Policy Brief

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Achieving Better Integration of Ukrainian Refugees in the Czech Republic: Making Use of Expertise and Addressing Cultural Differences

Abstract: In our policy brief, we would like to focus on two key aspects that have received little attention in the literature and in the real policy: the role of NGOs in the transition from crisis management to mainstream governance from an NGO perspective and the role of cultural barriers in proximate cultures.

1 Introduction

Since Russia invaded Ukraine, more than 500,000 Ukrainian refugees have arrived in the Czech Republic (Jelínková et al. 2023). While Poland currently hosts the largest total number of Ukrainian refugees, the Czech Republic leads the ranking in terms of the number of Ukrainian refugees per 100,000 inhabitants (Jelínková et al. 2023). This situation naturally puts a lot of pressure on the state, which was not at all prepared for the arrival of so many refugees. Although the Czech Republic is, as an EU country, part of the Common Asylum System (Tsourdi 2021), it has long granted very few international protections. Moreover, its refugee-deterrent policy led it to refuse entry to significant numbers of refugees even during the so-called refugee crisis after 2015 (Klaus et al. 2018). By the time the Ukrainian refugees arrived in and after March 2022, however, 7 % of the Czech population was migrant, and migrant integration policies were slowly developing (Zogata-Kusz 2020) due to significant economic migration, mainly from Ukraine, Slovakia, and Vietnam (Czech Statistical Office 2022).

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The Czech Republic's strong willingness to accept Ukrainian war refugees (who became, officially, beneficiaries of temporary protection)[1] in 2022 led to a rapid response from the Czech state and society. The challenging emergency phase of refugee reception was well managed. Newly arriving Ukrainian refugees were granted generous rights (e.g. access to the labour market, education, health care) and, although the majority of them were women with children, they quickly started to participate in the labour market. However, in contrast to this successful crisis management, the subsequent phase of integration has not gone so smoothly: planned measures have only been implemented in part, and public support for Ukrainian refugees has decreased significantly. Although the country's initial willingness to accept Ukrainian refugees was widely understood as a willingness to accept people with a similar culture – cultural racism (Balibar 2008) having been one of the main reasons for not accepting refugees after 2015 (Jelínková 2019) – prolonged coexistence with Ukrainian refugees has revealed that the Czech society is sensitive to minor cultural differences, which have become the subject of hoaxes and hybrid campaigns. The state has not responded to relevant NGOs' emphasis on the need for a more nuanced approach to the integration of refugees. Moreover, the relationship between the state and NGOs, which played an absolutely crucial role in the reception of migrants in the first months, has cooled considerably. Our data clearly show that while the NGOs' expertise was essential in the emergent (initial) phase, this expertise has since become less welcome and there is increasing pressure on NGOs to adopt the role of simple service providers.

In this policy brief, we focus on two key aspects that have received little attention both in real policy and in the literature: first, NGOs' role in the transition from crisis management to mainstream governance, as seen from the NGO perspective, and second the effects of cultural barriers in proximate cultures.

2 Context: The Fraught Relationship Between Migrant-Assisting NGOs and the Czech State

The establishment of Czech migrant-assisting NGOs was closely linked to the post-revolution development (1989) of the newly established Czech Republic (Zogata-Kusz 2022). Most migrant-assisting NGOs were founded by women dissidents who had previously been active in the anti-communist opposition. These NGOs

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1 Temporary protection is a specific legal category of residence used by the EU for the first time in its history, based on Council Directive 2001/55/EC. The purpose of this residence category is (a) to allow temporary (up to 3 years) residence and protection to a clearly defined group of the population and (b) to set minimum standards for that group's rights in the host country (Motte-Baumvol et al., 2022).

