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***Integration of Refugees in Poland
– Lessons to be learnt from the American Experience***

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Integration of Refugees in Poland – Lessons to be learnt from the American Experience

Integration of newcomers is crucial for both people under international protection and for the receiving country. It is a means of:

- **solving complex economic, social and psychological issues faced by those under international protection.**
- **decreasing ethnic tensions and conflicts**
- **mitigating xenophobic attitudes among both members of receiving community and immigrants**

There seems to be some elements in the US experience, which could be effective in the Polish case. It is therefore suggested here to:

- **consider engaging NGOs as a key partner for the state in the integration programs for persons under international protection.**
- **concentrate more on the importance of economic self-reliance as a factor leading to the adaptation to the host society. Therefore focus should be on employment services: vocational training, skills development, orientation to the workplace and job counseling**
- **consider citizenship as a tool encouraging integration process of those under international protection.**

During 2005, a total number of 668 000 first instance or appeal application for asylum or refugee status were submitted all over the world. Most claims were registered in Europe – 374 000. Regarding Poland, in 2005, 6 860 persons applied for refugee status, the majority (6 244) constituted Russian citizens of Chechen origin. 335 persons were granted a refugee status and 1 822 a tolerated stay, that is a complementary form of protection.² In practical terms it could be said that almost none of Chechens was left without any form of international protection. Their majority received tolerated stay, however, a part of them applied for refugee status once again, which explain the discrepancy in numbers mentioned above.³

¹ The Center for International Relations

² As refugees they obtain right to work without work permit, access to social aid and family benefits, right to state education on the basic and secondary level. However, they do not receive Geneva travel document. They also do not benefit from Individual Integration Program but it is going to be changed in 2007 - persons with tolerated stay status will also participate in this Program.

³2005 *Global Refugee Trends*, UNHCR, June 2006: <http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/statistics/openssl.pdf?tbl=STATISTICS&id=4486ceb12>; *Statistics based on data provided by the Office for Repatriation and Aliens*: http://www.unhcr.pl/aktualnosci.php?news=323&wid=61¤t_section=statystyki

The number of applications for refugee status in Poland was growing steadily in the nineties but the significant increase appeared in 2000 - after the beginning of the war in Chechnya. Unfortunately, till that year, the integration of people under international protection was not perceived by the Polish authorities as an issue worth to be on the agenda. Currently, there are also not too many reasons for an exaggerated optimism. At the end of the one-year Individual Integration Program elaborated by each recipient with the assistance of a social worker from the county family assistance center, few refugees are practically adopted to the Polish realities. Although there is still no official evaluation of this Program referring to observation, it is rather not effective. It is extremely difficult to conduct a successful program with a limited staff – in Warsaw for example there are about two social workers working with about 100 refugees during their integration program. Integration to host society is crucial when we consider a stable solution to the difficult economical, social and psychological situation experienced by those under international protection. It is crucial both for them and for receiving country as well. It is a way to decrease ethnic tensions and conflicts and to avoid xenophobic attitudes among both members of receiving community and immigrants.

The United States of America has served as a refuge for persecuted and oppressed people for over 400 years. Poland is also known from its openness towards people in need. It was a shelter for the Jews expelled from Western Europe in early modern times. Nowadays, both states base their policy towards refugees on humanitarian premises and international treaties. There is however, a substantial difference between Poland and the US. The US can pursue an asylum policy without any particular obligations. Since Poland is a member of the European Union it has to comply with EU standards - integration of people under international protection is an important part of them.

There are more differences than similarities between Poland and the US. The US has been an immigrants' country from its foundation. Its prosperity is owed to permanent flow of immigrants, although there were periods when the policy towards new immigrants was particularly restrictive.⁴ Poland has been gradually changing from a sending country to the country of transit and immigration; however emigration flows still prevail.

