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SELECTED ISSUES RELATED TO THE ACTIVITIES OF NON-GOVERMENTAL ORGANISATIONS IN POLAND IN THEIR WORK FOR REFUGEES

| Abstract

- ▶ *Goal* – The aim of this article is to analyse selected problems related to the activities of NGOs in Poland working for refugees. In particular, the following issues are discussed: the definition and types of NGOs, the legal basis for the activities of NGOs in Poland, actions taken by NGOs in connection with the situation on the Polish-Belarusian border.
- ▶ *Research methodology* – The research methods employed in this article include the legal analysis and descriptive methods.
- ▶ *Score/results* – This article discusses theoretical issues concerning NGOs, including their definition and types, as well as the legal basis for the activities of NGOs working with refugees in Poland. All this has made it possible to analyse specific actions taken by NGOs in relation to the situation on the Polish-Belarusian border and to discuss specific problems faced by these organisations. Undoubtedly, the actions taken by these organisations are wide-ranging, complementing or sometimes even replacing the activities of the state. However, due to the problems faced by these organisations (in particular financial problems), their activities are limited.
- ▶ *Originality/value* – The article is unique because it collects and analyses the activities undertaken by NGOs on the Polish-Belarusian border and the problems they face.

| **Keywords:** NGOs, refugees, legal basis, activities, problems

1. Introduction

Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) play an important role in shaping and supporting the development of civil societies, not only through their activities for various social groups, but also as actors involved in solving refugee problems at the local, national and international levels. In Poland, as in many other countries, NGOs have become an integral part of the social system, providing assistance in many areas. One of the key areas of their activity in recent years has been helping refugees who, fleeing persecution, seek shelter in Poland.

The current challenges related to migration are forcing countries to adapt their policies and strategies in order to ensure adequate international protection. However, despite the efforts of government institutions, there is a need to support NGOs in providing comprehensive assistance to refugees. This is mainly due to the voluntary and apolitical nature of NGOs' activities. It is particularly important, and even indispensable, in crisis situations.

The aim of this article is to analyse selected problems related to the activities of NGOs in Poland working for refugees. In particular, the following issues are discussed: the definition and types of NGOs, the legal basis for the activities of NGOs in Poland, actions taken by NGOs in connection with the situation on the Polish-Belarusian border.

The article uses legal analysis and descriptive methods.

2. Definition and types of NGOs

NGOs are a highly diverse group of entities operating in the social sector. However, there is no unified, universally applicable definition of NGOs, either at the international or national level. Nevertheless, there are certain common criteria that allow NGOs to be distinguished from other forms of organisations. The undisputed, universally recognised criteria are: 1) membership and 2) permanent bodies. These criteria allow us to distinguish NGOs from governmental organisations, the members of which are countries, or from conferences, which, despite the fact that they may bring together natural and legal persons, have a temporary character. Another criteria that should be noted is the legal basis for their establishment.

It should therefore be assumed that NGOs are associations bringing together natural persons, legal persons or associations of such persons, established as

a result of an agreement (which cannot be classified as an international agreement) and having their own permanent bodies [Zdanowicz, 1994: 24].

The main characteristics of NGOs that should be noted are:

1. independence – organisations are not part of public administration and are not controlled by state authorities,
2. voluntary nature – establishment and participation are based on the principle of voluntariness,
3. non-profit purpose – the organisation does not operate for profit, and any income is used to achieve its statutory aims,
4. social or public purpose – activities are aimed at the common good, e.g., social assistance, education, ecology, culture, human rights,
5. self-governance and autonomy – the organisation itself determines its goals, structure, and mode of operation.

NGOs are diverse in terms of their status, scope of activity and their own structure. This also applies to NGOs working for migrants in Poland.

Taking into account the criterion of legal form, we can indicate, among others, associations and foundations. NGOs dealing with the problems of foreigners in Poland are much more likely to take the legal form of a foundation than an association. Although the vast majority of NGOs registered in Poland are associations, this is mainly because it is easier to set up a foundation and it is also less problematic to manage it [Pawlak, Matusz-Protasiewicz, 2015: 16]. It is also worth mentioning the Granica Group, an informal social movement bringing together NGOs, volunteers, activists, and people living near the border with Belarus. This group provides medical, legal, and humanitarian help to foreigners who find themselves in this area. The group was established in response to the humanitarian crisis on the Polish-Belarusian border [www 1].

