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Between the state and clients – Non-governmental organisations working with refugees and migrants in the Czech Republic

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Abstract:

This article focuses on the rarely discussed problematic aspects of the relationship between non-governmental organisations, the state and the clients/foreigners. Its aim is to initiate a critical discussion concerning the role of NGOs in the current system of migration control. Is there a risk of NGOs becoming an extended arm of the state? What consequences are there for the protection of rights of migrants and refugees? How do NGOs' clients themselves perceive the assistance they receive and what are the alternatives?

This text deals with the rarely discussed problematic aspects of the relationship between non-governmental organisations (hereinafter referred to as NGOs), the state and the clients/foreigners. Such aspects include both the services NGOs provide and the way they present their services in the public space. Its aim is to begin a critical discussion about the role of NGOs in the current system of migration control. Is there a risk of NGOs becoming an extended arm of the state? What does it mean for the protection of rights of migrants and refugees? How do NGOs' clients themselves perceive the assistance they receive, and what are the alternatives?

The text is based on the authors' PhD thesis¹, defended at the Department of Sociology of the University of Warwick in the United Kingdom. It is a follow-up to a public debate which took

¹ The main topic of this PhD thesis is the analysis of the system of acceptance and integration of refugees; therefore, it should be emphasized that collection of data about the work of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and their clients was focused on issues concerning refugees and asylum. Regardless of that, it can be assumed that many of the conclusions presented here are also valid for NGO activities with regard to other categories of migrants. The research took place in 2005-2007 in the form of semi-structured interviews with workers of five NGOs working with migrants and refugees (22 respondents); representatives of the Department of Asylum and Migration Policy of the Ministry of the Interior of the Czech Republic (12 respondents); employees of the Refugee Facilities Administration (22 respondents) and two workers of the Prague office of UNHCR. 45 asylum seekers from Armenia, Belarus and Chechnya took part in the research.

place in the library of the Multicultural Center Prague on 16th September 2009 during which the main arguments were discussed with NGO and academia representatives.

The work of NGOs aimed at refugees and migrants in the Czech Republic has been undermined for many years by unstable and insecure funding leading to an uncertain future for the organisations. Often, frustration is expressed about the constant struggle with state authorities against the increasing restrictions towards migrants and the feeling that the work done by the NGOs – often volunteer or remunerated poorly – passes unappreciated by both state authorities and the clients themselves. On the other hand, government officials, in particular the Department of Asylum and Migration Policy (OAMP) of the Ministry of the Interior and the Refugee Facilities Administration (SUZ), are of the opinion that NGOs should fulfil mainly the tasks delegated by the state. In other words, NGOs should focus on those state-approved activities which cannot or will not be carried out by state institutions. Ideally, NGOs should define their work as response to grant calls announced by ministries financed from the national or EU budget² without showing too much initiative of their own. Many government representatives have a negative perception of the “constant criticism” voiced by NGOs and do not believe that NGOs do professional work. By applying different approaches to financing individual NGOs the state creates tension among them as they are forced to compete for limited resources in order to provide often similar services. This often prevents NGOs from running joint actions and from having a stronger voice in the public sphere to advocate for refugees and migrants whose interests they represent.

Such tension is nothing new in the Czech Republic. What is new is the fact that over the past few years NGOs have become very dependent on state funding³, which has had significant impact on their scope of work and their approach to clients/foreigners. Using the words of a participant of the debate, which took place in the library of the Multicultural Center Prague in September 2009, the share of funding redistributed by the state is so large that “governmental non-profit organisations”⁴ would be a more appropriate name for NGOs today.

This article is based on the assumption that NGOs play a crucial role in advocacy and protection of rights of migrants and refugees. If NGOs did not exist, many vital services would not be provided at all or would be limited. Many restrictive legislative changes in immigration and asylum law would be passed more easily and migration would be presented to the public mainly as a security or economic issue. Even though Czech NGOs already fulfil

² For example from the European Social Fund or the European Refugee Fund. For a critical commentary on how the Ministry of the Interior controls the way EU funding is redistributed see the text by Věra Roubalová Kostlánová from 28 December 2006 on [migraceonline.cz: http://www.migraceonline.cz/e-knihovna/?x=1955034](http://www.migraceonline.cz/e-knihovna/?x=1955034) (in Czech).