were established in the early 1990s in response to the arrival of refugees from former Yugoslavia, and over time they also addressed situations encountered by voluntary migrants in the Czech Republic (Zogata-Kusz 2020). The relationship between these NGOs and the Ministry of the Interior (MoI), the main state coordinator of migration policy, was initially friendly, thanks to the limited number of actors in a small country (the Czech Republic has a population of 10 million). Later, however, the country's increasingly restrictive migration policy and the MoI's questioning of NGOs' legitimacy led to gradual alienation. Nevertheless, personal ties ensured that meetings between NGO representatives and the Director of Asylum and Migration Policy at the MoI continued to address the most urgent situations. These meetings were often effective in achieving particular improvements for the migrants for whom the NGOs were advocating. A certain unwritten equilibrium was established, whereby NGOs tended to cooperate with the MoI in order to solve the most problematic cases. That equilibrium came to an end following the Czech Republic's accession to the EU (2004), due to a combination of factors: generational change, better (less 'flexible') legislation, the increasing securitisation of migration, and moral dilemmas (for example, whether NGOs should openly criticise the MoI's policies).

Czech migration policy is very centralised, and local governments have not yet become key actors in it (Jelínková, Plaček, and Ochrana 2023). This is in part a product of the excessive decentralisation of governance in the Czech Republic, where there are more than 6,246 municipalities, most of which have fewer than 1,000 inhabitants (ibid.): in this environment, it is very difficult to coordinate the implementation of specific policies. Municipalities lack the capacity to develop and implement their own public policies (ibid.). Thus, cooperation with NGO's tends to depend on the municipal leaders' current preferences. Some local governments provide grants to NGOs from the municipal budget (Plaček, Špaček, and Ochrana 2020).

The main aim of Czech migrant-assisting NGOs (the largest of which are the Organisation for Refugee Assistance, the Association for Integration and Migration and Inbáze) is usually the provision of legal and social counselling to migrants (including refugees). The Czech organizations are specific in a number of ways compared with those operating in Slovakia, Poland, or Hungary (Duszczyk, Pachocka, and Pszczółkowska 2020): they place a strong emphasis on advocacy work, and they are able to unite. Since 2003, 18 Czech migrant-assisting NGOs have united under an umbrella organization known as the Consortium of Migrants Assisting NGOs. NGO representatives view their advocacy successes rather sceptically, arguing that they have been more successful in preventing major deteriorations than in bringing about major improvements. However, this is also an important factor. Despite their extensive work, the Czech NGOs continue to work from a difficult position. In the absence of any tradition of private donors, their precarious funding

comes largely from various EU grants (Jelínková and Valenta 2022) or from state contributions to social services, which do not allow for any flexibility in spending.

In and after 2015, Czech politicians and mainstream Czech society denounced the Czech migrant-assisting NGOs' activities, and indeed their very existence – to a certain extent, these NGOs became scapegoats for the anti-refugee movement, which opposed refugees arriving in Europe (especially Syrians, but also Kosovars, Albanians and others). The social and political climate was strongly against these refugees, with more than 80 % of Czechs refusing to accept them (CVVM 2016). Nevertheless, the Czech Republic did not experience any increase in the number of applicants for international protection at the time, whereas neighbouring Germany received over 1.2 million applications for international protection (BAMF 2023). Migrant NGOs were harshly labelled as hostile by politicians and the media, their representatives were subjected to hate, and the state violated European and its own laws in its approach to potential asylum seekers (Jelínková 2019; Zogata-Kusz 2022). The image of refugees was narrowed down to a visual narrative of threat (Kotilainen and Pellander 2022), which pictured refugees as 'young men with expensive smartphones'. NGOs' attempts to change this anti-migration discourse were not successful (Kucharczyk and Mesežnikov 2018). With the passage of time and the departure of the populist government, migration largely dropped out of everyday discourse, only re-emerging as an issue during election campaigns. However, the events and responses that followed after 2015 had a significant impact on the position of migrant-assisting NGOs. In their analysis, Čada and Hoření (2021) highlight the consequences of a political style built on collective sentiments of fear and demands for punitive policies. First, the discourse of fear was reflected in the tightening of migration legislation, which focused on economic migration and had no connection to asylum policy (Dobiášová and Kotrusová 2020). Second, the blatant hostility towards NGOs assisting migrants was often exploited by the populist government. In this regard, Timmer and Docka-Filipek (2018) point out that such reactions are not accidental. NGOs working on behalf of vulnerable populations can be seen as 'canaries in the coal mine', as the civil sector may be the first sector of society to come under attack or experience a downturn when liberal democratic institutions are in flux (ibid, 54).

