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Non-governmental assistance to Ukrainian refugees by Polish society in the aftermath of the escalation of hostilities in 2022

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Abstract

The full-scale war in Ukraine caused the largest refugee crisis in Europe after World War II. Poland was the initial destination for people fleeing the war, causing a rapid influx of several million refugees in just a few weeks. An unprecedented and rapid response of the Polish society in terms of providing assistance to refugees enabled the acceptance of those who decided to stay in Poland. Social action that began at the local level and translated into commonly known non-governmental assistance provided the basis and impetus for fostering beneficial connections between Poland and Ukraine, not only on the state level, but especially within the respective populations. The purpose of the article was to explore the forms of assistance offered by the Polish society, the scope of aspects of the refugees' lives it addressed, and how this was reflected in the mutual perception of Poles and Ukrainians. As a hypothesis, it was assumed that a direct involvement of the Polish society in helping refugees from Ukraine decreased over the course of a year of the full-blown war in Ukraine, with simultaneous high social support for the state's systemic solutions in this regard. In order to verify the hypothesis, a combination of descriptive, analysis of existing data, comparative and statistical methods were employed.

| *Keywords:* refugees, Ukraine, Poles, non-governmental aid, society

Неправительственная помощь украинским беженцам со стороны польского общества в условиях эскалации боевых действий в 2022 году

Аннотация

Полномасштабная война на Украине стала причиной крупнейшего кризиса беженцев в Европе после Второй мировой войны. Польша была первоначальным пунктом назначения для людей, спасавшихся от войны, что привело к быстрому притоку нескольких миллионов беженцев всего за несколько недель. Беспрецедентная и быстрая реакция польского общества в плане оказания помощи беженцам позволила принять тех, кто решил остаться в Польше. Социальные действия, которые начались на местном уровне и переросли в широко известную неправительственную помощь, послужили основой и стимулом для содействия полезным связям между Польшей и Украиной не только на государственном уровне, но особенно внутри соответствующих групп населения. Целью статьи было изучить формы помощи, предлагаемые польским обществом, масштабы аспектов жизни беженцев, к которым оно обращалось, и то, как это отражалось на взаимном восприятии поляков и украинцев. В качестве гипотезы предполагалось, что прямая вовлеченность польского общества в помощь беженцам из Украины снизилась за год полномасштабной войны в Украине при одновременной высокой социальной поддержке системных решений государства в этом направлении. Для проверки гипотезы было использовано сочетание описательного, анализа существующих данных, сравнительного и статистического методов.

Ключевые слова: беженцы, Украина, поляки, негосударственная помощь, общество

Introduction

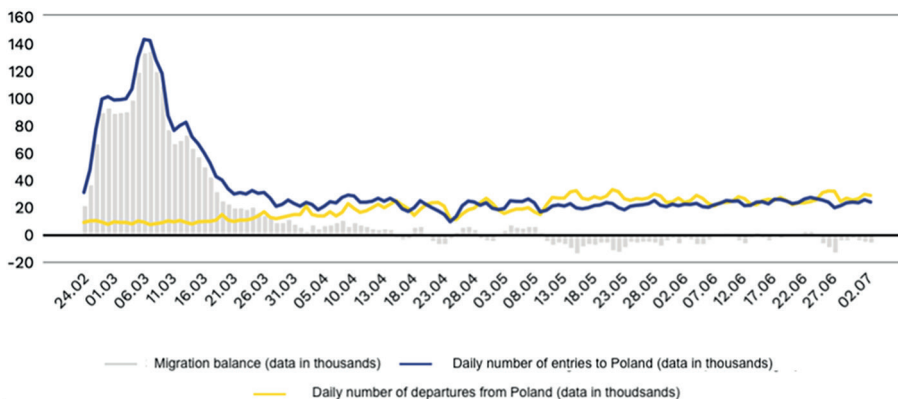
In the rankings devoted to the involvement of states in helping Ukraine, Poland is indicated as a leader in providing broadly understood support to both the authorities in Kiev and refugees. It is significant that this support is not limited only to the activities of the Polish state authorities, which focus primarily on supporting Ukraine on the international political arena and providing financial and military assistance. What is particularly emphasized

in all media messages and comments, statements of political leaders as well as analyses and reports, is the extraordinary and unprecedented involvement in helping refugees by Poles as a society. It is, therefore, important to determine what forms the help provided by the Polish society took, what aspects of the lives of refugees it covered, and how it influenced the mutual perception of Poles and Ukrainians. As the main hypothesis, the assumption was made that the direct involvement of the Polish society in helping refugees from Ukraine decreased over the course of a year of the full-blown war in Ukraine, with simultaneous high social support for the state's systemic solutions in this regard. In order to prove the hypothesis, descriptive, analysis of existing data, comparative and statistical research methods were employed.

