



BULLETIN

No. 8 (858), 26 January 2016 © PISM

Editors: Jarosław Ćwiek-Karpowicz • Anna Maria Dyner • Aleksandra Gawlikowska-Fyk
Dariusz Kałan • Patryk Kugiel • Sebastian Płóciennik • Patrycja Sasnal • Marcin Terlikowski
Katarzyna Staniewska (Managing Editor)

Polish Local Government Attitudes towards the Refugee Crisis

Adriana Skorupska

Despite the many unknowns, including the date of arrival, funding for and characteristics of the refugees who will come to Poland in 2016 and 2017, it is certain that primary responsibility for their integration into Polish society will lie with local authorities. Key issues associated with this will be in the legal and funding areas, and regardless of when the refugees arrive, broad and swift inclusion of social partners and local government in preparations will maximise the chance that the integration process will run smoothly and in the interests of local communities and Poland as a whole.

Procedures. Refugees arriving in Poland are placed in the centres for foreigners, in line with the refugee procedure. In this first phase, they are under the supervision of the Office for Foreigners (OFF). The procedure should take between three and three-and-a-half months, although in practice it can take anything from six months to two years. It should, theoretically, be a period in which foreigners are prepared for living outside the centre. Following an OFF investigation, refugees can apply for an individual integration programme, implemented by centres operated by powiats (a level of Polish government) for family support and supervised by the Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Policy (MFLSP). After leaving refugee centres, they most often go to large cities. This is because, particularly in larger areas, such a move makes it easier for refugees to find jobs, integrate, and live independently of social benefits.

Unfortunately, the Polish experience with refugees suggests a very unsuccessful integration process. A 2015 report by the Supreme Audit Office emphasised insufficient coordination of activities by state bodies responsible for carrying out tasks related to the integration of refugees. For example, there is lack of cohesion between the activity of the OFF and that of MFLSP. The period spent in the arrival centres is not used for learning Polish, and refugees are therefore unprepared to find work or to integrate into their new communities.

This poorly run integration process could therefore be a reason for the low percentage of refugees who manage to find work, resulting in a large number of people relying on social benefits.

Good Practice in Central and Local Government. Regardless of the many unknowns, and ahead of central government decisions and information campaigns, some local governments have engaged in grassroots initiatives to prepare administration and local communities to receive the increased number of refugees. One of the first initiators was the city of Gdańsk, where the local authorities established a team of more than 130 people from different institutions and organisations, together with representatives of the refugees themselves. The team is working on a model of integration for foreigners. It is divided into a number of groups and, after initial diagnosis of the situation, objectives and actions in each sphere are developed.

Foreign partners, with experience in refugee issues, constituted a very important element in Gdańsk. As a member of the Eurocities international association, Gdańsk joined the Social Affairs Forum that brings together more than 30 cities most experienced in the field of integration policy for migrants. Within the forum, the most experienced cities monitor relative newcomers. Another Polish city, Lublin, has also participated in the Eurocities programme. Characterised by a large foreign population, Lublin has taken action to promote integration over a number of years. "Openness" is inscribed in the strategy of the city, and it has a dedicated Information Desk for Foreigners. Similar strategies have been adopted in other cities, such as Łódź, Wrocław and Warsaw.

However, local governments have expressed concerns about the lack of clear communication and decisions from the state. The Union of Polish Metropolises, comprising the 12 largest cities, stated that local authorities' participation in the implementation of resettlement and relocation programmes is conditioned by the adoption of appropriate regulations governing the division of powers between central and local government. The same argument was also put forward in response to an MFLSP questionnaire of 2015, by which means the ministry wanted to determine the number of refugees that each local authority could potentially support.

The ministry will take into account the experience and previous activity of major cities, for, despite the general assumption that refugees should be sent "wherever they want to go," there is still a large group of potential arrivals who may not be familiar enough with Poland to make such a choice. Therefore, and in consultation with communities, it is important that local governments make concrete statements concerning the refugee population, in order to increase the chances of successful integration. The ministry wants to use EU funds to help cities prepare offers concerning their refugee programmes and the central government's proposals will take into account cooperation with NGOs as well as local government.

Recommendations. As integration policy is not part of local governments' general remits, and their actions in this field are ad hoc, it will be necessary to create new solutions. Yet without a legal framework, even the most motivated local governments will find it difficult to implement more measures aimed at to the better and faster integration of refugees. It will be necessary to define the precise responsibilities of local governments, and the funds that will be at their disposal for managing new arrivals.

Although the main decisions on refugees and integration policies are the responsibility of central government, the implementation of these decisions and policies will take place locally. That is why cooperation and communication between all levels of administration and social partners (NGOs, universities, companies and local media, as well as churches and religious associations) are so important. In this context, the whole process should be focused, especially in the first period, on cities that already have experience with refugees and foreigners. Communities in such places are also more likely to be more receptive to people of other nationalities.

In addition, education for refugees should be an area of particular interest to the state. In this context, it is important that programmes are created in collaboration with schools, NGOs and local authorities, and take into account the specific character of each region. At the same time, additional support for schools will be necessary, for example in the form of classroom assistants. Thus, the Ministry of Education should revise the existing policies and ring fence additional funds to support the teaching of refugee children.

Cooperation with NGOs supporting the integration of foreigners is of particular importance. These organisations have been participating in various integration programmes, and collaborating with local governments to create local policies for migrants. The National Office of the International Organisation for Migration in Poland has the job of integrating these different entities around the country.

Preparation and dialogue with local governments need to start as soon as possible. The integration process should not begin only when refugees arrive in cities. The Office for Foreigners, in cooperation with other central agencies, should begin a dialogue with local authorities when preparations are being made for the relocation of refugees. This would help create a unified message for local communities, regarding the reception and integration of refugees.

An institution should be created with responsibility for coordinating the integration process, both at governmental and local level. At present, responsibility and action regarding the reception of foreigners are disparate, with tasks falling within the remits of the OFF, the ministries, and provincial offices. The best solution would be to determine a single point of contact for local authorities in one of the ministries or central offices. The experience of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs could be utilised in this respect, as its recently established local government dimension means it has become an important means of support for local authorities in terms of international relations, and key forum for collaboration and exchange of information between the Foreign Ministry and local partners.

Local governments should also make better use of the expertise of their foreign partners. It would allow them to share both good and bad experiences in the integration of foreigners. Local companies, which can support local government activities in the area of financial support and provide jobs for foreigners, could also be important partners.

The integration process must involve preparation by both the host community and the refugees. Of particular importance will be, for example, the availability of suitable translators. In turn, the more refugees who have information about Poland and the cities and regions to which they are headed, the greater will be the chance of better integration and benefits for both parties.