Organisations also vary in size and scope of activity. A distinction should be made between organisations for which foreigners in Poland are only one of the recipients of their activities. E.g. Polska Akcja Humanitarna and Caritas Polska provide humanitarian aid in many places around the world and to various groups in need. The second group of organisations specialises in specific areas of activity (e.g., providing legal assistance) and also reaches out to refugees in this regard (e.g., Helsińska Fundacja Praw Człowieka, Stowarzyszenie Interwencji Prawnej). The third group, which is fundamental to our considerations, consists of organisations for which matters related to the presence of foreigners in Poland are their primary field of activity (e.g., Centrum Wsparcia Imigrantów i Imigrantek).

The fourth category includes organisations that occasionally undertake activities for foreigners in Poland, focusing on other areas of activity [Pawlak, Matusz-Protasiewicz, 2015: 16–17].

3. Legal basis for the activities of NGOs working with refugees in Poland

The authorisation for NGOs to work with refugees comes from both international law, including the European Union law, and the national law. Due to the limited scope of this paper, only the most important regulations in this area will be mentioned.

The Statute of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees provided in paragraph 8 that the High Commissioner shall provide for the protection of refugees falling under the competence of his Office by [the Statute of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, General Assembly Resolution 428 (V) of 14 December 1950]: h) establishing contact in such manner as he may think best with private organisations dealing with refugee questions; i) facilitating the co-ordination of the efforts of private organisations concerned with the welfare of refugees.

The Statute of the Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees, which is an internal legal act of an international organisation, is a source of international law [Zdanowicz, 1994: 40–41].

Article 22(2) of the Convention on the Rights of the Child directly obliges States Parties to cooperate with the United Nations and with other competent intergovernmental and non-governmental organisations in their efforts to provide protection and assistance to children seeking refugee status [Convention of 20th November 1989 – on the Rights of the Child, Journal of Law 1991, Nr 120, Item 526].

Article 35 of the Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, in conjunction with the above-mentioned provisions of the UNHCR Statute, may also serve as an indirect legal basis for the activities of NGOs working on behalf of refugees in the Contracting States [Convention of 28th July 1951 – relating to the Status of Refugees, Journal of Law 1991, Nr 119, Item 515].

In the context of refugee protection, reference should also be made to the international humanitarian law, including the Fourth Geneva Convention on the protection of civilians. Article 3 provides the basis for the provision of assistance by neutral humanitarian organisations, i.e. NGOs [Geneva Convention of 12 August

1949 – relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War, Journal of Laws 1956, Nr 38, item 171, appendix].

One of the areas of activity of the EU is migration and asylum policy. The EU has adopted a number of regulations aimed, among other things, at harmonising the rules of procedure for persons seeking international protection.

Article 5(1) of Directive 2003/9/WE provides that Member States shall ensure that applicants are provided with information on organisations or groups of persons providing specific legal assistance and on organisations that may be able to assist or inform them about the reception conditions available, including healthcare [Council Directive 2003/9/EC of 27th January 2003 – laying down minimum standards for the reception of asylum seekers, Journal of Laws L 31 z 6.2.2003, pp. 18–25].

Similarly, Article 27(5) of the Dublin III Regulation says that Member States should make sure the person has access to legal help and, if needed, language help [Regulation (EU) No 604/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 26 June 2013 – establishing the criteria and mechanisms for determining the Member State responsible for examining an application for international protection lodged in one of the Member States by a third-country national or a stateless person, Journal of Laws L.2013.180.31].

Another important issue is the financing of NGOs involved in refugee protection. Article 4 of Regulation 2021/1147 specifies that NGOs, such as refugee organisations and organisations run by migrants, as well as national human rights institutions and equality bodies, and economic and social partners, may form partnerships for the use of the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund [Regulation (EU) 2021/1147 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 7 July 2021 – establishing the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund, Journal of Law L 251/1, 15.7.2021].

In the Polish law, it is mainly the Act on Granting Protection to Foreigners that provides the legal basis for the activities of NGOs working on behalf of refugees. Article 54f(1) indicates that in proceedings for granting international protection and in proceedings for deprivation of refugee status or subsidiary protection, foreigners are guaranteed freedom to contact UNHCR representatives and international or non-governmental organisations providing assistance to foreigners, including legal assistance.