The scale of the refugee crisis

As predicted before the full-scale attack on Ukraine, the largest number of refugees crossed the border with Poland (*Media*, 2022; Widzyk, 2022; Lewicka, 2022). In the period from February 24, 2022 to February 23, 2023 the Polish Border Guard checked 10.033 million people at the border crossings from Ukraine to Poland, with 2.2 million during the first month of the war (Mokrzycka, 2022; *Straż Graniczna*, 2022) (see Chart 1). During the

Chart 1. Migration flows on the Polish-Ukrainian border from February 24, 2022 to July 2, 2022



Source: Baszczak et al., 2022, p. 8.

year of the war, over 8.131 million people crossed the border from Poland to Ukraine. According to the UN data, over 8 million people fled Ukraine during this period. With the direct military engagement mainly occurring in eastern Ukraine, over a million refugees have gone back to their homes. Despite this, more than 5 million people still reside abroad, 1.5 million of whom are in Poland, making this the greatest resettlement crisis in the 21st century (*Wojna*, 2023). Europe has experienced the largest influx of migrants since World War II, with more people coming to Poland in a month than to the European Union in the whole of 2015 (1.83 million).

According to the Polish Ministry of the Interior and Administration (MSWiA), 75% of the Ukrainian citizens who have crossed the Ukrainian-Polish border since the beginning of the war are adults, 97% of the refugees are female and 3% male, and 21% are children under 14. About half of the Ukrainians who came to Poland because of the war were of working age. Out of the total, 96% are women between the ages of 30 and 50, 16% are younger than 30, and 10% are seniors. Among the respondents, almost 90% had children, usually one or two (*Aktualna*, 2023).

At the same time, it should be noted that even before the escalation of the war in 2022, there were 1.5 million Ukrainians over 15 years of age in Poland. As a result of the escalation of Russian aggression, this number has increased to nearly 3.2 million, including children under 14 years of age. There was also a significant change in the demographic structure of Ukrainian citizens residing in Poland. Up until February 24, 2022, the majority of those arriving to work were young men, but since that date, a significant number of them have gone back to Ukraine. According to data from April 1, 2022, 79% of Ukrainians residing in Poland were adults and youth over 15 years of age. As the result of the influx of refugees, the population of Poland reached, for the first time in its history, almost 41.5 million inhabitants (Wojdat, Cywiński, 2022, p. 12).

The specificity and scale of the influx of refugees is also reflected in their relocation, which was kind of bottom-up, as the main decision-makers regarding the place of stay were primarily the refugees themselves. It was somehow on two levels, because on the one hand, people from all over Europe came to the Ukrainian-Polish border crossings to transport refugees to their countries. On the other hand, Poles spontaneously and independently of the

actions of state and local authorities organized transport for people who crossed the border and declared where they wanted to stay in Poland.

In their decisions as to where to stay in Poland, refugees were most often guided by three main factors:

- knowledge of the place (even by hearsay) where they wanted to stay;
- having friends or relatives in a given town or city;
- spontaneous choice.

However, these were mainly large urban centres associated within the Union of Polish Metropolises (UMP). Data from March 2022 show that during that period, the cities of UMP and the surrounding communes were inhabited by “almost 70% of all Ukrainian citizens who came to Poland after February 24 and who lived here before – over 2 million 200 thousand people. This means a rapid increase in the population of the largest Polish cities” (Wojdat, Cywiński, 2022, p. 12). The percentage increase in the number of UMP residents as a result of the influx of the refugees on April 1, 2022 was as follows: Rzeszów 53%, Gdańsk 34%, Katowice 33%, Wrocław 29%, Kraków 23%, Lublin 20%, Poznań 16%, Szczecin 15%, Warszawa 15%, Łódź 13%, Bydgoszcz 13% and Białystok 12%. The result of the influx was the following percentage of city residents of Ukrainian nationality: Rzeszów 35%, Gdańsk 25%, Katowice 25%, Wrocław 23%, Kraków 19%, Lublin 17%, Rzeszów 35%, Gdańsk 25%, Katowice 25%, Wrocław 23%, Kraków 19% i Lublin 17%.

In the case of a spontaneous choice of the place of residence, the main determinant of the decision was most often an impulse or an offer of help from private persons whom the refugees met after crossing the border with Poland, and who spontaneously decided to directly engage in helping people fleeing the war. In such cases, “the choice of a given locality was influenced by the help network organized at the grassroots level on the Polish-Ukrainian border” (Wojdat, Cywiński, 2022, p. 12).

In the context of choosing the place to stay, proximity of the border with Ukraine and distance from the border with Russia were also important. It was, among other factors, proximity of the border with Ukraine that contributed to the increase in the number of residents in Rzeszów. At the same time, a proposal to settle in the Warmian-Mazurian Voivodship, which is directly adjacent to the Królewiec Region of the Russian Federation, raised concerns.

