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Foreigners – Varsovians. An overview of actors, actions, and challenges in the Warsaw integration landscape

This issue of CMR Spotlight, written by members of the Laboratory of Urban and Regional Migration Policies at [@CMR UW](#), provides an overview of the integration activities and challenges in Warsaw, Poland's largest city, which has become a destination for migrants. It discusses the situation before and after February 24th, 2022, when the full-scale Russian aggression on Ukraine started.



Cudzoziemcy - warszawiacy

Diagnoza i rekomendacje działań
integracyjnych



Foreigners – Varsovians. An overview of actors, actions, and challenges in the Warsaw integration landscape

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Introduction

Warsaw, as the largest city in Poland and the place of residence of the most numerous migrant community (with over 44,000 foreigners¹ formally registered in mid-2021 and 106,500 forced migrants² from Ukraine registered in November 2022), faces various challenges related to integration. This Spotlight describes how municipal institutions, local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and immigrant organizations³ try to respond to the specific needs of diverse migrants. When analyzing activities targeting migrants in Warsaw, one can clearly speak of two distinct periods in recent years. The first – before the full-scale Russian aggression against Ukraine on 24th February 2022, and the second after this date.

This CMR Spotlight is the result of the project “Foreigners – Varsovians. Diagnosis and recommendations of integration activities”, implemented in 2021-2022 by

the Centre of Migration Research (in cooperation with the Konrad Adenauer Foundation in Poland). The following activities were carried out as part of the project:

- Collection and analysis of quantitative and qualitative data on the situation of foreigners and migrants in Warsaw;
- Qualitative research with representatives of the local public administration, dealing with issues of migration and integration of immigrants at the local government level; employees and activists of non-governmental organizations dealing with immigrant integration issues in Warsaw; immigrant organizations and immigrant activists operating in Warsaw.

The main part of the study was conducted before the Russian aggression against Ukraine. However, due to the specific challenges after February 24, 2022, we also included some new data. More info on the project can be found at the [CMR website](#).

¹ In the article, we use the terms “foreigner(s)” and “(i)migrant(s)” interchangeably, but when referring to statistical data and information resulting from Polish law, we use the former, in accordance with the official nomenclature.

² This is an operational term, not a legal category. It serves to collectively describe all persons who were forced to leave their place of residence (usually their country of origin).

³ By NGOs, we mean those associations that work for the benefit of migrants. On the other hand, immigrant organizations are created by migrants themselves.

This article is of a brief, cross-sectional nature and does not exhaust the subject matter. It refers to the situation as it was just before the end of February 2022 and the change in the field of integration activities, which was initiated by the full-scale war and the need to receive large numbers of forced migrants from Ukraine ([see other issues of CMR Spotlight for more](#)).

Situation before February 24th, 2022

Local actors

The analysis of the activities of Warsaw's municipal institutions aimed to support migrants, national and ethnic minorities and broadly understood multiculturalism, proves that this task was already very complex prior to February 2022. These activities not only covered a wide range of actions but were also carried out by diverse sets of institutions, including municipal and cultural ones, as well as NGOs and immigrant organizations.

Usually, for publicly funded projects, municipal departments of the City of Warsaw determined the direction and purpose of activities and subcontracted their implementation to NGOs through open grant competitions, small grant schemes and intervention funds providing assistance to foreigner Varsovians' issues. Among the crucial municipal offices, one should mention: the International Cooperation Department (coordinating activities for migrants in Warsaw), the Centre for Public Communication, the Education Department,

the Welfare and Social Projects Department, the Culture Department, and the Economic Development Department. District offices were usually not directly involved in the implementation of actions aimed at migrants, but they supported other institutions and entities, such as social welfare centres, cultural centres, non-governmental organizations and grassroots initiatives, through co-financing and providing access to public space and infrastructure. NGOs were the key actors involved in the direct implementation of projects, including services for people with migration and refugee backgrounds.

The implementation of publicly funded activities largely by NGOs, combined with limited direct communication between the municipal institutions and immigrant and ethnic communities, contributed to the fact that municipal institutions were usually not identified by the public at large and by migrant communities as those directly engaged in activities for migrants.

Cooperation and coordination

Our study showed the complexity of the relationship between the local administration and NGOs providing services for immigrant Varsovians prior to February 24th, 2022. Various tools were used locally to develop and strengthen communication and cooperation between local service providers, including the municipal institutions, NGOs and immigrant organizations. The main tools were the Sectoral Social Dialogue Committee for

Foreigners (pol. *Branżowa Komisja Dialogu Społecznego ds. Cudzoziemców – BKDS*) and other sectoral committees (bodies designed as a tool for dialogue between the City of Warsaw and NGOs), where issues related to migration were discussed. The BKDS for Foreigners was known to almost all study participants. Unfortunately, it was also criticized by a large part of the respondents representing both municipal institutions and NGOs.

