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Catherine Nafti-Malherbe:¹ *Migrant minors in France.*

Summary of the lecture

The seminars from the series “Beyond the cultural obvious” are regularly conducted at the University of Lower Silesia in Wrocław by Professor Paweł Rudnicki (DSW). Their goal is to discuss changes taking place in education, culture, politics and the media. The participants ask questions, raise doubtful or controversial issues, the presence of which in the public discourse in an (in)obvious way changes our reality. The inspiration for this series of scientific seminars are the scientific achievements of the late Professor Robert Kwaśnica, the first Rector of the University.

Recently, at the invitation of Dr. Aneta Słowik, Professor Catherine Nafti-Malherbe from the Catholic University of Angers took part in the seminar. Her lecture concerned the situation of migrant minors, which is so important and topical for us due to the situation on the Polish-Belarusian border. At the beginning of the lecture, the professor emphasized that France, in line with its Republican values dominating in the French society, does not allow the emergence of ethnic subcultures and expects immigrants to integrate seamlessly with French culture. The main role in the implementation of integration activities should be played by the state, school, family and the Church. Unfortunately, since the 1990s, there has been a continuous disintegration of traditional institutions, and consequently of the implementation of the mission of the integrating institutions. Thus, individuals are starting to play an increasingly important role in integration processes, almost appropriating them. The collapse of traditional institutions responsible in the past for maintaining stability and giving a sense of security, for example social integration, leads to the

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domination of feelings such as disorientation, confusion, and existential anxiety in French society. Therefore, the adoption of the canons of French culture by immigrants becomes more and more difficult, and sometimes even impossible, and leads to the emergence of communities / subcultures that were supposed not to exist.

The professor presented the traditional, formal process of admitting immigrants and providing support to minors crossing the border:

- ♦ A person requesting asylum at the moment of crossing the border must declare their willingness to accept help.
- ♦ If the asylum decision is negative, you have the option of appealing against the decision.
- ♦ If the re-decision is also negative – according to the law, the person should be returned to their country of origin.

Such a deportation only takes place if France has an agreement with the immigrant's country of origin, ensuring their safety and rights. If there is no such agreement, they usually remain without the right to support, thus becoming an “invisible person” (because they cannot be caught by the police), and “a person impossible to be seen” by aid institutions (they are illegal, without a regulated status and therefore legally invisible or, in fact, they must be invisible to institutional support entities). Young “invisible persons and persons impossible to be seen” are mainly interested in obtaining money necessary for survival, and therefore, often on their own initiative or being manipulated by adults, they obtain it illegally, e.g. by theft. France's legal system does not have the option of sentencing minors to imprisonment, so they may feel unpunishable.

The collected data show how in the period 2016-2020 there was an increase in the number of underage immigrants, mainly young men aged 14-18. In 2016, there were 8,054 underage immigrants; in 2017- 14,908; in 2018 – 17,022; in 2019- 16,760; while in 2020, there was a decrease to 9,501 as a result of the border closure caused by Covid-19. The aforementioned data concern persons registered by the system and benefiting from the institutional support. By signing the Charter for the Protection of Children, France is obliged to protect minors, even in case of rejection of their asylum applications, especially when the country, of origin experiences hostilities and is unable to ensure adequate conditions. However, it is estimated that there are currently 60,000 unaccompanied minors in France. They come from Afghanistan, the Indian Subcontinent, China, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Angola, Nigeria, Chad, Mali, Palestine, Iraq, the Balkan countries and Russia. 95% of them are boys, 77% of whom are 15/16 years of age. They usually have an unregulated legal status, they are so-called “invisible persons and persons impossible to be seen.”

The integration of adolescent refugees, who very often have a series of traumatic experiences behind them, is now the responsibility of the regional authorities and is very costly, which is why the French regional authorities are appealing to the

government for subsidies and the creation of structures that will help (read: finance) integration. However, the problem grows with the number of arrivals, driven by the belief prevailing among young people that countries such as France are easy to live in and can get rich quickly. Sociological research shows that underage persons flee their country of origin not only because of wars or economic factors, but often because of family breakdown, domestic violence, physical and / or mental abuse, or a desire to travel.

In France, a typology of underage migrants was developed by Angéline Etiemble (2002):

- ◆ minors from war-stricken countries who seek asylum to save lives;
- ◆ minors who have fled their country of origin because of poverty, often under pressure from their parents;
- ◆ minors in the hands of traffickers, some forced into prostitution or street thefts;
- ◆ minors who run away from their family home due to difficulties in the family;
- ◆ wandering minors who wander from country to country.

Recently, based on data analysis and pressure from social protests, the law is being revised and senators are working on setting new standards. They assume that by 2030 such aid solutions would be developed that will enable all refugees and immigrants to be completely covered. The aid dedicated to them so far is not unified and depends on the region of France: the richer the region, the wider the range of aid possibilities. One of the solutions that would strengthen the support system are funds from the state, and not mainly from local government funds as so far. Another important direction raised by French senators is the development of forms of psychological help to refugees after their “journey.” Therefore, the new assumptions of the migration policy focus more on assistance solutions addressed especially to underage immigrants, and less on the letter of the law. The following is postulated:

- ◆ assistance must be given even if the person does not apply for asylum;
- ◆ there must be a greater focus on identifying needs than on controlling or giving help;
- ◆ if the person agrees, the child and underage youth should be sheltered in an appropriate facility.

However, there are some obstacles in the implementation of these postulates because many young immigrants are distrustful and, fearing deportation, refrain from using the help.

There is also a possibility of support in the form of education for immigrant minors. In France, up to the age of sixteen, it is mandatory to attend school; after that, there is a possibility of attending a state high school or a vocational school. The

issue of education, however, creates many problems related to the unequal preparation of minors for education in a French school, because migrants have different levels of education, e.g. some cannot write at all, while others write and read fluently.

Despite the fact that new solutions are developed, the problem of migration policy divides France seriously and causes tension, because the support which costs a lot of money (annual assistance for minors cost France about 11 billion euros in 2019) is dedicated to migrants only until they reach of majority, and after reaching the age of eighteen, they often struggle with the lack of solutions. Many migrants therefore report a lower age than they are, knowing that the French state is obliged to take care of minors, place them in a refugee center, guarantee food and allow them to apply for asylum. Nonetheless, statistical data show that in France, out of 9 thousand migrants, only around 500 asked for asylum – for most of them, France is only regarded as a springboard for getting to the United Kingdom and the United States.

The increasing migration processes require a search for solutions that can be applied on a global scale. Identifying individual and social problems in the countries of origin of migrants and refugees requires the involvement of many countries, non-governmental organizations and extraordinary, empathetic individuals. One of the forms of helping them can be intercultural and multicultural counseling.

Bibliography

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