes provide such a possibility.”⁹
- The Act of April 24, 2003, on Public Benefit and Volunteer Work (Dz. U. z 2020 r. poz. 1057 oraz z 2021 r. poz. 1038, 1243 I 1535).¹⁰

Refugee social organizations in Poland

Relevant statistics on the number of refugee associations and participation rates of migrants with protection status in social organizations are unavailable, as public authorities collect no such data. Most migrant social organizations represent particular diasporas (Belarusian, Ukrainian, Palestinian, etc.). Such organizations represent the interests of migrants, refugees and asylum seekers, provide self-support and promote their rights in Poland.

The majority of the organizations operate locally, with Warsaw being the leading city in terms of the number of registered migrant initiatives. Diaspora organizations are mainly engaged in advocacy activities for the human and social rights of asylum-seekers and migrants with protection status, humanitarian assistance and educational and anti-discrimination social campaigns.

The role of migrant and refugee organizations

- Developing social organizations, refugee leaders engage in political, social and cultural activities highlighting refugee-specific issues and raising awareness about the situation of this group in their new country of residence. Migrant and refugee organizations realize a broad scope of activities:
- advocacy and representation of community interests, rights, cultural and religious freedoms;

⁸ Law on foundations of April 6, 1984 (Dz. U. z 2020 r. poz. 2167), <https://isap.sejm.gov.pl/isap.nsf/download.xsp/WDU19840210097/U/D19840097Lj.pdf>.

⁹ Law on associations of April 7, 1989, (Dz.U.2020.2261 t.j), <https://isap.sejm.gov.pl/isap.nsf/download.xsp/WDU19890200104/U/D19890104Lj.pdf>.

¹⁰The Act of 24 April 2003 on Public Benefit and Volunteer Work (Dz. U. z 2020 r. poz. 1057 oraz z 2021 r. poz. 1038, 1243 I 1535), <https://isap.sejm.gov.pl/isap.nsf/download.xsp/WDU20030960873/U/D20030873Lj.pdf>.

- self-help and humanitarian support;
- cultural and educational programs;
- political action directed towards the country of residence or the country of origin.

Such initiatives also focus on the internal integration and networking of diaspora or migrant communities. Networking allows particular leaders to gather the support necessary to stand for broader representation, promotion of social inclusion and intercultural dialogue. The significant advantage of migrant and refugee information is internal expert knowledge and an understanding of the social or cultural features of a particular community or group (e.g., female Chechen refugees), their daily life, needs or difficulties they experience in Poland.

Advocacy and representation of community interests

Thanks to the active public participation and individual engagement of refugee leaders, social organizations can act on behalf of refugees and asylum seekers. Advocacy activities include public and media appearances and the involvement of refugee leaders in solidarity actions, protests and representation of the interests and needs of migrant groups in contact with central and local administration. An essential aspect of this activity is building and promoting the rights of people with migration and refugee statuses, combating discrimination and prejudices through social and educational campaigns, and developing own information portals. A wide range of activities in this area is carried out, among other things, by leaders with experience in the Ukrainian, Belarusian and African communities.

Self-help and humanitarian support

Some organizations provide targeted support and assistance for newcomers in dealing with the Polish administration, looking for accommodation, seeking psychological support, etc. A critical area of the activities of refugee social organizations constitutes support and assistance programs for people with experience of war and repressions (e.g., legal consultations about asylum procedures, psychological support, etc.). Organizations also aim to support other social groups that face the risk of exclusion such as seniors, refugees, asylum-seeking women, and people with disabilities. Since 2020, such support and assistance activities have been provided on a large scale by Belarusian diaspora organizations for people forced to flee the country and families of repressed who remained in Belarus, specifically, by organizing assistance for Belarusians in reception and accommodation centers in Poland. In response to the war in Ukraine and increased migration to Poland, Ukrainian diaspora organizations have provided humanitarian and integration assistance for war refugees.

Cultural and educational programs

Refugee and migrant organizations promote the culture, language, traditions and history of their country of origin, enhancing intercultural dialogue and strengthening social inclusion in the new country of residence. Refugee communities also focus on maintaining a sense of belonging to a cultural heritage among young migrants and refugee descendants. For this purpose, organizations initiate cultural activities by themselves or participate in external events like festivals, handicraft and cooking workshops, educational meetings, literary evenings or concerts. In Poland, the Ukrainian, Belarusian and Vietnamese communities undertake a wide range of such activities. African organizations also develop various activities to disseminate knowledge about African countries, culture and music.