Social acceptance of supporting refugees

Both the scale and extremely fast pace of the influx of refugees, especially at the turn of February and March 2022, made relocation and provision of basic living needs of the refugees a pressing issue. Regardless of whether for people crossing the border, Poland was a destination or a transit country being only a stop on their journey, it was also often the first safe haven.

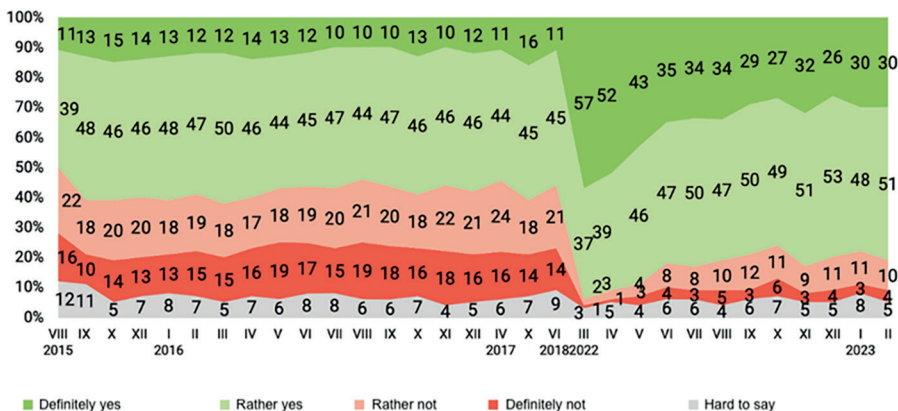
In official announcements, the Polish authorities informed that all persons fleeing Ukraine from the armed conflict were to be admitted to Poland, and at reception points (where registration was not obligatory), they would receive, among other things, more information on the rules of stay in Poland, they would be provided temporary accommodation in Poland, they would receive a hot meal, drink, basic medical care and a place to rest.

At the same time, regardless of the declarations and actions of the state authorities, under the influence of incoming media information about the situation in Ukraine and at the Polish-Ukrainian border crossings, a bottom-up social movement took place, which manifested itself in the first days of the crisis in, among other things:

- organizing transport for refugees and transporting them to selected locations;
- transport of material assistance and free car rental;
- delivery and distribution in border areas of basic food products, personal hygiene products, warm clothes, medical supplies, products for children, etc.
- preparing and serving hot meals and drinks as well as ready meals for onward travel;
- broadly understood volunteering in the field of providing information, first aid or support for people in need of special care;
- assistance in the vicinity of border crossings, at reception points, at accommodation facilities, at help centres or at collection points for in-kind donations;
- organizing fundraisers;
- hosting refugees in private houses or flats and providing access to private housing resources.

The indicated forms of direct assistance were consistent with the social attitude towards providing shelter to refugees from Ukraine. Surveys conducted since August 2015 by the Center for Public Opinion Research (CBOS) show that the majority of Poles were in favour of accepting Ukrainians from war-torn areas in 2014 (see Chart 2). The position was represented from mid-2015 to January 2022 by 50% to 62% of respondents. As the result of the war escalation in 2022, the trend was not only consolidated, but deepened and reached its peak point of 94% at the turn of February and March 2022.

Chart 2. The attitude of Poles to accepting Ukrainian refugees from areas affected by armed conflict



Source: *Komunikat z badań 69/2023*, p. 2.

People fleeing Ukraine because of the war were, therefore, not perceived as a potential threat to state security, neither externally or internally. Refugees in this case were perceived as victims of the aggression of the state which may also threaten Poland. It is remarkable that the proportion of people sustaining their endorsement of the acceptance of refugees since June 2022 has been sustained at around 80%, with 81% in March 2023 (*Komunikat z badań 69/2023*, p. 2). Moreover, at the turn of March and April 2022, 82% of respondents expressed a favourable outlook towards refugees, and 81% were of the opinion that people living close to them had a positive attitude towards refugees (*Komunikat z badań 62/2022*, p. 5). It should also be noted

that three-fifths of Poles aged 16-65 (i.e. 60%) believed that the adoption of the Act of March 12, 2022 on assistance to Ukrainian citizens in connection with the armed conflict on the territory of this state was justified (Staniszewski, 2022, p. 54)