3 How Migrant-Assisting NGOs and the State Responded to Ukrainian Refugees

Czech migrant-assisting NGOs found themselves in a completely new situation after Russia invaded Ukraine on February 24, 2022. Almost half a million refugees from

Ukraine arrived in the Czech Republic within a very short period of time. Civil society reacted almost overnight, and migrant-assisting NGOs were among the first to respond to the refugees' needs of the refugees in the initial days and weeks. Subsequently, support for forced migrants from Ukraine was seen across almost all segments of society (Jelínková, Ochrana, and Plaček 2023). White, linguistically close (Ukrainian, like Czech, is a Slavic language) and culturally similar forced migrants were welcomed by the majority of society, most politicians and the media. The relative geographical proximity (Ukraine is 500 km from the Czech Republic), public perception of Putin's plans to extend Russia's sphere of influence into Central Europe (again) and, above all, Czechoslovakia's first-hand historical experience of invasion by the Soviet army in 1968 and long-lasting Soviet occupation clearly played a significant role in raising support. All these reasons and certainly many others led to an enormous expression of support in the Czech Republic for forced migrants from Ukraine; in spring 2022, more than 75 % of the Czech population supported accepting new Ukrainian refugees (CVVM 2023).

Almost 500,000 Ukrainians were received into the Czech Republic in a process that was managed well, albeit not without a few glitches. The success of the initial welcome was due in large part to a huge wave of civil society solidarity, the involvement of regional and municipal authorities, private businesses and not least the central government, which adopted early on (April 2022) *Strategic Priorities for the Management of the Refugee Wave Associated with the Invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation*, in which it outlined plans for establishing coexistence with Ukrainians across 13 core areas, with a clear outline of how all relevant actors (including migrant assisting NGOs) would collaborate to developing and implement the specified priorities. However, after the initial successes of the emergent phase, with the most intensive refugee intake (spring, summer 2022), the necessary changes that would have allowed for the newly arrived Ukrainians (primarily women) to integrate into Czech society did not take place (Jelínková and Tollarová 2022) and public support for these migrants began to decline.

Public support for allowing Ukrainian war refugees to remain in the Czech Republic dropped within 1 year to 56 % (CVVM 2023); this fact is frequently highlighted by the Czech media (and other increasingly vocal opponents of Ukrainian migration). In the context of very rapid inflation, the energy crisis, attacks by populist politicians of the opposition, the fastest-growing national debt in Czech history, and societal exhaustion of in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic and the nearby war, retaining support above 50 % may not be so bad. While the government continues to support Ukrainian refugees, they are increasingly the easiest scapegoat for a government keen to show that it is saving money and thinking primarily of its citizens' needs. In July 2023, legislation known as Lex Ukraine VI came into force, which fundamentally limits support for accommodating Ukrainians. The impact of

the changes is drastic: limited financial resources combined with expensive and poorly available commercial housing place Ukrainian refugees – many of whom have small children and most of whom work in low-paid, unskilled jobs although they are well educated and qualified (PAQ 2023) – in an intractable situation.

4 Lesson Learned: Reflections from NGO Representatives

We have conducted semi-structured interviews with five representatives of the largest Czech NGOs, lasting about 2 h, on the topic of the NGO response to the arrival of Ukrainian refugees. The main issues that emerge from the thematic coding of those interviews (Braun and Clarke 2006) reflect the high level of frustration that NGO leaders have experienced over the past 36 months. Part of this frustration stems from the situation they dealt with in the first few weeks after the invasion of Ukraine, and the Czech state's lack of preparation for such an influx, but much of it relates to subsequent developments and the state's attitude towards the NGOs themselves and their expertise. The challenges of refugee and migrant integration have been discussed at length (e.g. Esses, Hamilton, and Gaucher 2017).