Another difference between these two countries is more profound and touches the very basis of the national mentality. Referring to the US tradition people living there rely on themselves, they tend to be self-sufficient in all aspects of life. Whereas, due to communist Poland's heritage,

⁴As for the legal basis, there have been liberal and restrictive periods of immigration to US. The first mentioned covers "old" immigration (since US independence till the final formulation of republic system in 1882) and "new" one (1882-1921 when quota system was introduced). The restrictive period covers "modern" immigration (since 1921 till now).

generally Poles still tend to expect intervention and support from the state. And last but not least, there is a deep gap between US and Poland in the terms of economic and international potential, and numbers of asylum seekers and refugees.

However, despite those dissimilarities there are some practices, which could be effective in the Polish case, namely engaging NGOs as a key partner for the state in the integration programs for refugees and concentrating more on the importance of economic self-reliance as a factor leading to the adaptation to the host society.

Program directed to refugees in the US is designed to function as a public-private partnership. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) play a key role in this system. In order to provide a variety of services to refugees they cooperate with the federal and state agencies in every step of the program. NGOs encourage volunteers, who often become refugees' friends, to help them to learn how to arrange everyday life in a new environment. General concept behind this system is to insert refugees into the local community. It is a good example to follow. Of course we cannot deny that non-governmental sector in the US is much more developed than it is in Poland. However, it is an obstacle, which could be overcome in the future, when Polish society grows at the grassroots' level. It is also worth consideration how to encourage successfully integrated refugees to establish their own associations, which could be partners for the state administration.

In the current situation, the majority of Polish NGOs' activities is focused on intervention, some of them offer expert knowledge. A bigger financial support for already existing NGOs would enable them to undertake activities, which concentrate on introducing refugees to local communities, to teach them how to act in everyday life.

As for financing services offered to refugees in the US, it is a combination of public and private funding. NGOs not only raise considerable funding but recruit volunteers whose work is also an important contribution. Following this example might result not only in improving financial issues but increasing social empathy with those in need of special attention.

Since 2000, Russian citizens of Chechen origin have dominated the flow of asylum seekers in Poland. They constitute approximately 90% of applicants for refugee status. Majority of them is granted tolerated stay. In practical terms, it means that almost none of them is left without any form of international protection. Regarding this Polish peculiarity, introduction of volunteers to Reception Camps might encourage Chechens to integrate and definitely it could help them to build a social network in the host society which is an incentive for integration effort.

In general terms, in the US refugees are perceived as group of immigrants which should enter labor market as early as possible. Economic self-reliance is the US government priority. This is the reason why a focus is on employment services: vocational training, skills development, orientation to the workplace and job counseling. The example of long-term immigrants to Poland shows that economic success, or expectation of it, is a factor leading to integration. In the US, employment is treated not only as a way to economic self-sufficiency but as a way leading to integration to a new country. In Poland we should take this under deep consideration. Present situation shows that upon completion of an integration program refugees still depend on social aid and charity organizations. Simultaneously, employers complain that despite high unemployment rate they cannot find qualified employees. Therefore, we could target two aims with one action.

An important factor leading to integration of refugees in the US is a vision of naturalization. After one year of since granting the refugee status, refugees can apply for the permanent residency card and after five years of residency, they are eligible to apply for the US citizenship. In the case of an immigrant country, as the US, it is an obvious final step. However, it does not mean that Poland cannot at least consider using citizenship as a tool encouraging integration process of refugees.

In conclusion, integration to the host society is crucial both for people under international protection and for the receiving society. It is not only a stable solution to the complex social, economic and psychological problems that is shared by those under international protection but the way to decrease ethnic tensions and conflicts. Thanks to integration both members of receiving community and immigrants are less attracted to xenophobic arguments and immigrants are less vulnerable to poverty. It can be stressed that there are some elements in the US experience, which might be effective in the Polish case. We should consider engaging NGOs as a key partner for the state in the integration programs for refugees. We should also concentrate more on the importance of economic self-reliance as a factor leading to the adaptation to the host society. And finally, citizenship should be taken under consideration as a tool encouraging integration process of persons under international protection.

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