Scale and forms of social assistance to refugees

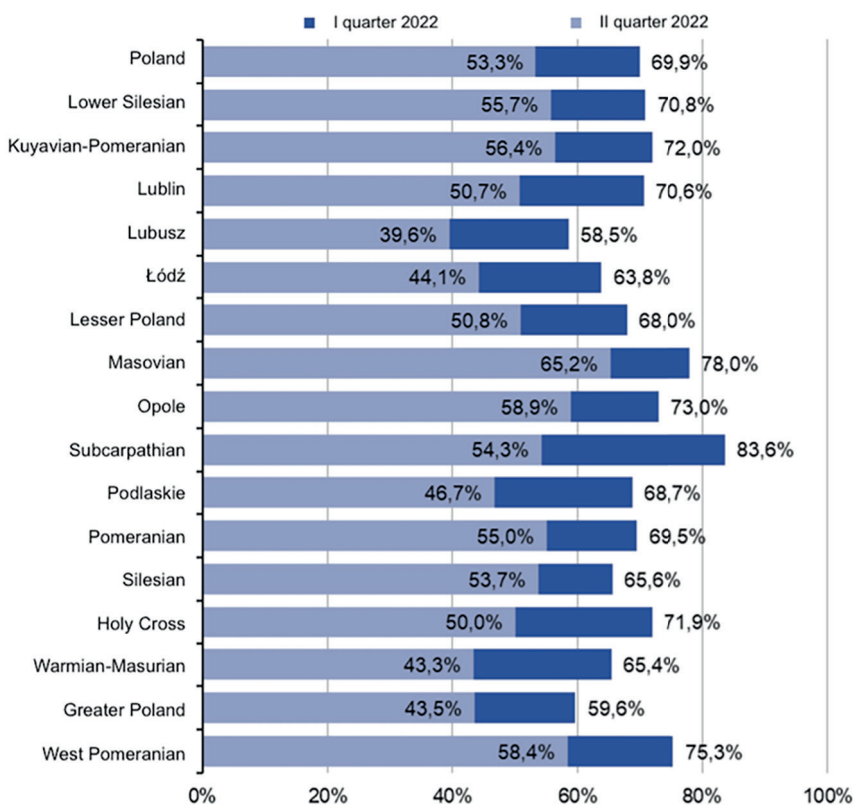
Systemic and extensive aid, and the application of assistance, are regarded as a complicated process that necessitates particular steps. In the situation of the refugee crisis and its scale, the actions of public institutions in the initial phase were insufficient in this respect. In these circumstances, the immediate, spontaneous, but also multi-faceted grassroots help of Polish society turned out to be all the more important and invaluable. 68% of Poles declared various forms of support and assistance to refugees in the first two weeks of the war (*Komunikat z badań 38/2022*, p. 1). They are consistent with the data presented by the Central Statistical Office (GUS), according to which in the period from February 24, 2022 to June 30, 2022, 70.2% of households in Poland provided various forms of assistance to Ukrainian citizens (GUS, 2022, p. 1). This assistance included both support provided to refugees in Poland and people who remained in Ukraine.

On the scale of certain voivodships, the percentage of households involved in these activities in the first quarter of 2022 ranged from 58.5% to 83.6% (see Chart 3). The leaders in this regard were the Subcarpathian (83.6%) and Masovian (78.0%) voivodships. When the refugee crisis reached its highest point in the first quarter of the year, requiring a response on a scale never before seen in Poland, every province recorded a rate no less than 58.5% (GUS, 2022, p. 4).

In April 2022, Poles most often indicated in-kind donations, e.g. food, clothes, hygiene products (46%) and financial support (36%) as main forms of assistance (see Chart 4). These two forms of aid dominated throughout the first and second quarters of 2022 (GUS, 2022, p. 2).

Special forms of assistance declared by Poles include donating blood for those in need in Ukraine – 1.4% (GUS, 2022, p. 2) and spontaneous hosting refugees in private homes or providing them with private housing resources (see Map 1). According to the data provided by the Polish Economic Institute

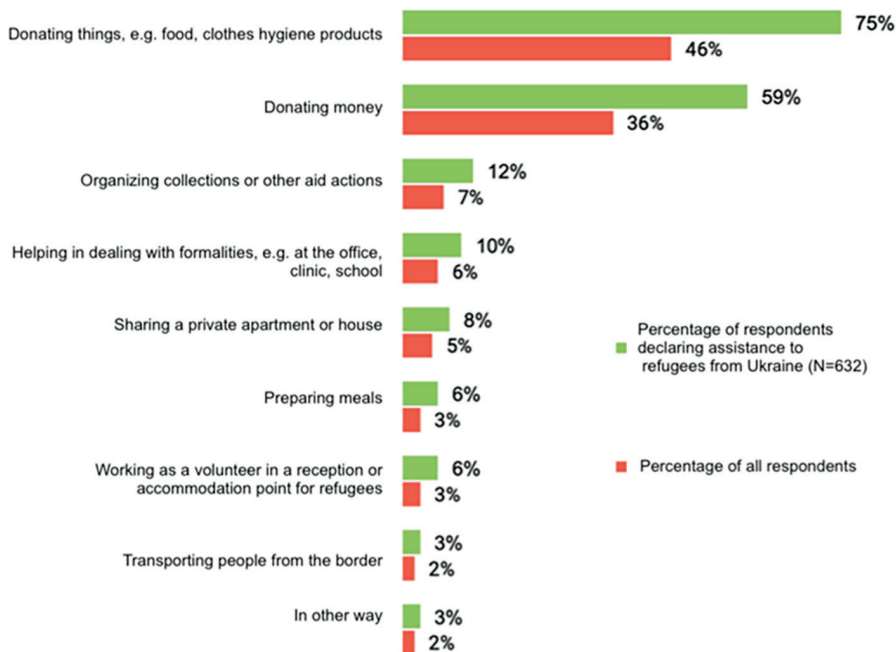
Chart 3. Percentage of households that provided assistance to residents of Ukraine in the first and second quarters of 2022 in individual voivodships



