

WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM REFUGEE RIGHTS NGOS? INSIGHTS FROM EASTERN EUROPE

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While¹ debates about migration in European states are hardly new phenomena, the vigor with which they entered European politics in the wake of the Syrian War certainly created this appearance. In spring of 2015 many policymakers and commentators began talking about the largest displacement of people the world had seen since the Second World War, as "Europe's (think EU) refugee or migration crisis". Yet, most of the world's refugees still reside outside of the EU (UNHCR, 2017), so such expressions only underline the limited ability of most European states to fulfill their obligations towards people fleeing violent conflict (Gilbert, 2015). As EU states struggled to coordinate border protection mechanisms and the provision of humanitarian assistance, very few of them worked to expand their capacity to welcome more asylum-seekers. In the debates that ensued about most EU states failure to act, civil society was often anecdotally portrayed as a counter-force (see Youkhana and Sutter, 2017). Numerous volunteers and institutionalized NGOs within and outside the EU, along the "Balkan route" stepped up, and either provided much-needed services or advocated on the refugees behalf.

In this memo we propose a few observations on the way "the European crisis" was experienced by rights - based NGOs working on asylum - related issues in Eastern Europe. The internal functioning and the needs of what we call "refugee rights NGOs" have, until now, been subject to little academic interest (Garkisch et al., 2017). Researchers often look to refugee - rights NGOs as an access point for fieldwork, a source of knowledge about displaced peoples, but they are less interested in these NGOs as such. However, more attention to the daily experiences of those working with refugees, and the questions they consider important, can provide inputs to several academic and policy oriented conversations.²

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²The scholarship to which this type of research connects naturally goes beyond the field of migration/refugee studies and is too vast to be referenced in full in this brief preliminary memo intended also for practitioner audience. Briefly, we engage interdisciplinary debates on various types of solidarity including future of work, international aid, opportunities and limits of the EU accession process.

As scholars interested in various aspects of transnational solidarity and migration we have had a number of opportunities to engage in conversations with a wide range of NGO professionals and practitioners in the field of refugee protection. Informed by previous exchanges on the subject, we convened a joint workshop of refugee-focused NGOs from five Eastern European³ countries (Czechia, Hungary, Slovakia, Poland and Turkey) in Prague in the Fall 2017. While the NGOs that participated work in different social contexts and legal frameworks, we found that reading their experiences side by side helped us engage more deeply with the challenges – and at times contradictions – inherent in responding to the needs of non-citizens. We were deliberately interested to hear from the "veterans" working in refugee protection, because their long-term observations could shed light on the institutional changes they experienced as the crisis situation, in this case the growing Syrian exodus, developed. NGOs working on migration issues in these five countries, hence our workshop participants, operate in varied legal, institutional and social spaces.

The difference in government approaches to refugees (i.e. open door in Turkey vs closed door in the Visegrad countries (V4)) invites comparison, as does the fact that Turkey, although having harmonized some of its migration legislation with the EU, is not a member state. Yet, migration is a very complex phenomenon: ethnic and religious make-up, past legacies, wealth, security (and the perceptions thereof), all play a significant role in shaping policy decisions and public conversations on who should be allowed in, and on what terms. Until the Syrians arrived, none of the Eastern European countries subject to our inquiry had much experience providing asylum to a large body of recipients, and the Syrian crisis entered their political vocabulary at different times and under varied circumstances.

Turkey began hosting Syrians in 2011, and probably never expected their numbers to reach 3.5 million (Icduygu et al., 2017). Importantly, while the Turkish government has emphasized an open-door policy, Turkish society has become less and less patient with its role as host (for a recent report see International Crisis Group, 2018). In the V4, refugees did not enter the political agenda until much later (2014/2015), and from the beginning, were an unwanted presence. Arguably, governments' anti-immigration campaigns played a role in the swift rise of anti-refugee attitudes in a region not only notorious for very low asylum recognition rates, but also (with the exception of Hungary) a small number of applicants to begin with. In 2015, Czech Republic received less than 2000 applications – a number more or less constant with those over the past decade (MoI, 2017). The politicization of migration in the region was coupled with rhetoric and practices that portrayed asylum-seekers as threats to security. In Fall of 2015, Hungary, for instance, declared a "state of emergency due to mass immigration," and criminalized irregular border crossings, even for the purpose of asylum. Securitization of migration of course is not a new concern (Huysmans, 2000; Szczepanikova, 2011). Although the differences are glaring, focusing on the parallels in the narratives of NGOs workers from EU member and candidate states provides insight into future research which might also resonate with larger questions regarding