Another important regulation concerns ensuring that representatives of NGOs have contact with applicants who have submitted an application for international protection at a border crossing point (Article 29(2)). In addition, the Border

Guard authority competent to receive an application for international protection shall inform the applicant about organisations providing assistance to foreigners (Article 30). There are also detailed regulations concerning, e.g., unaccompanied minors. In such a situation, an application for international protection is submitted by a guardian or a representative of an international or non-governmental organisation providing assistance to foreigners, including legal assistance (Article 26(1)). The Act also contains an important obligation for the Head of the Office to adopt a list of NGOs conducting public benefit activities, authorised to provide free legal assistance in Poland (Article 69k(1)) [Act of 13th June 2003 – o udzielaniu cudzoziemcom ochrony na terytorium Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej, Journal of Laws of 2003, Nr 128, item 1176 as amended].

On the website of the Office for Foreigners, the list of NGOs providing free legal aid includes only two organizations: Fundacja Instytut na Rzecz Państwa i Prawa oraz Stowarzyszenie Interwencji Prawnej [www 2].

The list of organisations providing assistance to foreigners includes 23 entities, among them: Centrum Pomocy Prawnej im. Haliny Nieć, Helsińska Fundacja Praw Człowieka, Fundacja “Multicalenie” with a branch in Krynki, Fundacja “Ocalenie”, Centrum Wsparcia Imigrantów i Imigrantek, Instytut na rzecz Państwa Prawa, Stowarzyszenie Interwencji Prawnej, CARITAS Polska [www 3].

4. Activities carried out by NGOs in relation to the situation on the Polish-Belarusian border

The current situation on the Polish-Belarusian border is a unique one, unprecedented in Poland. Until mid-2021, the situation on this border was stable, but this has changed due to actions taken by the Belarusian and Russian regimes [Moraczewska, 2023: 302–303]. Due to the humanitarian crisis, Poland has found itself in an extremely difficult situation. Poland has taken numerous legal and other measures to deal with the problem [*Pushbacks at Europe`s Borders: a Continuously Ignored Crisis*, 2024: 5]. In the face of the indicated crisis in Poland, many NGOs have undertaken activities to assist and complement state action [Pawlak, Matusz-Protasiewicz, 2015: 14]. Therefore, it is justified to consider selected activities currently undertaken for refugees by NGOs in Poland in relation to the situation on the Polish-Belarusian border.

The activities of NGOs providing assistance to refugees are currently focused not only on the border zone, but also concern, i.a. foreigners who live in open

centres and outside such centres. Moreover, NGOs activities also focus on support for independence after the procedure has been finished [www 4].

NGOs, which employ professional lawyers, provide free legal assistance within the scope defined in their bylaws or statutes. Legal activities mostly focus on providing free legal advice, legal information. Some organisations provide free legal assistance during all proceedings, some only before the Head of the Office for Foreigners.

NGOs are also working, i.a. to advocate changes in law, practice and improvements in the reception system as it relates to applicants [Pawlak, Matusz-Protasiewicz, 2015: 14.]. NGOs present their opinions on draft amendments to the Acts. This type of activity in the case of the Polish-Belarusian border appeared with the implementation of legislation on push-backs [www 5]. In addition, activities also include monitoring the humanitarian crisis on the Polish-Belarusian border [www 6; Klaus, 2022: 21].

Other activities undertaken by NGOs that are typical of the Polish-Belarusian border include, in particular:

1. material aid. These activities include, i.a. the provision of warm clothing, hygiene products, food. Next to the hospital in Hajnówka, where foreigners from the border are taken in, there is a so-called “hospital point” mainly with clothes, shoes, cleaning products. Most often, doctors inform the Egala staff what items they should bring to the hospital for foreigners [www 7]. Similar assistance at the hospital is also provided by the Bezkres Foundation [www 8];
2. providing medical and psychological assistance;
3. provision of interpreters. Organisations work with interpreters remotely or on site [Klaus, 2022: 21];
4. housing support. One organisation – Egala - has prepared a training housing programme. The foreigner is provided with free shared housing for about 2–3 months. This allows to adapt to a new reality, gives time to find a job and get a stable income, without having to worry about the basic necessities of life [www 9]. The Ocalenie Foundation has created the Refugees Welcome Poland programme, which aims to help people with refugee experience rent a cheap room in the home of a Polish family in or near Warsaw [www 10];
5. assistance with finding work;
6. educational activities, including learning the Polish language [www 11];
7. activities to support integration into society [Popławska, Gać, 2021: 62–63];

8. approaching and disclosing foreigners on the move to the Border Guard in such a way that they can make an application for international protection [www 12; www 13]. the assistance also includes trying to locate people who have gone missing on the road [Klaus, 2022: 21];
9. assisting the families of foreigners to bury people who have died on the border in the forest;
10. transport from Border Guard posts or guarded centres to open centres, i.a. at the request of the Border Guard.

