



“Levy in mass of support”: the role of NGOs in providing assistance to war refugees from Ukraine (research report)

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Abstract. This paper aims to present selected findings from qualitative research carried out in 2023, which consisted of five individual interviews and one focus group interview conducted with staff of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and institutions working with refugees from Ukraine in the Warmińsko-Mazurskie Voivodeship. These investigations were primarily concerned with the assessment of the support provided by non-governmental organizations, their strengths, as well as difficulties and limitations of the activities undertaken by NGOs to help war refugees. The results have shown that the role played by NGOs in providing assistance to refugees from Ukraine was impressive, especially considering the scale and the forms of their activities. The staff of NGOs demonstrated efficiency, flexibility and great commitment. The difficulties and limitations affecting their efforts for war refugees stemmed primarily from the absence of relevant regulations based on which they could operate; further obstacles included problematic cooperation with public administration, financial difficulties and other deficits.

Keywords: war refugees, NGOs, assistance to refugees, qualitative research, Warmińsko-Mazurskie Voivodeship.

JEL Classification: L31, H53, F22.

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*People - the way they are –
are simply unprepared for such traumas
that have just come to us from Ukraine.
This is a complete novelty¹*

1. INTRODUCTION

The outbreak of the war in Ukraine resulted in a tremendous migration crisis that is unique both in terms of scale and the massive public response which accompanied it. Data from the Polish Border Guard Headquarters shows that over 3.3 million foreign nationals entered Poland between February 24 and April 30, 2022 (SIP, 2023). Thus, Poland became “one of the leading refugee-receiving countries in the world” within just a few weeks from the start of the war (Dobiás & Homem, 2022, p. 29). Taking into account returns to Ukraine and multiple border crossings by the same persons, approximately 2.2 million people stayed in Poland at least temporarily (Urząd Statystyczny – Statistical Office, 2022, p. 2). An estimated 48% of war refugees² expressed their intention to remain in Poland for the duration of the armed conflict (Bird & Amaglobeli, 2022, p. 2). The population arriving in Poland consisted mainly of representatives of the Ukrainian middle class - women with children with higher education, urban residents - whose assessment of personal financial standing prior to the war was good or very good (Długosz et al., 2022, pp. 6-7). As for the aid measures that would facilitate their further stay in Poland, Ukrainian migrants cited the availability of Polish language courses, assistance in finding employment and help with access to health care (Chmielewska-Kalinska et al., 2022, pp. 4-5).

In fact, as soon as the Ukrainian refugees started arriving, one could observe widespread and spontaneous grassroots mobilization among Poles. The early days of the war witnessed a social reach-out movement involving millions of Poles, who assumed the role of “helpers”, i.e. spontaneous, tireless volunteers (Kuczynski et al., 2023, pp. 66-67). The volunteers ran meal centers, cared for refugee children and provided them with education, offered accommodation and transport, donated large quantities of clothing and non-food items, etc. (Lee et al., 2023, p. 42). In addition to ordinary citizens, humanitarian agencies, local governments and private companies were also involved in various types of assistance to war refugees at the Polish-Ukrainian border crossings. Subsequently, numerous central reception facilities were established (Rakusa-Suszczewski, 2023, p. 160)³, where war refugees could receive a warm meal, clothing, hygiene products, temporary accommodation, medical assistance, psychological support and various types of information. The scale of support and its financial value were impressive. According to the estimates by the Polish Economic Institute, 77% of Poles were engaged in helping refugees during the first three months of the war. The estimated value of private outlays for this purpose in the period concerned could have amounted to PLN 9-10 billion (i.e. 0.34 - 0.38% of the national GDP), including direct transfers of money, public collections and the value of items and various types of goods, the value of accommodation, food and other forms of support. The total value of assistance provided to refugees by the authorities and Polish citizens reached nearly 1% of Polish GDP (Baszczak et al., 2022, pp. 4-5). It may also be noted that from the outset, the Polish model of accepting refugees differed substantially from its counterparts in Western countries. It has been described in the literature as inclusive (Firlit-Fesnak, 2022, p. 12; 2023, p. 123). No refugee camps have been established in Poland, while some 149,000

¹ Observation made by an NGO worker during the focus interview (own research).