Political activity

Another dimension of refugee social organizations is their political activity. Diasporas oppose anti-democratic regimes in their countries of origin or address political authorities in their new country of residence. Leaders develop social campaigns and disseminate information about the situation in their home country, violations of human rights, prosecutions, etc., sign petitions or take part in protests, demonstrations and strikes. They work to establish cooperation with the authorities of their country of residence to support or help people applying for international protection. In Poland, such activity is broadly provided by Palestinian, Russian and Belarusian diasporas.

Challenges that hinder refugees and migrant social organizations

Several factors limit the civic participation of beneficiaries of international protection in Poland. Although various barriers are interrelated, it is generally possible to divide them into two categories – organizational and political limitations.

Organizational limitations

Bureaucratic requirements related to the registration of social organizations and the inability to gain access to sufficient financial resources discourage beneficiaries of international protection from formalizing their activist involvement. Language barriers, especially in terms of administrative and legal terminology, make it more difficult to elaborate on the official status of the organization or submit applications for grants. Leaders reported difficulties with the accessibility of practical information about setting up and running a social organization; they mentioned the lack of workshops dedicated to refugees and migrants interested in civic activities.

Organizational difficulties are also related to the uncertainties of employment in the third sector. Lack of stable work is also associated with the ability to secure livelihoods for the refugee leaders and their families. Migrant and refugee organizations exist largely thanks to the personal involvement of leaders and volunteers who volunteer their time to them in addition to their regular paid work. Such organizations have neither regular staff nor

permanent funding. The lack of stable financial resources makes maintaining the continuity of activities impossible. The working model is often project-based or is organized ad hoc thanks to fundraising campaigns and donors' support. Such conditions lead to burnout of the leader or team members. Refugee leaders also face various inequalities when participating in competitions for financial grants. There are no specific programs or funds for migrants and refugee organizations in Poland. Participating on a general basis with other social organizations, they face challenges due to their lack of long-term experience and acknowledgment of the institutional system of the social sector. Leaders also mentioned that competition programs are not transparent.

Political limitations

The politicization of migration, anti-refugee sentiment and, significantly, anti-Islamic public discourse in Poland affects refugees' civil participation. Hence, leaders mentioned that cooperation with local and municipal administration is underdeveloped, while collaboration is missing at the central administration level. There is no political will to involve migrant and refugee organizations in public consultations and strategic planning. The anti-refugee discourse of the political elites in Poland has a negative impact on the possibilities of developing cooperation with other social and public actors and increasing the social participation of leaders with experience of forced migration, especially in smaller towns and rural areas.

Summary and Recommendations

Migrants and beneficiaries of international protection establish and run social organizations to enhance public participation and self-representation. Cooperation involving mainstream society, beneficiaries of international protection and asylum seekers facilitates the elaboration of an inclusive integration policy and helps to prevent stereotypes, xenophobia, and discrimination. Nevertheless, such cooperation should not only be based on bottom-up initiatives but should constitute part of a fully-fledged national framework for building bridges involving both central and local authorities. Public actors should also play a crucial role in promoting migrant participation in many areas of public life.

In Poland, migrant and refugee communities offer a wide range of cultural, educational and political activities; they provide targeted support and develop intercultural dialog with other communities and mainstream society. Nevertheless, the scope and resources of their actions are limited. Organizational and political conditions affect the capabilities and the extent of the impact of refugee initiatives on the public sector. In Poland, no support programs are provided for refugees to self-organize at the administrative level. The lack of awareness-raising campaigns about their rights and the role of the public participation of migrants (as well as beneficiaries of international protection) limits chances for intercultural dialog.

Recommendations

- Funders and stakeholders should develop and promote initiatives to enhance cooperation and partnership relations among refugees and other social actors;
- Central and municipal authorities might establish targeted funding support dedicated to migrant and refugee organizations;
- Practical workshops and programs diversified in terms of the activities and characteristics of the social organization should be available in different locations (smaller towns and rural areas) in cooperation with local authorities;
- Funders and stakeholders should elaborate the mechanism of crisis support for migrant and refugee organizations: e.g., providing an online informational platform, ensuring access to spaces for humanitarian help (e.g., psychological assistance, educational activities, etc.), logistic assistance during fundraising campaigns, the exchange of volunteers, etc.;
- Central and municipal authorities should cooperate with academia to provide regular research and evaluation of the social sector, the needs of migrant and refugee organizations and support programs directed to them.