Due to direct contact with foreigners in need of assistance, NGOs are more aware of the needs and problems of foreigners therefore they act more effectively than the state. Consequently, some tasks are delegated by the state to NGOs, in particular information activities and the provision of legal aid [Grzymała-Kazłowska, Stefańska, 2014: 216].

5. Problems faced by NGOs

NGOs providing assistance to people with refugee experience in relation to the situation on the Polish-Belarusian border face a number of problems. Among them, we can emphasise in particular:

5.1. Funding

It is not entirely appropriate for the state to make NGOs responsible for assisting refugees, because the assistance provided by such organisations often depends on the funds they are able to obtain for their activities. If such funds are not obtained, it is either impossible to implement various projects related to assistance for foreigners or the support is significantly limited [Charycka, Bednarek, Belina, 2025: 10; www 14].

There have always been problems with funding. There have been situations when organisations have ended or reduced their activities due to a failure to obtain funding. E.g., the Ocalenie Foundation reported that as of September 2024, the Assistance Centres for Foreigners in Łomża and Łódź had stopped working [www 15].

Most recently, in January 2025, the US administration announced the temporary suspension of almost all aid programmes. This decision also extended to Poland and had a significant impact on the activities of NGOs [www 16].

Some organisations are publicly reporting funding problems and asking for support. The CPPHN, e.g., has reported on social media that after 23 years of operation they are threatened with closure, having lost almost 60% of their annual budget [www 17]. Nomada Association reported that the organisation received only 41% of its planned donation from UNHCR in 2025 [www 18].

Due to the reduction in funding, organisations have limited possibilities in continuing the activities indicated above. There are already problems in providing legal but also material assistance.

5.2. Disapproval of society and authorities/bodies

NGOs taking action on the situation on the Polish-Belarusian border also face disapproval from society and some state authorities and bodies [Charycka, Bednarek, Belina, 2025: 10].

There have been cases of people destroying things belonging to NGOs. E.g., the organisation Medycy na Granicy reported that unknown perpetrators had damaged their cars [www 19]. There have been cases of services detaining NGO members without giving a reason for the detention, confiscating medical equipment, and there are known cases of pointing guns at volunteers [Szymanek, 2023: 59–60; www 20].

5.3. Impersonation

Cases of impersonation of NGO staff are also known. E.g. the Polish Migration Forum Foundation reported that unknown persons create accounts similar to the Foundation's email accounts and send emails asking for data and sometimes promising services or funds in return [www 21].

5.4. The problem of finding accommodation

The problems of finding housing are of course related to the limited funds of foreigners and aid organisations, but also to the fact that people do not want to rent housing to foreigners either [www 22; Wencel, 2011: 4]. The Dialog Foundation points out that finding accommodation for foreigners is time-consuming, as it is often associated with the negative attitude of Poles towards refugees [www 23].

5.5. Staff problems

In addition to the problems identified, attention should be paid to burnout and exhaustion of NGOs staff and volunteers [Charycka, Bednarek, Gumkowska, 2024: 5]. This is due, among other things, to working overtime and heavy responsibility, which also causes conflicts within the team [www 24].

6. Conclusions

NGOs are very active in helping refugees in Poland. These organisations vary in terms of both their legal status and the scope of assistance they provide. The legal basis for the activities of NGOs working with refugees stems from both international law, including the European Union law, and the national law. These laws explicitly authorise the provision of such assistance.

Through their activities in support of refugees, NGOs contribute to raising the standards of public institutions and play an important role in complementing the activities of state entities.

Currently, providing assistance to refugees crossing the Polish-Belarusian border is largely based on the activities undertaken by NGOs, which, despite the numerous problems they face, continue to undertake numerous activities for the benefit of foreigners.

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