Municipal institutions perceived the BKDS for Foreigners primarily as a platform used by NGOs to formulate expectations addressed to the administration, and to a lesser extent as a platform for building dialogue and providing information exchange on issues related to Warsaw's migrant communities. The latter was what municipal institutions would expect the format of BKDS for Foreigners to be used for, but they did not see it. Additionally, they perceived the attitude of social actors as oftentimes reluctant towards the city administration. The interviewed organizations' representatives, on the other hand, had the sense that their requests expressed through the BKDS for Foreigners platform were neglected and disregarded by municipal institutions. Hence, BKDS for Foreigners, in their view, failed to realize the role of a dialogue platform between public institutions and NGOs providing services for immigrants. Consequently, we need to note that the BKDS for Foreigners seems to have failed to achieve many of its goals, although it did prove functional as a platform for

communication and exchange later, during the war crisis.

In addition to BKDS for Foreigners, there are also other sectoral committees where issues related to migration are discussed. However, outside the BKDS for Foreigners, cooperation between NGOs, actors and municipal institutions seems limited. City representatives in this research rarely elaborated on cooperation with organizations in their statements. In turn, organizations more often described such cooperation, although they usually took a critical stance, pointing to problems such as excessive bureaucracy, low awareness of issues related to migration among employees of municipal institutions, underfunding, and insufficient systemic involvement of local administration on a district level in activities addressed to foreigner Varsovians.

While the cooperation between local stakeholders was complex and challenging prior to February 24th, the cooperation with the central administration remained even more difficult in some aspects. Although everyday cooperation between central and local administration, regulated by the division of competencies, usually took place without major problems, the cooperation between municipal institutions and the central administration going beyond those divisions was limited. The situation was even more difficult for NGOs and immigrant organizations, which in many cases could not cooperate with the central administration at all due to political

discrepancies resulting from the right-wing conservative attitude of the ruling party, which has been generally reluctant or even hostile to migration and integration issues.

Strategies and opportunities

Similarly to other Polish metropolises, Warsaw does not have a separate policy or strategy specifically addressing migration or migrant integration. This results from Polish law and the tasks assigned to cities. Such an approach is described in the city's "[Strategy #Warsaw 2030](#)" – the idea is that specific minority groups' needs (including those of migrants) should be considered horizontally across all policy domains. Usually, the surveyed representatives of the municipal institutions referred to the "[Social diversity policy of the Capital City of Warsaw](#)" (being developed while the study was conducted). This approach of not having a dedicated strategy has been both supported and – to some extent – criticized by the respondents representing municipal institutions and NGOs.

During the so-called migration crisis of 2015 in Europe, the Polish government eventually refused to accept asylum seekers under the EU's temporary relocation scheme. In response, the Warsaw administration engaged in testing legal paths to support forced migrants in cooperation with various entities in this area. However, these activities did not arouse much public interest and commitment, mainly due to the small number of forced migrants at that time and the perception of this problem as marginal

and hence unimportant. Interestingly, however, some solutions tested then turned out to be useful during the crisis caused by the Russian aggression against Ukraine.

During the crisis resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, tools developed by local migrant providers, such as those extending the digitalization of services for migrants, increased the quality of some services (e.g., sped up some administrative procedures) and increased migrants' access to information. At the same time, switching to online communication and work disrupted migrants' and service providers' social relations, limited in-person interactions, increased migrants' anxiety about the future and limited employment opportunities. In this aspect, some solutions used in response to the pandemic had adverse effects on the process of integration of foreigners and slowed down their social inclusion.

Activities offered for migrants

The main integrative actions addressed to Warsaw's migrant communities prior to February 24th, 2022, included:

- **social assistance**, counselling and organizing Polish language courses: in Warsaw, documented migrants holding some types of residence permits (e.g., permanent residence permit) have access to social assistance provided by Social Welfare Centers. This includes financial assistance in the form of targeted benefits, permanent benefits, payment of health insurance premiums; provision of food for school-age children, career

and family counselling, care and education skills workshops, and educational volunteering. In addition, the Warsaw Family Support Center conducts Individual Integration Programmes addressed to the beneficiaries of international protection (see: [Wach, Pachocka 2022](#)). NGOs, funded by municipal institutions, implement projects offering advice on administrative matters, legal, employment and educational consultations, work legalization services, and psychological support. Polish language courses at the A1-B1 level were carried out mainly by NGOs and cultural institutions (e.g., [Old Town Community Centre – Staromiejski Dom Kultury](#)). To a lesser extent, language courses were available through Social Welfare Centers in selected districts.