³There are different ways to categorize Czechia, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia such as Central Europe, V4, new EU member states. Turkey would be categorized as Mediterranean, Middle-Eastern, Near Eastern. Each categorization comes with its history and ideological baggage, we opted for Eastern Europe indicating simply the geographical location in relation to Western Europe.

state and civil society relations, such as the limits and opportunities of the EU accession process. With this aim, this research memo elaborates on the two clusters of concerns our workshop participants had for refugee rights NGOs was the organizations' struggle for legitimacy and the rights workers' ability to balance precarious project-based working conditions. These seem to be questions that civil society actors working in migration have, regardless of the contextual differences they operate in.

NGO's Struggle to Justify Their Presence and the Presence of Refugees

While central and local governmental institutions have some obvious legitimacy, in that they are made up of elected officials, and are able to provide a range of services covered by public money, NGOs have to periodically re-establish their purpose in order to justify their presence, and continue to solicit funding. Migration-related issues are often publicly contested and NGOs who advocate on behalf of foreigners are in a uniquely defensive positions by default. This is the case for those that provide services to migrants, but even more so for those that speak on migrants' behalf. Refugee rights NGOs are in a precarious situation, as physical movement across borders belongs to key prerogatives of state sovereignty. The state decides who comes in, how many will come in and when, and also what status newcomers receive. NGOs are, on the one hand, trying to play by the rules set up by elected authorities, and then on the other, projecting their own ideas for policy change.

The arrival of the Syrians (either physically or via TV screens) made asylum-related issues the subject of political mobilization in multiple venues: parliaments, streets and cafes. Until recently, refugee-rights NGOs in the V4 and Turkey have rarely been the focus of such public attention, but over the past few years this has changed rapidly. The increasing visibility of refugee issues pulled these organizations into the limelight. They are now expected to be more present in the public debate and engage with multiple audiences, and their expertise is sought after by government representatives and the media. Several NGOs even had to hire new communications specialists or train their staff in outward messaging, and how best to respond to the increased demand for information. At the same time, the increased visibility made them targets of public discontent and at times, even attacks. The refugee rights advocacy organizations in the V4 that were pushing for government support of the EU relocation scheme, were often accused of 'importing migrants', a phrase that became a common misnomer in regional debates.

NGOs also struggled to explain why helping foreigners was a necessary task, when the needs of locals were not yet fully met. Turkish NGOs have launched new programs in cooperation with the state to enhance social cohesion, in some cases allowing locals to access services originally only made available to refugees. So not only must they focus on helping people in need, but they must also be prepared to explain to multiple audiences what they are doing and why. This involves subtle diplomatic skills – yet, while their task involves liaising between different cultural contexts and various interests, they, for obvious reasons, lack the protections available to state diplomats. Refugee-rights NGOs' very special position makes them a unique source of knowledge on the societies in which they work. A further inquiry into the

dynamics of NGO engagement with the wider public (how they legitimize their interventions) can offer insight on how social, local, and national identities are negotiated in their respective countries. NGO perspectives offer insight into broader societal trends, and when being studied, they should not be isolated from their institutional histories and contexts in which they emerged and work.