³ Or on EU financing which is redistributed under the conditions set by Czech state authorities.

⁴ In this context, it will be interesting to follow the development of the so-called Regional Integration Support Centres for Foreigners operated by the Refugee Facilities Administration, administration of the South Moravian Region and the Counseling Centre for Integration. This initiative launched and controlled by the Ministry of the Interior can be interpreted as the state’s effort to compete with or even replace some of the services previously supplied by NGOs. This topic is described in more detail in Barbora Tošnerová’s article Integration in the Czech regions – Regional Integration Centres 4 May 2010: <http://www.migrationonline.cz/e-library/?x=2228265>

many of the important advocacy tasks, I believe that their track record together with the increasing dependency of state funding is calling for deeper rethinking of NGO work among NGOs themselves.

In an effort to get a broad picture I am bound to oversimplify to a certain extent. Of course, there are different NGOs working with migrants and refugees; they have different strategies and ideologies and achieve different results. As suggested above, all of them work in a quite challenging environment. It is not my goal to suggest how things should be done more effectively; rather, my aim is to offer an informed view from the outside and begin a discussion about certain crucial, yet often underestimated issues.

NGOs and the state

The environment in which NGOs work in the Czech Republic has been historically determined by the combination of an ethnically and culturally homogeneous society with xenophobic tendencies on the one hand and a low level of citizen involvement in public affairs on the other. Even though it may sometimes appear that the state and NGOs are in opposition to each other, they are in fact linked by mutual dependence. In a democratic society, the state seeks to legitimize its power through a certain degree of cooperation with civil society, such as working with NGOs. On the other hand, NGOs depend not only on state funding but also on the general support and legal environment for the development of associative activities of citizens. Thus institutional identities of state administration bodies and NGOs remain interdependent. Also their self-definition is based on mutual negation of what “we are not”. This definition by negation results in a lack of internal criticism and appraisal on both sides. Due to their dependence, NGOs feel vulnerable or sometimes too comfortable playing the role of “doing good” and protecting foreigners from the “evil repressive state”. On the other hand, representatives of state institutions perceive themselves as too important for critical self-reflection and nobody from the outside is pushing them to engage in such introspection either.

An example of insufficient insider criticism on the part of NGOs is an event entitled *Osina roku* (Barb of the Year) organized by the Centre for Integration of Foreigners⁵. In this competition, representatives of NGOs and migration experts vote for the worst initiative in the field of integration of foreigners both on the national and the local level. It is a very useful event using constructive humour to draw attention to problematic steps taken by institutions responsible for migration control and integration of foreigners. The regular winners are the Ministry of the Interior, the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. However, it is difficult to imagine an NGO project also being nominated, even though there certainly are unsuccessful projects that could qualify. It is evident that negative impacts of NGO projects are likely to be smaller than the negative outreach of some systemic lapse or intentionally restrictive policy of state institutions. However, it could be useful to break the

⁵ More about this initiative can be found on the website of the Centre for Integration of Foreigners: <http://www.cicpraha.org/osina2009/> (in Czech).

“us” vs. “them” relationship between NGOs and state institutions because it has been growing for many years now and has been often proven unproductive.

Certain criticism of the NGO sphere can be heard both from NGOs’ representatives and from academics. I have witnessed it several times during my research. Here is an opinion representing many of those voices expressed by a respondent who has experience in both spheres:

“Work of NGOs is increasingly defined by grants. They have become an extended arm of the state. They offer lower prices, lower costs, they work faster and better. Their role of watchdogs and the implementation of structural changes are falling behind because it is difficult to find money for such things. And the things don’t get done if there is no money. A long-term strategy and prioritisation is missing.” (Academic worker with NGO experience, Prague, 2007)

Conceptual framework and NGO rhetoric

In order to estimate the risk of NGOs becoming an “extended arm of the state” it is necessary to understand the framework of thinking about refugees and migrants which drives the activities and presentations of NGOs as such. This framework is reflected in the rhetoric used in debates and texts about migration – it outlines the borders of what can be discussed and what is already perceived as given. The language and terminology used is very important in this context because it normalizes the values associated with certain social phenomena.