- **activities targeting the educational needs of children with migration background:** these were carried out mostly by the Education Department of the City of Warsaw and [Warsaw Centre for Education and Social Innovations and Trainings](#) and included support for teachers and school staff in teaching Polish as a foreign language to children and establishing preparatory classes for pupils with a migration background. Social projects funded by the Education Department of the City of Warsaw addressed direct support for children and parents with a migration background, prevention of children's exclusion from the education system, and offered

support for intercultural integration processes in the school environment.

- **civic and cultural activities:** included a wide catalogue of activities carried out by public institutions, cultural institutions (museums, theatres and libraries) and non-governmental organizations in the field of culture and sport. The activities included such categories as:
 - ✓ ***multicultural and anti-discrimination education*** (e.g., happenings, workshops, lectures or debates devoted to anti-discrimination issues);
 - ✓ ***intercultural dialogue*** (e.g., festivals, concerts, film screenings, as well as cyclical events aimed at exchanging experiences for the benefit of intercultural dialogue);
 - ✓ ***increasing multilingual accessibility of cultural institutions*** (including in English, Ukrainian and Russian languages) and the VOD platform by the [Film Culture Centre](#);
 - ✓ ***inclusion of people with migration experience into cultural and artistic activities*** (e.g., handicraft workshops, language and cultural workshops, providing space for artists);
 - ✓ ***solidarity actions in public space*** (e.g., in 2020, the action Solidarity with Belarusians #LightForBelarus as part of the Warsaw Biennale).
- **information and promotion activities:** aimed at presenting the Capital City of Warsaw as an open, attractive place to its residents and a good place for the

development of, especially, young people's potential. This also applies to the city's promotion among its new foreign residents. An example of such action is producing and promoting a booklet in English and Ukrainian, "[Essential Guide for Active Citizens](#)", published in 2016.

- **Social diagnosis, monitoring and evaluation:** activities aimed at analyzing the needs of resident migrants (including monitoring and evaluating the activities carried out so far) were implemented to a much lesser extent. Among the main activities performed in this field were: the project "[Enhancement of the accuracy and effectiveness of actions addressed to foreigners in Warsaw](#)", implemented in 2014-2015, and the pilot project "[Warsaw test project of integration of foreigners taking into account the needs of the labor market \(WITEK\)](#)", implemented between 2016 and 2018.

An important initiative is the [Warsaw Multicultural Centre](#), an institution funded by the City of Warsaw and operated by NGOs. It aims to support social integration and cohesion, promote attitudes of tolerance, protection of human rights and civil liberties; offer multicultural education and promote the image of Warsaw as a multicultural metropolis.

In response to the needs of migrant Varsovians, the municipal institutions apply primarily a service mainstreaming approach, i.e., they try to adjust existing public services and ensure service equity by funding

activities targeted at migrant communities through NGOs. This is often implemented on a rather *ad hoc* basis, however, and lacks strategic and long-term planning taking into account the specific needs of new migrant residents. Additional indirect public activities include training and networking of administration workers serving migrant clients (both officials and representatives of organizations) and other public institutions' employees (e.g., physicians or teachers). However, both the mainstreaming activities as well as those ensuring service equity have been often perceived by representatives of NGOs and migrant organizations as insufficient. Consequently, according to some interviewed participants, migrants' social rights and opportunities were in many cases compromised.

Apart from the activities directly provided by municipal institutions or subcontracted by the administration to NGOs, other services are offered through specialized NGOs and migrant organizations. In some cases, their activities complement municipal activities and fill in systemic gaps. In other cases, they are autonomous in nature, as they address the needs that are not taken into account by the public administration system. For example, NGOs have been providing services mainly to diverse communities, while migrant organizations tend to focus more on the ethnic groups they represent.

The activities targeting Warsaw's migrant communities offered by various public institutions and NGOs are numerous and diverse. At the same time, they create a

patchwork network difficult to navigate not only for migrants themselves but also for some service providers. This is due to two factors. Firstly, it results from the diversity of institutions and organizations operating in this area – from the subcontracting model of offering public services, and consequently, from the abovementioned communication and coordination deficiencies. Secondly, the relative scale and diversity of the migrant communities in Warsaw contribute to the complexity of stakeholders engaged in migrant service provision.

When respondents were asked how to improve the coherence of activities and thus their effectiveness, they indicated, among others:

- the importance of first organizing pilot actions before actually launching new full-scale activities, which would help to design better services;
- building consortia of service providers;
- increasing migrant participation in designing and delivering services addressed to their communities;
- developing [Local Activity Spots \(pol. *Miejsca Aktywności Lokalnej – MAL*\)](#) which operate at the district level.