Despite the successful reception phase, our interviews reveal that many activities continued to operate on a voluntary basis for months, with no specific people or institutions accountable for the new agenda while demands for proper coordination and strategic management were not met. It is true that the Fire and Rescue Service, which is responsible for crisis situations, took on an important management role. Municipal and regional crisis teams also functioned, and their capacity to intervene was strengthened by the recent experience of the COVID-19 pandemic (Plaček, Špaček, and Ochrana 2020). However, this crisis management was time-limited and those involved lacked knowledge relevant to migrants' participation in society.

During the first months of the crisis, there was an evident willingness among most actors to collaborate, communicate, and find the best possible solutions. Cooperation between state and local government representatives was ongoing and resulted in a number of changes. However, cooperation was not smooth and structured across the board: although NGO representatives initiated important activities and necessary changes during this period, their communication with state and local government representatives was unstructured and somewhat random. In the interviews, NGO representatives frequently mentioned situations in which they opted for direct (mostly telephone) contact with decision-makers, for example, to explain that special measures should be taken for unaccompanied

minors (whose situation was not being addressed at the time), or that refugees should not be required to pay for public transport to reach assistance centres. Effective communication channels were established within units that had previously worked together (e.g. during floods), while other actors were involved more haphazardly. At the local level, there was often good cooperation between municipalities, NGOs and various local initiatives. As far as strategic decisions were concerned, however, NGOs' voices and their expertise were gradually less keenly heard by politicians and the state administration.

At present, NGOs continue to be formally involved in a number of working groups and platforms, but the NGO representatives we interviewed agree that their participation in these working groups has become questionable: at working group meetings (e.g. on labour market participation, social security, health) led by various ministries, there is virtually no discussion and the NGOs are usually only asked to provide information from the field. In the best cases, they learn about planned measures at these meeting; often they only learn about policy changes through the media. Our respondents repeatedly mentioned that after expressing concerns or disagreements they were then not invited to the next meeting, or were excluded from the group without being informed of this. Participation in multiple working groups is also time consuming in terms of transaction costs. Such disregard for NGO participation in decision-making in partnerships involving the non-profit sector and government is a well-known phenomenon (Gazley 2008; Shafiq, Albrecht, and LeRoux 2023). Nevertheless, the resulting inability to participate in decision-making, or even in discussions of forthcoming measures, leaves Czech migrant-assisting organisations faced with the dilemma of whether to leave the working groups in order to avoid legitimising the state's decisions, and take a stronger opposing stance, or whether to maintain the status quo and maximise their participation in the ad hoc marginal improvements that can be made here and there as a result.

5 The Role of Cultural Barriers in Proximate Cultures

NGOs with expertise in assistance to migrants are have brought into the public debate a number of issues that are crucial for the integration of Ukrainian refugees, including key issues relevant to migrant integration, such as the recognition of qualifications, the fight against labour exploitation, or the need for substantial support for language learning (Joppke 2007; Kogan 2016; Pfeffer and Skrivanek 2018). As mentioned above, cultural similarities were among the most important reasons for the Czech population's willing acceptance of Ukrainian refugees. However,

long-term coexistence shows that cultural misunderstandings occur even between groups whose cultures are close. This was also confirmed by one of our interviewees, who had previously organised an exhibition on ethnic minorities in the Czech Republic, entitled "Customize". Czech society, which until recently was rather homogeneous, is gradually becoming more "accustomed" to the small cultural differences observed in relation to Ukrainian refugees. However, failure to name and explain these differences leads to unnecessary tension. Some NGO activities (and other institutions) have tried to address such differences, but the scope of these activities is limited.