Source: GUS, 2022, p. 4.

(PIE), 7% of respondents declared (in the period April 25 – May 19, 2022) this form of support. In addition,

this form of assistance deserves special attention, primarily due to the fact that the accommodation provided to refugees by private individuals significantly influenced the possibility of accepting such a large number of people to Poland. Administrative data indicate that by July 2, when 1 million 207 thousand people were already registered in the PESEL system, 357 thousand of them took advantage of organized accommodation (...).

Chart 4. Forms of assistance provided to refugees from Ukraine

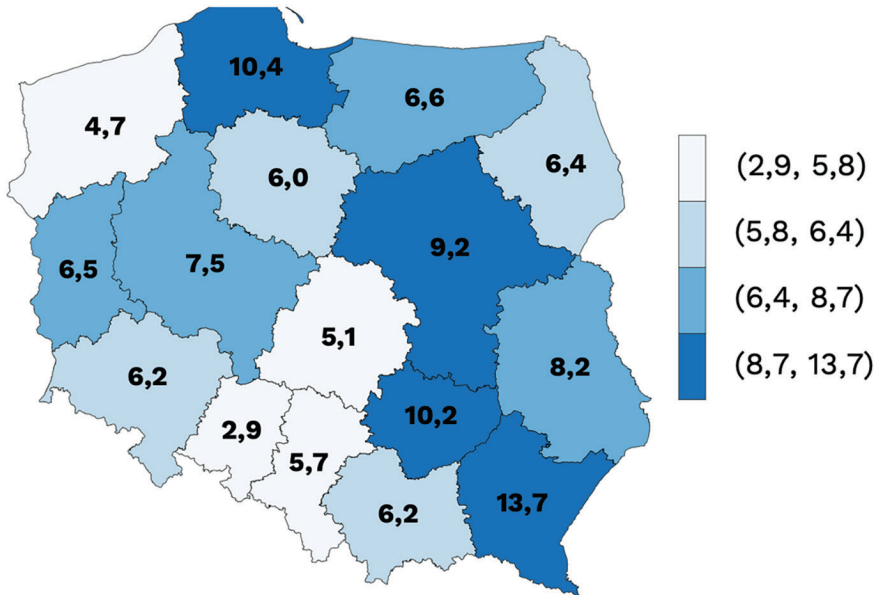
Source: *Komunikat z badań 62/2022*, p. 8.

This means that most of the refugees staying in Poland at that time used private accommodation – in the market form (mainly rent) or by temporarily or permanently residing in someone’s house or apartment (Baszczak et al., 2022, p. 23).

This form of support has become a symbol of unprecedented mobilization in terms of providing aid by the Polish society.

Particularly important thing from the organizational, formal and legal point of view for people deciding to stay in Poland was support in completing formalities, e.g. at the office, health clinic or school. On the one hand, refugees had to obtain information about their rights and possibilities of receiving certain benefits, on the other hand, they had to fill in specified documents and familiarize themselves with applicable procedures. Despite simplification of many of them and creating special administrative service points aimed at facilitating and streamlining the application process for

Map 1. Percentage of people who declared that they had accepted a refugee(s) into their home (by voivodships)



Source: Baszczak et al., 2022, p. 24.

specific benefits, help of volunteers in the implementation of these activities turned out to be invaluable. Especially for people who communicated only in Ukrainian (NBP, 2023, p. 11). This support was of particular importance in such formal matters as: the possibility of obtaining a PESEL number, setting up a trusted profile allowing for dealing with official matters electronically, submitting an application for legal stay in Poland or applying for funds for refugees from Ukraine. 35% of respondents were involved in formal or organizational assistance and various forms of volunteering (Baszczak et al., 2022, p. 4).