Work-Cycle and Uncertain Futures

The question of job security and uncertain working conditions is central to several current academic and policy conversations (see e.g. Srnicek and Williams 2015) and is a highly salient issue also for NGOs we spoke to. Regardless of the type of contract NGO workers have with their institutions (employee or a freelance provider of services), their work (and future perspectives) are tied to project cycles. Long-term funding of institutions and the services they provide is rare, and so NGOs regularly apply for funding and pitch their work to donors. The nature of their work is precarious and the absence of a steady income makes professionalization difficult. This is particularly paradoxical: the very people working to ensure safer futures for others, are in reality, operating under such unpredictable terms. For NGOs as institutions, this brings challenges and risks – the uncertainties of funding not only limits their planning possibilities, but also requires that they spend quite a bit of energy managing their employees' expectations, as well as those of their donors and beneficiaries. Exploring how NGOs – as well as how the individuals that work for them – re-situate themselves when faced with donor fatigue would be particularly relevant.

One of the key dilemmas for organisations active in refugee protection, was how to respond to growing humanitarian needs and the surge of funding that followed. In Turkey, the humanitarian sector has grown rather fast in recent years, as the country became more active in its foreign policy over the last decades. This expansion undoubtedly generated new job opportunities in the already growing NGO sector. The arrival of Syrian refugees also caused new NGOs to spring up rapidly, and inspired existing ones to expand their mission and focus to include refugee issues (see Mackreath and Sağnıç, 2017). Similar trends, albeit to a lesser extent, have been in place in V4.

NGOs are supported by a variety of public and private donors, and many organizations found themselves in a dilemma as to which source of funding was the least controversial or conversely the most acceptable, for public authorities and society at large. The discussion about how funding may limit local actors from pursuing activities in public interest is not new or unique in the migration debate. Membership in the EU did not resolve the 'donor driven agenda' issue either, and the trend was only reinforced after the arrival of refugees. A related concern is the new dynamics that emerged with inflow of the EU (and the member states) money, much of which was entrusted to international (or EU-pean) NGOs for distribution. These established (i)NGOs are often able to provide better working conditions, and thus hire many qualified and experienced workers. At the same time, the growth of the humanitarian sector in Turkey, for instance, has provided job opportunities to young university graduates hoping to do meaningful work. The trend towards the professionalization of the civil society opens up different ways to explore everyday work-cycle and career path of NGO workers.

It would be interesting to investigate how young graduates entering civil society evaluate their work and future perspectives when compared to others who enter the field at later stages of their career and even to others who have been engaged before the recent boost in funding. Another important research avenue is to analyze how NGOs as well as individual NGO workers will re-situate themselves when faced with donor fatigue. Of no less relevance is to examine what type of change has the donor interest and funds brought to NGOs ability to justify their presence and that of refugees.

The NGOs that decided to curb their growth (in terms of number of staff members), did so to maintain internal cohesion, consistent messaging and continuity – a tight team of people who know each other and understand why they are doing the work they are doing. The strategic choice to maintain their initial principles certainly was not an easy decision, since growth would have led to more impact. Those in management positions explained that, they were forced to assume more administrative tasks that took them away from the actual client-focused work that they consider more meaningful. In general, a closer examination of the impact that donors' support has on an NGO's ability to justify their presence and that of the refugees they advocates for would be welcome.

Refugee-Rights NGOs and the EU Accession: A Game Changer or Not So Much?

"Civil society" is a contested category, in everyday and academic discussions used to denote social movements, ad hoc groups of individuals, but also institutionalized NGOs (Fisher, 1997). In this particular context, working in an NGO is not the only platform in which people can engage in working for/with refugees. Yet at the time when discussion about shrinking of the civic space is highly salient, listening to diverse perspectives of those, who consider themselves part of this space, and engaging with questions they raise, should be part of academic inquiry. Focusing on parallels in the narratives of NGOs workers from EU member and candidate states provides insights into larger questions on state and civil society relations, such as the limits and opportunities the EU accession process provides. NGOs in Eastern Europe have very limited means of shaping the public conversation on asylum. Plus, NGOs have little say over how financial mechanisms are governed. For instance, the allocation of funding in the March 2016 Turkey-EU statement is a great case in point, and highlights the need for close observation of how supranational/national bodies and local/international actors function and cooperate. Much research on inter-state responsibility-sharing and national integration frameworks has already been undertaken. While this is certainly important, more attention paid to direct care providers – including the NGOs, volunteers, and municipality workers – can further enrich the debate.

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