One of the main cultural differences considered in the literature is a difference of cultural values, namely: whether the given cultures are individualistic or collectivistic (Hofstede 2001). In individualistic cultures, the individual is seen as relatively independent of others, whereas collectivistic cultures emphasise the importance of relationships, roles and status within the social system (Guess 2004). The implications of this aspect of culture are fundamental: it affects cooperation, communication, relationships, how institutions work, approaches to conflict, trust in society, family relationships, and even the way language is used (Hofstede 2001). While the Czech culture has a relatively high degree of individualism, Ukrainian culture is somewhat more collectivist. Moreover, a closer examination (Borysenko 2017; Shafiq, Albrecht, and LeRoux 2023) shows that attempts to measure Ukrainian individualism and collectivism have yielded somewhat mixed results, with large differences between Western and Eastern Ukraine and between generations.

Cultural differences, whether they are simply differences of values or differences stemming from historical experience, are neither fundamental nor insurmountable. In practice, however, they are increasingly becoming a source of misunderstanding between the Czech population and the newly arrived Ukrainians. Some of the most frequently mentioned differences observed are a higher level of tidiness among Ukrainian women, greater emotionality, noisier and less responsible behaviour in public spaces, intensive use of public spaces (e.g. barbecue areas), minimal small talk, and frequent frowning among Ukrainian women (who often work as shop assistants). Although some of the mentioned behavioural differences are highly stereotypical, Czech society seems to perceive them in a very negative light.

While the impact of cultural barriers on migrant integration has been well described in many different cultures (Kalich, Heinemann, and Ghahari 2016; Kiselev et al. 2020), it has received rather minimal attention in proximate cultures. And yet even minor cultural barriers have a very practical impact on integration. Recent research on how Czech doctors perceive Ukrainian patients (Jelínková et al. 2023) reveals how doctors were prepared for well-known barriers in the provision and accessibility of healthcare, such as language, information, and differences in

healthcare systems (Al Shamsi et al. 2020; Bernard et al. 2006; Hahn, Steinhäuser, and Goetz 2020) but were not prepared for smaller cultural differences. Doctors have perceived their Ukrainian patients as very grateful, but also as demanding in relation to their treatment, more emotional than Czech patients, and arriving with the expectation that they will have to fight to receive health care (Jelínková et al. 2023). Ukrainian patients' behaviour partly reflects differences in the functioning of the Ukrainian health care system compared with the Czech system, but also points to differences in emotionality, relationship to conflict, use of language (e.g. not using conditioning), and expectations of authority. These are differences that stem from the aforementioned differences between individualistic and collectivist cultures. Most of these tensions can be easily bridged, for example, by training medical staff in intercultural competence or familiarising Ukrainian patients with the workings of the Czech health system (Dobiášová and Kotherová 2023).

Nevertheless, the above anecdotal evidence shows that minor cultural differences can very easily be exploited for disinformation campaigns and the creation of new narratives through social media. Despite their unquestionable cultural proximity, Ukrainian refugees, are portrayed as ungrateful and as resistant to local cultural practices. A similar narrative can already be observed from some media and politicians, who portray the top leaders of the Ukrainian executive as failing to value the aid provided to them and constantly demanding more. This poses a new challenge for NGOs which, in addition to their existing agenda, need to be able to effectively advocate in the online space, whose influence has significantly increased since the last migration crisis in 2015.

6 Conclusion and Policy Recommendation

In this policy brief we have focused on two main themes. First, the dynamics of the relationship between public and non-profit bodies and the cooperation between them in dealing with the challenges of migration. Second, the effects of cultural barriers in proximate cultures, which can lead to serious problems if overlooked.

To bridge cultural differences between migrants and the majority population, we consider it most crucial to take initiatives to prevent the creation of misinformation narratives. Sharing verified information and providing targeted communication to individual stakeholder groups are key tools. We also consider it important to share information about the positive aspects of the reception of Ukrainian refugees. The data show that the Czech population most values the economic benefits of immigration (Jelínková 2023). The Czech labour market is suffering from a chronic labour shortage, and most adult Ukrainian refugees have thus quickly become economically active and are contributing to the development of the Czech economy.

The economic argument is therefore one of many that should be heard in the Czech public sphere.

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