An example of a causative potential of the involvement of ordinary Poles was an action initiated by Maria Lisowska, who, under the influence of morning media reports on February 24, 2022, decides to provide refugees with the apartment of her mother who died two weeks earlier. To this end, as she recalls:

I started looking for a possibility of offering accommodation to refugees, but it turned out that there was no such organization or place that could help with it. So I started a Facebook group. Initially, it was supposed to be used only to provide housing to refugees in Poland, but people also began to write their requests for help in transport, crossing the border, etc. (...) when I saw how the group was growing, I felt both moved and terrified, but above all, I felt great responsibility. Fortunately, I managed to gather 40 moderators who, although they come from different places, sectors or cities, have committed themselves to help and volunteer, almost around the clock, helping to keep order in the group (Panek-Owsiańska, 2022).

Five days after its initiation, the group “Help for Ukraine” founded by M. Lisowska had 200,000 members, and in mid-May 2022 nearly 600,000. In the first two months of operation, the group was visited by 20 million people, and the number of incoming posts per minute (in the first days of operation) was 100. These data indicate how many people wanted to provide support and how huge the demand for it was. The deficit of systemic solutions in that period and the scale of problems faced by those in need, determined the actions of individuals, which often turned into organized activities that were not originally planned. A kind of spontaneously growing social networks were created, often based on impulse, empathy, but also on opposition to the harm that was happening. This is what happened in the case of the “Help for Ukraine” group. According to the declarations of the moderators responsible for its operation, they did not think about the scale of their work until Facebook representatives informed them that they were the largest humanitarian aid group in the world and offered systemic support in forms of the security of further operations. One of the administrators of the group, Urszula Chwedziak, said that it was only Facebook’s reaction that made them realize that they might become the target of troll attacks: “We realized that it is also a war in cyberspace. We didn’t think about it at first because we focused on helping. Only then did we feel that we had created something really big and serious” (Wcisło, 2022). In order to secure the group, Facebook not only provided them with technical support necessary to manage such a large group, but also provided tools to fight trolls, secured the group’s accounts and set up a hotline. In order to improve the operation of the group, a fanpage was also started, when one can report any problems

regarding the group's activities and ask questions. In June 2023, the group had 561,000 members and still continues its activities, which are adapted to current needs of Ukrainians, but its "aid activities reach far beyond the structures of the group. In addition to coordinating aid actions in the 'real world', it is on the agenda to support smaller groups from different countries of the world with its reach" (Wcisło, 2022). When they started their activity, they focused mainly on helping with transport to Poland and housing, the next stage was support in finding a job and providing information on rules of using government aid. Currently, more and more questions concern the procedures and possibilities of returning to Ukraine, or further migration of those who decide to take such a step.

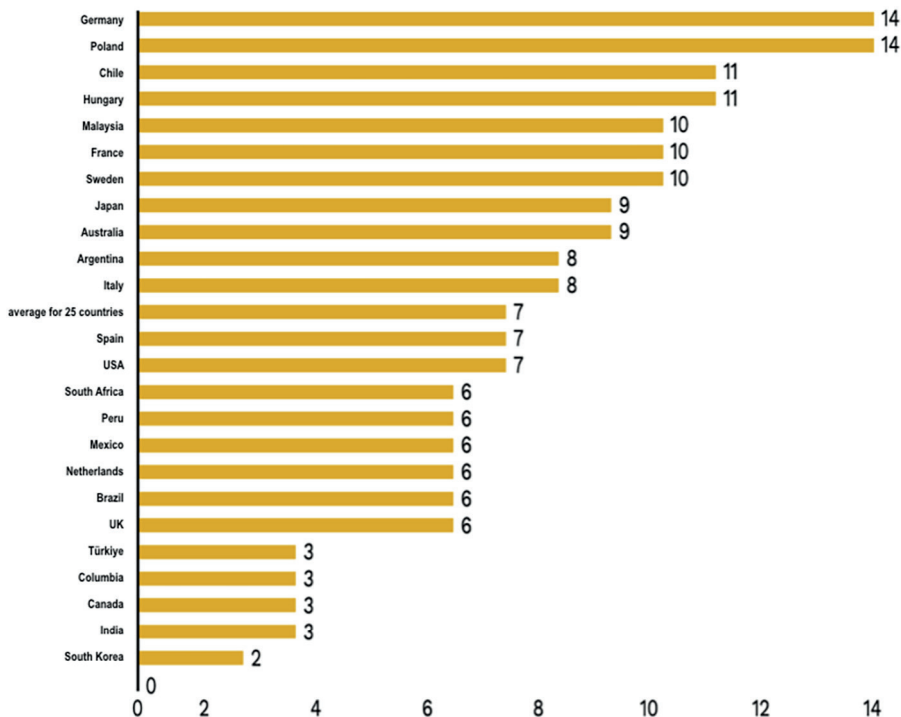
It should be highlighted that social media was used as a platform to launch numerous initiatives and collections for both refugees and Ukrainians staying in Ukraine. Some of them have already completed their activities, while others continue their work, adapting it to new challenges and needs.