Let us take a closer look at two expressions without which it is difficult to imagine today’s debate about migration: 1) “illegal” or “irregular” migration, and 2) “integration of foreigners”.

The use of the first expression in the public debate is sometimes defended by NGO representatives as a necessary tool of communication with the state administration, which does not accept other names. Undoubtedly, such communication is necessary in order to achieve some structural changes or, more often, at least to mitigate the impact of status illegalisation⁶ on the life of the migrants. NGOs have succeeded in introducing several important changes, e.g. granting access to education for children of illegalized persons.⁷ However, the matter-of-fact use of the expression “illegal/irregular migration” legitimizes a cycle of behaviour that results in increasing numbers of people facing repression such as

⁶ As opposed to expressions like “illegal” or “irregular”, “illegalisation” does not emphasize the problematic actions of the migrants themselves – it rather stresses the process in which certain people are made “illegal” by legal and political mechanisms of state power. For the discussion of illegality discourse in the context of migration refer to the work of Nicholas P. De Genova (2002); on the website of migrationonline.cz this concept was described in articles by William Hiscott (2004-2005).

⁷ For more information about this and other NGO campaigns refer to migraceonline.cz, *Regularizace nelegální migrace* at <http://migraceonline.cz/temata/regularizace/> (in Czech).

limitation of their freedom of movement in the form of long-term detention in jail conditions, exploitation or deportation even though they did not commit any serious crime.

The question we need to ask ourselves is: what role should the NGOs play in the system of migration control and its consequences, such as the issue of “illegal migration”? For both practical and strategic reasons NGOs are more focused on mitigation of impacts on persons whose status is “illegal”, rather than on criticism of the ease of becoming an “illegal” migrant without having committed a serious crime. However, this brings along the risk that NGOs – regardless of their long-term effort to fight against illegalizing measures of Czech migration legislation – assume the role which is quite acceptable if not comfortable for the repressive state authorities: their activities do not seriously address the very production of illegality. Such cooperation easily legitimizes and perpetuates both the position of the state and NGOs who can thus count on receiving state grants supporting their work.

These remarks are not intended as a call for more careful language use in a sense of more political correctness in discussions about illegalized migration; they are intended as a call for critical reflection upon NGOs activities and (re)production of certain migration discourses.

The second very frequent expression emerging in debates on migration is “integration”. In the context of NGO work “integration of foreigners” is largely predefined by EU and state criteria. In other words, NGO efforts aimed at integration of foreigners are mostly defined by available grant opportunities. In this sense of “integration”, the value of migrants and the possibility of their acceptance by Czech society are predefined by their economic utility. Integration is, therefore, understood as integration into the labour market and independence from state aid (knowledge of the language and acceptable accommodation are vital conditions for such outcomes).

Of course, activities aimed at enabling immigrants to settle down are very important. Nevertheless, this narrow understanding of integration leads to a one-sided perception of migration and its impacts. This simplified vision of integration is taken out of the context of policies which make it impossible or very difficult in reality. Those are, for instance, the following: migration policy of the EU and individual member states; the economic policy and labour conditions it determines; or a weak position of labour unions. Even though numerous NGO projects are aimed at other dimensions of migration as well, for example, raising legal awareness of foreigners or enhancing their knowledge of the social and cultural environment in which they live, there is insufficient discussion about how the process of integration is perceived by different stakeholders, especially the migrants themselves. The question then goes: What type of integration is supported by NGO projects? Which definition of a migrant/citizen are they based on and what kind of alternatives can be found for the current integration policies?

Implementation of projects and services

Next to the conceptual framework and NGO rhetoric two topics regarding the implementation of services and projects must be mentioned. In these areas NGOs often come close to what they themselves criticize about state institutions. The two issues are the bureaucratisation of services and the simplified representation of refugees and immigrants.

