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Title **The Evolvement of NGOs in the Field of Refugee Policy in Estonia**

Abstract The paper focuses on the relationship and cooperation between public and not-for-profit actors in the policy-making process in the context of refugee policy in Estonia. During the past few decades, the importance and role of civil society and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in the governance process has rapidly increased. In many ways, NGOs complement state activities and have become important allies for governments in public service provision, policy-making and also in tackling so-called “wicked issues” like migration. Furthermore, NGOs have become one of the key players in the field of refugee policy, as they work closely with both asylum seekers and refugees, providing services and advocating for their rights. This was highlighted during the European migration crisis that escalated in 2015, when NGOs stepped in to provide essential services for the vast number of arriving asylum seekers, because governments were not prepared well enough to deal with the massive influx of people. Therefore, we could presume that it is important for governments to improve their collaboration and relationship with NGOs.

In this research, we try to analyse the relationship between the government and NGOs in the refugee policy field, by examining the birth, development and transformation of non-governmental organizations dealing with asylum seekers and refugees in Estonia in their wider ecosystem of organizations. It can be expected that in a small state, there is a smaller ecological “niche” and more limited resources for NGOs to emerge and function. The special context of the policy field in Estonia as a state that opened its borders only in the end of the 1990’s and was until the European migration crisis not a target country for the migrants, offers additional explanatory variables. The central research questions are: how has the landscape of refugee NGOs developed in Estonia, how has the evolvement of NGOs shaped the relationship and interaction between the NGOs and the government, and how has the context of the small states influenced these processes? This is a qualitative study that first develops a theoretical framework combining knowledge on organizational ecology, collaboration and small states and then uses the framework

to conduct the empirical analysis. Data for the empirical analysis is gathered through document analysis and semi-structured interviews with NGO representatives, other service providers in the field and policy-makers.