After a year

At the beginning of the refugee crisis, in media coverage of the involvement of the Polish society, commentators and journalists often wondered how long this attitude of Poles would last and when the effect of the so-called compassion fatigue might come (Sorenson et al., 2016; Aldamen, 2023). Representatives of humanitarian organizations also emphasized that in the case of aiding war refugees, the assistance should not be brief but rather sustained, likened to running a marathon. They also pointed out the potential external circumstances hindering everyday co-existence (e.g. economic downturn, inflation) as well as potential issues with accepting such a large number of refugees, which might then influence the relations between Poles and Ukrainians (e.g. restricted access to medical services).

Considering the above, it should be noted that a year after the escalation of the war in Ukraine, the vast majority of Poles were still convinced of the need to provide them with shelter in Poland (i.e. 81% in March 2023). A noticeable drop in support in this field (compared to the data from March 2022 – 94%) is characteristic of all countries hosting refugees from Ukraine (see Chart 5) and is a manifestation of the previously predicted effect of compassion fatigue.

Chart 5. Decrease in support for accepting war refugees in the period 03.04.2022–11.12.2022 (in percentage points)



Source: Baszczak, Ł., Wincewicz, A., Zyzik, R., 2023, p. 16.

The number of people declaring their involvement in helping refugees also decreased, from 63% to 39% within the year (*see Chart 6*). In December 2022, 56% of those who provided assistance in the initial phase of the crisis still have continued their activities (Baszczak, Wincewicz, Zyzik, 2023, p. 16). In addition, the vast majority (i.e. nearly 97%) of those surveyed in November 2022 supported free state aid, but in their opinion it should be limited in time:

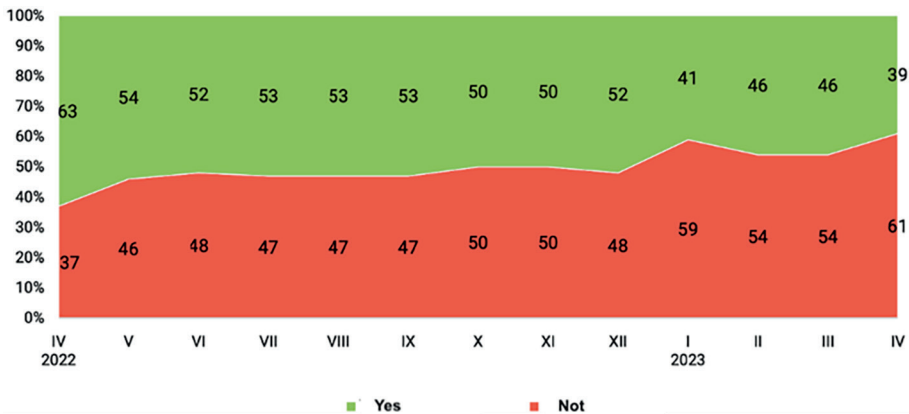
- 38% – believed that it should be granted for at most half a year from arrival in Poland;
- 23% – accepted granting it for a maximum of one year from arrival;
- 10% – would provide such support for a month at most.

Only 3% of respondents would not give it at all, and 18% believed that it should be provided until the end of the year (*Komunikat z badań 152/2022*,

p. 8). At the same time, in February 2023, 67% (the same as in April 2022) believed that the aid provided in Poland is sufficient (*Komunikat z badań 28/2023*, p. 7).

The following were indicated as the preferred forms of assistance: admitting refugee children to Polish schools (86%), access to free health care (54%) and additional, one-time benefit in the amount of PLN 300 (40%) (Staniszewski, 2022, p. 13). Most Poles (85%) also believed that the Polish state should help refugees to find work (*Komunikat z badań 101/2022*, p. 9). Among the aid solutions “that did not gain social acceptance were: family and child benefits, e.g. 500 plus (IV–V 2022: 42% no, I 2023: 47% no, VI 2023: 60% no) and social assistance, e.g. in the form of money benefits (IV–V 2022: 37% no, I 2023: 42% no, VI 2023: 52% no)” (Staniszewski, 2022, p. 13).

Chart 6. Percentage of people who voluntarily and free of charge help refugees from Ukraine



Source: *Komunikat z badań 54/2023*, p. 4.