With the increasing dependency of NGOs on state funding the administrative burden imposed on their services has also increased. This trend was often caused by exaggerated requirements for reporting and documenting NGO activities placed by ministries as donors or redistributors. Quantity has become a standard criterion, i.e. typically the number of clients who are claimed to have benefited from the project. Qualitative criteria, such as systematically collected feedback from clients or monitoring long-term project impacts, are rarely quoted on NGOs' websites or in the annual reports. The desire to make the administration of a project as simple as possible and the tendency to follow the often inadequate evaluation criteria set up by donors or redistributors lead to bureaucratisation of NGO services. Because of this bureaucratisation NGOs can lose one of their main advantages compared to services rendered by large organisations – the individualized, flexible and personal approach to clients.

Many NGO representatives rightly feel that they need to react to the negative images of foreigners in the media and are trying to promote a positive presentation of their clients. The way migrants and refugees are perceived by the public has a significant impact on the potential support provided for NGO activities and their position in negotiating with state institutions. However, in the attempt to present the most positive image possible it is often narrowed down and simplified in order to turn it into what is thought to be attractive and acceptable for the general public. Migration and refugee issues have been presented as something exciting, entertaining and pleasantly exotic in NGO activities aimed at the general public in the past years. Such events usually have a rather predictable format – some music or dancing, tasting of exotic food prepared by migrant women, sale of craftwork, presentation of NGOs and their projects. It seems like a good formula to make Czech society digest a little bit of multiculturalism and have some fun with it.

The problem with this approach is that it reduces a complex political issue to something nice and consensual. The reasons why refugees and migrants leave their homes and the conditions in which they end up living in the Czech Republic are often not mentioned. As if the NGOs had not enough courage to bring up problematic and potentially controversial topics. Foreigners presented during such events often play a marginal role; they are only “guest stars” acting within a predefined screenplay. They are not engaged as experts to significantly shape such events.

The following quote shows that the emphasis on a purely positive image leads to oversimplification of the problem and can become a burden for the persons onto whom this image was impressed:

“I am a typical example of a woman who is always invited to personify a positive image of a refugee. I am saying it a bit cynically but don’t get me wrong. Because I know that when something like this is organized, nobody ever invites a man who has waited for a decision about his asylum application for 15 years and doesn’t look... doesn’t look very good. I know that whenever they need a refugee on TV, they call me or somebody similar. Because I can at least smile and say a few words in Czech, and it’s going to look so nice and endearing that this foreigner can say something, she has kids and she is so happy. This is the feeling you get. The other women, who are not dumb, also feel it, and this is why many men don’t want to do that and they don’t engage in those organisations.” (Refugee woman, Prague, 2007)

Another respondent reflected upon the situation in a similar way and also stressed the problem of low participation of clients themselves in the presentation of NGOs and their activities to the public:

“Well, there were many things like this ..., things I didn’t like much; there would be some events like research and we were always asked [by NGO workers] to come, they kind of ... used us. It’s difficult to say it like that. We had to prepare some food. I know how other women felt about it and how I felt about it. But it was... they didn’t ask how I felt about it. What we thought... when we had to give an interview, for the radio... anything.... I knew they needed it... It’s not only me; all women are quite sensitive about this.” (Refugee woman, Prague, 2007)

As these quotes illustrate, female migrants have a specific role in positive representation of refugees. Maybe it is because it is easier to present a woman – compared to a man – as an innocent victim who deserves sympathy of the public. However, this image can cause damage because it evokes passivity, dependency and the need of outsiders’ help. Therefore, it is paramount for NGOs to present refugees and migrants only after considering carefully what kind of image of these people is being promoted and what consequences it could have. I believe that comprehensive human portraits, which also give their representatives an opportunity to present themselves in their own ways, have a better chance of evoking interest, solidarity and understanding than simple, repetitive positive figures of migrants who try really hard.

NGOs and their clients

Bureaucratisation of the approach to clients together with professionalization of social services⁸ in their current form seem to stand in the way of more active participation of migrants and refugees in defining their needs and the means of fulfilling them. Despite almost twenty years of migrants’ and refugees’ presence in the Czech Republic, there are only a few people with migrant or refugee background working in NGOs. It seems that

⁸ Professionalization is evident, for instance, in the growing education requirements for social workers which must be met in order to obtain accreditation of social services by the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs.

professionalization resulted in assistance for migrants becoming more complicated and less accessible for such individuals. NGOs could play an important part in the professionalization of foreigners themselves and assist them in learning to help themselves and participate in the public migration discourse more actively. It is obvious that not every migrant can or wishes to become a social worker or advisor. Many clients approach NGOs for one-time service only, e.g. they need to translate or write a document. On the other hand, after the years of NGOs' operation there have certainly been many people with a strong potential to work in the field. Nevertheless, this potential remains largely unused.

