



## MIGRANT ASSOCIATIONS IN HUNGARY - ANALYSIS

### The national situation – legal background

In Hungary, foreigners can be members, board members and leaders of associations and foundations. This regulation was valid since the early 90s, so there are many NGOs in the country, which have foreign members (or former foreigners). In this analysis we were focusing on NGOs having significant rate of foreigners among their members or in the leading bodies. The trade unions are not effective bodies in Hungary. Only a few such unions are functioning and they do not have any connection to foreign residents.

It is not too difficult to establish an NGO in Hungary. For associations it is a matter of sufficient members, while for a foundation there is a need for starting capital yet less emphasis on membership. There is no need for official juridical assistance, so any citizen or legally residing foreigner can launch the process at the local court. Usually the court registers new organizations in 2-6 months and the procedure has no cost.

### Statistics

The Central Statistic Bureau reported more than 60 thousand NGOs in Hungary (in 2012), in a survey (made by Andras Kovats in 2012, with the support of European Integration Fund) *there were found around 300 organizations, which could be considered as “immigrant” organizations. They differed these ones from the ethnic minorities organizations* (such as Serbian, Ukrainian, Romanian etc.). *Kovats and his team narrowed these ones to 146 as it turned out that the rest were not functioning or they were not able to reach them. According to this research, 87% of the organizations were based in Budapest* (the national average is 24% only – by the CSB).

### Profile of immigrant organizations

There are many bureaucratic issues and problems, which the immigrant NGOs are faced with. The administrative workload even for the Hungarian organizations is very heavy, but without a supportive network it can be even harder for the immigrants. The language barriers should also be mentioned. The Hungarian language is very difficult to learn and it has no direct similarities to any of the big global languages. Therefore, we can estimate that 30-40% of the immigrant NGOs are using interpreters for all their official issues, thus requiring a lot of human and



Co-funded by the European Union



financial capacities. Migrant NGOs focused on immigrants do not have a close working relationship with the Hungarian state and its institutions. The impact of such NGOs is limited only to the members they can reach. With the weak democratic institutions in place in Hungary there are not many good examples demonstrating successful cooperation between grass-root organization and the state. The state institutions do not rely on civic participation of inhabitants and in many cases they react only on the most critical voices in the population often seeing political motivation behind them.

The main income of these organizations is the personal supporters' donations, and very rarely migrant associations receive any projects or funds from the bigger EU or state funds. Some of the reasons behind, why some NGOs in Hungary face funding instability include: harsh competition, difficult application forms and language barriers. Combined, these make it difficult to get selected for funding as a grass-root NGO. Consequently most NGOs depend on their member fees and collect donations directly from their ethnic communities (e.g. from the successful business owners).

The average profile of migrant NGOs in Hungary is usually grass-root. They were founded by their members to give a frame for their already existing activities. They are organized mainly by ethnicity, sometimes by continent and there are only a few cases with an ambition to represent migrants in general. *The average organization is 8 years old (Kovats 2012).*

What is also quite common is that the migrant NGOs often have very active members, some of them are reaching huge communities with their activities. There are also a few one-man organizations as well specialized on some certain topic or trying to represent whole communities.

Among the topics of migrant associations, we can find mainly cultural and/or religious organizations. Organizations with political agendas are almost completely missing (we found only one). We asked them if they can lobby the Hungarian decision makers, but the usual answer was that they have no direct contacts. *After these focuses, they still have charity programs and educational programs among their activities (Kovats 2012).* What is important to underline - most of these organizations are not working or focusing on the field of immigration at all. Their advantage is that they all own a different culture and language, so teaching languages and holding cultural events is usually very popular and creates a positive image of them.

Since the social media revolution most of the organizations are active online Their websites are out of the date, but they have active Facebook pages that post events, information and issues related to their country of origin or recent communities.



Co-funded by the European Union



There are a few organizations founded or organized by asylum seekers and refugees too. Usually their profile is less cultural, more about defending human rights, self-educating, and law-protecting activities.

There is not much of an ethnic focus among these organizations, however, the East-Asians migrants have a different profile. They have much stronger connection to their diplomats and embassies ( e.g. the Chinese, Vietnamese, Korean, and Japanese NGOs) as they are focusing on the development of international relations between Hungary and their home-countries. That is why they are active in economic programs, they also organize diplomatic events, and it is hard find the barrier between official diplomats and independent NGOs.

When discussing about political participation our respondents answered positively that they would not refuse political activities if they could have more opportunities with their organizations to influence internal (or even international) political issues. *From the research of Kovats, they found only 3 organizations (4%) with political activities, which is still much higher than the national average (0,8% - BCS). They measured also the public activities of the organizations, but with the number of newsletters, media interviews and leaflets, it is not clear whether they served political activities or simple civic engagement.* We asked the organizations about cultural differences or difficulties of different values or habits, but none of them complained about this.

It is important to mention that many NGOs which are not immigrant organizations, but which are focusing on that field, are mainly the ones giving different types of services for foreigners living and working in Hungary. In the Hungarian Migration Almanach (2012) there are around 30 organizations, among them only a few are considered as “immigrant” organizations. Most of them are Hungarian NGOs, many of them are working on integration, while others are covering different parts of the social, psychological and legal services for foreigners. These organizations usually support each other’s programs, share practices, and teach each other about the situation in the country.

### **A good practice - Migrant Solidarity (MigSzol)**

MigSzol is an informal group of activists. MigSzol has about 40 members and has existed since 2012. MigSzol’s goals are to advocate the realization of the social and political rights of refugees and asylum seekers in Hungary. MigSzol contributes to social change by campaigning against deportation and detention and raising awareness of the rights of refugees and asylum seekers. MigSzol works for a Hungary where the label of “refugee” or “immigrant” is no longer needed,



Co-funded by the European Union



and they fight against the notion that people's identities are determined by bureaucratic categories.

Migrant associations rely a lot on volunteer work, so they do not depend on funds or donations. In the case of political engagement, they say it requires more than voting at elections or participating in advisory bodies. They promote a more direct and equal democratic approach. Migszol aims to present itself as an informal but well-organized, independent political organization, which has a very important role as the only grass roots organization amongst Hungarian stakeholders. MigSzol also works constantly to develop their activities towards inclusiveness by having all their materials in several languages, choosing easy access locations.

In some cases, migrant NGOs openly oppose the Hungarian administration, bureaucracy or political elite, with demonstrations, statements and actions. They believe that the system itself needs to be improved in order to show that immigration is not a danger for the Hungarian society and that politicians are not right in provoking racism or xenophobia against foreigners.

## Recommendations

Most of the problems of migrant NGOs are quite similar with the problems of local, non-immigrant organizations and include the lack of funding, weak relation to the state and to its institutions, and heavy administration tasks, etc. The differences (language and cultural issues) are not seen as being crucial. Our respondents were not complaining over the lack of evidence on problems caused by these issues. Also, it seems that foreigners are usually not focusing or working with immigration topics; just a few of them are directly related to integration work. The topics of education, culture and charity are by far the most popular among them.

We would recommend to migrant associations to use better the advantages of knowing different languages, having different cultural backgrounds, and having strong connections to their countries of origin. The narrow civil fund opportunities of Hungary could also have a special part in aiming to use these organizational resources, offering grants (at least small grants) to develop their communities and to strengthen good cooperation between the institutions and the civil sector.

Marcell Lőrincz  
Foundation of Subjective Values  
January 2015



Co-funded by the European Union