From the point of view of refugees (November 2022), the most important forms of assistance that would facilitate their stay in Poland would be Polish language courses (43%), and assistance in finding a job (35%). Further listed were:

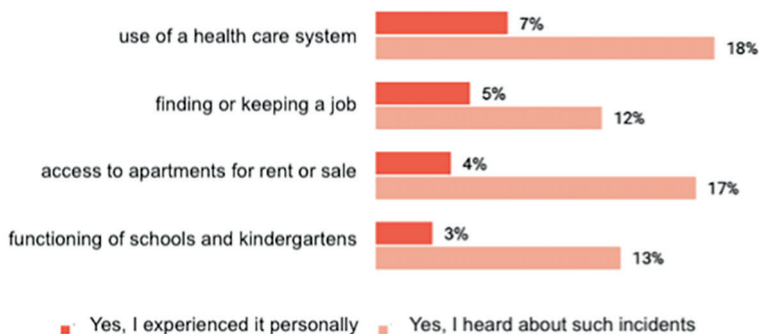
- access to health care (28%);
- easier legalization of stay (26%);

- assistance with accommodation (25%);
- assistance in the recognition of diplomas and certificates (20%);
- financial support for the unemployed (17%);
- free training (16%);
- better customer service in offices (8%) (NBP, 2022, p. 25).

In the context of relations between Poles and Ukrainians, attention should be paid to the opinions of Poles regarding projected problems related to the influx of refugees. The research conducted in June 2023 shows that 61% of respondents did not see a threat to Poland from people who came from Ukraine, while 29% expressed such concern. 10% of respondents had no opinion on this issue. The persons who were afraid of possible threats most often associated them with the following aspects: negative impact on the labour market, braking the law and increasing crime, negative impact on the Polish economy and the state budget, and increase in inflation. The vast majority of respondents (80%) did not see any threat to their families, while 10% were of the opposite opinion (Staniszewski, 2022, p. 13).

In July 2022, respondents indicated what difficulties they encountered or heard about in connection with accepting refugees. Significantly, the results of the research show that more people had heard about the problem than had experienced it personally (see Chart 7). The main reason (41%) for Poles causing a negative attitude towards helping those from Ukraine was their

Chart 7. Have you experienced personally or heard about difficulties related to accepting refugees in the following areas?



Source: *Komunikat z badań 101/2022*, p. 10.

“demanding nature and expectations of too much” (Baszczak, Wincewicz, Zyzik, 2023, p. 4).

At the same time, after a year of common life, which was becoming more and more normalized, the majority of Poles (62%) believed that Ukrainians appreciated the help they received in Poland. 24% of respondents were of the opposite opinion (*Komunikat z badań 54/2023*, p. 5). These data should be related to the opinions of refugees, because according to a report published in February 2023 by the Ukrainian Centre for Economic Strategy, the vast majority of people who came from Ukraine (79,8%) stated that Polish society had a good attitude towards them. They also declared that they generally felt welcome and many of them received various forms of humanitarian aid and financial support. However, some refugees (24.3%) believed that the attitude of Poles towards them had deteriorated since their arrival in Poland (Baszczak, Wincewicz, Zyzik, 2023, p. 19). Slightly more than half of Poles (51%) described their relations with refugees as positive, and 7% as negative ones. It should be noted that 41% “stated that they had no such contacts at all. If we omit the latter group, it turns out that among Poles who have had contact with Ukrainians recently, as many as 86% described these experiences as positive, and 12% as negative” (*Komunikat z badań 54/2023*, p. 6). The quoted data indicate that, in general terms, relations between Poles and refugees decreased in intensity during the year, but their positive connotations were maintained, which is a significant potential for shaping further relations.

Conclusions

The response of the vast majority of Polish society to the influx of Ukrainian refugees was instinctive, emotional, and compassionate. An extraordinary level of action was taken in order to aid people who came to Poland and those who were merely passing through. As a preferred destination for those fleeing the war, it became the world's second most populous country for accepting refugees on a global scale. Considering both the scale of the phenomenon and its pace, meeting this challenge without a massive involvement of Poles would be impossible.

A year after the arrival of the first refugees from Ukraine, one can notice a clear decrease in the involvement of Polish society in helping them.

Nonetheless, this is associated with advancing to the subsequent stage in the functioning of people from Ukraine residing in Poland. While, at the beginning it was essential to meet their basic needs, which required an immediate reaction and a huge social effort, in the next stage it is important to take systemic, formal and legal action on the part of the state authorities. In this aspect, some Poles handed over responsibility for aid activities to political decision-makers.

Normalization and progressing stabilization in connection with adaptation of Ukrainians to the Polish social, financial and labour market realities also require actions supporting the integration of both nations, while respecting their values and culture. In this regard, the considerable assistance provided by Poles in the initial phase is a strong basis for fostering positive mutual relations. However, in order to preserve the favourable environment, it is essential to take actions to eliminate the emerging tensions and to introduce regulations that are beneficial to fostering solidarity between Poles and refugees from Ukraine.

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