Low participation of clients in NGO work is evident at several levels. I have already mentioned the poor attention paid to the evaluation of project impact by the clients themselves. Clients also do not have the opportunity to influence projects when they are being designed – i.e. in the stage when problems are identified and solutions proposed. Could it really be possible that NGOs know the answers to these questions better than aid recipients themselves? Or, perhaps, the donors are more important for project evaluation than clients themselves? Another reason could be that there are no grant calls for many real existing problems.

Some clients feel that they are treated as “heads” that some NGOs need to count, report, photograph and present as project participants on websites and in annual reports. They are aware that their role is narrowed down to aid beneficiaries who cannot influence the nature of assistance. They also feel that NGO environment treats them as somewhat incompetent. Here is a very frank opinion of a respondent who has had vast experience of contacts with various NGOs:

“These organisations are the only places where I felt as a second class citizen. Doing cleaning jobs or dealing with civil servants has never made me feel so inferior. People in NGOs treat you like a little child or as someone completely stupid who doesn't know anything. As I am neither, why would I continue going there?” (Refugee woman, Prague, 2007)

The same respondent, though, highly praised the help she received from NGOs when she first came to the Czech Republic. However, her opinion shows clearly her frustration from the unequal treatment clients encounter in NGOs. Such voices are commonly heard only among migrants and refugees because few people dare to step out of their role of grateful recipients of aid by doubting or criticizing the way the help is provided. Nevertheless, this and other opinions reflect the complexity of relationships between NGOs and clients, which deserves more consideration.

More active participation of migrants and refugees in NGOs or establishment of stronger independent migrant or refugee organisations is hardly a universal solution for better integration. Many will find such proposals unrealistic or naive. It is probably because we are used to a single dominant model of NGO work and tend to forget about other forms of citizen

participation which are not necessarily dependent on receiving enough grant money from the Ministry of the Interior.

More active participation of migrants and refugees could eventually change both the work of existing NGOs and the public image of both target groups. Just imagine that NGOs working with migrants and refugees would have representatives of this group in their management boards where they could control and steer the work of the NGOs. Or another, simpler example: in the past few years NGOs have published several information brochures for better orientation of foreigners in the Czech Republic. In my research I was surprised many times by how little those seemingly very useful materials were used by foreigners, even by those who had direct access to them. The reason was simple: the brochures were written in such language that, even after it was translated into their native language, it was still very difficult to understand. Even people with university diplomas were not able to use the materials easily. When they needed something, it was easier to ask their fellow countrymen who often gave them unreliable or outdated information. Had migrants and refugees themselves been involved in both writing and translating the texts as experts, the results would probably have been easier to read and more effective.

Although reducing clients' role to mere aid recipients without the possibility to influence the way assistance is provided may make provision of NGO services faster and, seemingly, more efficient, it is also connected with long-term negative impacts and it does not draw upon the massive potential and experience of this group.

Conclusion

NGOs are very important advocates of the rights and interests of refugees and migrants coming to the Czech Republic. Many of them have survived years of existential uncertainty and insufficient recognition of their demanding work by society. I believe that the main threats to NGOs today are the growing dependency on funding or redistribution of funding by the state and the definition of their own activities through grant calls of ministries and EU priorities. This process is accompanied by a decline in the role of NGOs as efficient advocacy and pressure groups. The fact that NGOs accept the conceptual framework and rhetoric of those whose first interest is to punish and control migration is also problematic. This trend brings about bureaucratisation of NGO services, which goes hand in hand with exclusion of migrants from the public debate about migration and participation in formulating and evaluating provided services. The aim of this text was to draw attention to these trends and to outline some of the directions for deeper reflection and changes.

Translation: Jiřina Holkové

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