Challenges

The integration of immigrants in Warsaw before February 24th already faced many different challenges ([Winiarska, Wojno 2018](#); [Cichocka, et.al 2022](#); [Wach, Pachocka 2022](#)). The most important included:

- insufficient participation of migrants in social activities and service design;
- limited multilingual access to public services and insufficient linguistic support;
- actionism and ephemerality of activities related to the reception and support of migrants;
- limited awareness of the specific needs of migrant Varsovians among city authorities and within urban institutions.

Many of these challenges result from difficulties related to the functioning of municipal institutions and NGOs providing services directly to migrants. One of the most significant problems seems to be insufficient cooperation and information exchange between them. The following can be also mentioned:

- staff shortages, work overload of people involved and high staff turnover;
- under- and unstable funding;
- broad challenges described as so-called projectivization (which means that a large part of integration activities is in the form of periodic projects (co-)financed from various sources, rather than regular, sustained programs);
- insufficient cooperation between institutions.

Situation after February 24th, 2022

The crisis caused by the full-scale war in Ukraine generated the largest challenges in decades for municipal institutions, NGOs and migrant organizations dealing with

migration and integration issues. The massive influx of forced migrants has made it necessary to mobilize resources and deepen cooperation between various actors.

The unprecedented scale of forced migration has entailed extraordinary measures (for more details see: [Łukasiewicz et al. 2022](#); [Jaroszewicz et al. 2022](#)). Initially, municipal institutions – supported and even supplemented in some cases by NGOs and volunteers – undertook *ad hoc* activities, mainly aimed at meeting the most basic needs of forced migrants from Ukraine. These included providing information, administrative support and temporary accommodation.

Over time, however, the activities normalized and professionalized and focused more on improving access to mainstream public services, e.g. by introducing multilingual public websites and a hotline in Ukrainian, enhancing access to the public education system through the organization of preparatory classes or support for pupils with special educational needs, organizing Polish language courses for adults, offering social assistance, vocational training courses, and opening coworking spaces for entrepreneurs.

The crisis related to the war in Ukraine forced public institutions and NGOs to cooperate more closely and consequently, new platforms of cooperation were also established, such as the [Coordination Support Centre](#) in Warsaw that served as a platform for communication, information

and resource exchange both for those in need of help and, especially, those offering support, such as institutions, organizations, businesses and volunteer groups. In addition, the establishment and intensification of cooperation between social actors and international organizations was observed.

Crisis management required special measures, such as the personal involvement of the Mayor of Warsaw, which – according to the respondents – significantly streamlined the administrative process and increased the involvement of municipal institutions. Not without significance was also the employment of additional staff (often speaking Ukrainian), in response to new needs.

According to study participants, the crisis brought both opportunities and challenges for Warsaw and local immigrant service providers. The former included demographic (population growth) and social (multiculturalism) opportunities. In addition, participants believed that ultimately the crisis could improve the situation of Warsaw's migrant community through the development of services addressed to their needs and greater openness of residents.

The challenges include, above all, the need to provide housing and access to education and work for new residents. In addition, it is also important to create equal opportunities for foreigners in the use of public services, which requires, for example, multilingual access. The influx of forced migrants from Ukraine and special measures developed in

response to their arrival may, however, cause disparities through neglecting the needs of Warsaw's other migrant communities.

Conclusions

In recent years, various crises have impacted the migration situation in Poland: the crisis of refugee protection of 2015, the political and human rights crisis in Belarus, the crisis at the Polish-Belarusian border, the health crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic and, finally, the war in Ukraine, resulting in mass forced migration to Europe. Polish cities being the major receivers of immigrants were specifically impacted, with Warsaw at the forefront. The Polish capital has hosted the highest number of foreigners and people with migration experience (voluntary and forced) and consequently faced major challenges. Based on the analysis of publicly available secondary data and the original material from our study, we can conclude that all these challenges have triggered the development of existing policies addressed to migrant residents, as well as putting in place new *ad hoc* solutions implemented directly by municipal institutions, NGOs and residents themselves. In recent years, they have often had to operate in extraordinary conditions, which has accelerated city-wide discussion on the directions and goals of new policies, as well as on the effectiveness of actions already undertaken to address the needs of migrant Varsovians. Warsaw, similarly to other Polish cities, currently has momentum to review as well as redesign its

reception and integration policies and programs, and revise and plan them over a longer period of time. All this takes place in the context of Poland becoming a new immigration country.

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