

EWSI Analysis on Voluntary and Citizens' Initiative: Latvia

1 INTRODUCTION

Are considered as citizens' initiatives all activities mobilising large numbers of volunteers (e.g. in workplaces, schools, local communities, etc.) to support immigrants' long-term integration and/or open up the public to integration matters and diversity. **These initiatives most notably involve people-to-people or mutual learning activities** matching migrants with mentors, peers or people volunteering their time or space. These initiatives may concern housing, mentoring, child or university-level education, extracurricular activities for children, lifelong learning, language learning, information provision, assistance with public services, translation, job preparation, awareness-raising/advocacy, etc.

Given EWSI's thematic focus, the emphasis is placed on citizens' initiatives focusing on long-term reception (e.g. during the asylum procedure) and integration (of beneficiaries of international protection and/or other categories of migrants), and not on the **initial front-line humanitarian reception for asylum-seekers** (e.g. food, clothing, shelter before entering the reception phase).

2 LONG-ESTABLISHED VOLUNTEERS/CITIZENS' INITIATIVES

Description of initiatives that have been running for several years.

Given the low number of asylum seekers reaching Latvia up until the recent increase in inflow (between 2010 and 2014 there were only 1134 applicants,¹), no major citizens' initiatives is identified.

3 NEW VOLUNTEERS/CITIZENS' INITIATIVES

Description of major initiatives started only recently, particularly since the large numbers of refugee arrivals in 2015.

The initiative '[I want to help refugees](#)' (Gribu palīdzēt bēgļiem) is the largest and most active coherent citizens' initiative started as a response to the increased number of refugee arrivals in 2015. The initiative was founded by entrepreneur Egils Grasmanis (founder of "Brain Games")² in September 2015 as a Facebook page.

¹ "Asylum seekers in Latvia," Maria Golubeva and Marta Rikša, Centre for Public Policy PROVIDUS, 2015.

² <http://www.ir.lv/2015/9/9/egils-grasmanis-izveidojis-grupu-gribu-palidzet-begliem>

Inspired by initiatives from countries like Hungary, Germany and Austria, he was looking for like-minded people who would also be interested in helping refugees through voluntary work.

The group is based in Riga, where it has also organised its social activities for asylum seekers currently staying in the asylum seeker centre “Mucenieki” in the outskirts of Riga with which it cooperates for the supply of clothes, school material, food donated by volunteers in the group. In coordination with a local cultural centre/bar “KKC”, the group organised three social events for locals and asylum seekers (including families and children), where they could play games, cook together, and interact with each other. The group has also helped people with refugee status to find temporary living arrangements. Members of the group have been meeting with the NGO Society „Shelter „Safe House””, which has been working with asylum seekers for almost a decade, yet not formal partnerships have been formed since “I want to help refugees” is not a registered organisation but rather a volunteer group.

Since September 2015, the group has grown from initial 800 members to the current 3,000+ members.

4 PROFILE OF VOLUNTEERS

Description and comparison of the profile of volunteers active in old versus new initiatives.

Comparison is not possible given lack of initiatives of this kind before 2015.

5 INNOVATION ASPECT

Description and comparison of innovative or entrepreneurial aspects of the old versus new initiatives.

Comparison is not possible given lack of initiatives of this kind before 2015.

6 ADDED VALUE

Description of the added value of such initiatives (both long-established and new), including the uniqueness of their activities compared to the existing practices of the (1) state and (2) NGOs.

The added value of this initiative comes from its grassroots character, which is rare in Latvia. In comparison to other NGOs or state practices, the volunteer group is focusing on very practical day-to-day problems of asylum seekers and refugees, as well as matching locals who are interested in helping directly with the newly arrived refugees.

7 IMPACT

Description and comparison of the impact of old versus new initiatives.

On the one hand, it is probably yet too early to judge but on the other – the activities performed and the number of members in this volunteer group can play a symbolic role in showing that there indeed are people willing to welcome refugees, which contrasts with the political discourse in the government and the parliament.