² The term “war refugees” is used throughout this paper to characterize this group of persons, in view of the fact that they are not granted refugee status under the 1951 Geneva Convention (Duszczyk & Kaczmarczyk, 2022, p. 16). At present, the word “refugee” goes well beyond the narrow definition contained in the aforementioned Convention, where the term is confined to a flight due to political persecution and does not refer to migration compelled by war (Łukasiewicz & Klaus, 2018, p. 358), whereas colloquially it means “any person who has been forced to leave their place of residence, regardless of the cause.” (Czapka, 2006, p. 47).

³ Initially, reception points were set up in the Lubelskie and Podkarpackie Voivodeships, but later on they functioned all over the country (28 in total).

Poles have provided shelter in their homes for 525,000 Ukrainian migrants (Sobierajski et al., 2022, p. 7). Such a response from the Polish citizens has met with great admiration and respect not only in Europe but also worldwide.

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) were among the first entities to provide assistance to war refugees arriving at the Polish-Ukrainian border. According to data from Statistics Poland (2023, p. 5), in 2022, 30,300 NGOs (29.3%) engaged in additional outreach to support persons in need due to the war taking place on Ukrainian territory. At this point, one should mention that NGOs perform a normalizing function, filling gaps in the networks of public institutions, complementing their activities, and solving problems which have been overlooked or underestimated by the state. Consequently, social organizations address the genuine needs of their recipients, as well as create competition that drives better quality of services (Zaluska, 1998, p. 41). NGOs complement the work of institutions such as centers for foreigners who seek refugee status, schools, district family assistance centers (Pawlak et al., 2015, p. 20) or social welfare centers. By providing services to foreigners, they simultaneously contribute to increasing the standards of operation of public institutions. The position of many migrant groups would certainly be much worse without the efforts of social organizations (Pawlak & Matusz-Protasiewicz, 2015, p. 1). Social organizations are able to respond promptly to the needs of refugees while their activities demonstrate considerable flexibility. However, their functioning should be supported by the state administration, whose duty it is to formulate migration policies. Meanwhile, due to limited financial and human resources, NGOs can only be an ancillary component in the undertakings of the state administration (Florczak, 2003, p. 248).

The influx of the refugee population has also resulted in new legislation, which nonetheless did not regulate the rights of refugees in general, being dedicated exclusively to the migrants from Ukraine (Andrejuk, 2023, p. 1). Institutional assistance is now provided primarily under the Ustawa z dnia 12 marca 2022 r. o pomocy obywatelom Ukrainy w związku z konfliktem zbrojnym na terytorium tego państwa [*Act of 12 March 2022 on Assistance to Ukrainian Citizens in Connection with the Armed Conflict on the Territory of Ukraine*]. The Act grants war refugees numerous rights, including legal residence on the territory of Poland, legal employment and business activity, health care, education, free psychological assistance, free Polish language courses, as well as numerous benefits (family benefits, one-off cash benefit of PLN 300 per person⁴, 500+ scheme⁵, social welfare benefits, "Good Start", family care capital, subsidized crèche fees); assistance with e.g. accommodation and alimentation. The law also provides for simplified procedures when employing Ukrainian doctors and dentists, university teachers, researchers, and psychologists. The most recent amendment to the special-purpose act (*Act of 15 May 2024 on the Amendment of the Act on Assistance to Ukrainian Citizens in Connection with the Armed Conflict on the Territory of Ukraine and Certain Other Acts*) changed the legal framework which determined the situation of war refugees. Among other things, the act tightens the system of providing assistance and access to the labor market, as well as rescinds some of the aid measures (i.e. benefits for those providing accommodation and board to citizens of Ukraine in collective accommodation facilities and the one-time benefit of PLN 300 per person). Furthermore, new mechanisms were introduced for the refugees to contribute to their stay in collective accommodation facilities. Moreover, as of September 2024, the payment of the 800+ and "Good Start" benefits was combined with the obligation for Ukrainian children to attend education in Polish nurseries and schools. While the living situation of war refugees residing in Poland is fairly often studied by scholars (see e.g. Chmielewska-Kalinska et al., 2022; Dlugosz et al., 2022; Chmielewska-Kalinska et al., 2023; Duszczuk et al., 2023; Subocz et al., 2024), relatively little is known about the role of NGOs and the third sector workers who assisted refugees in their social adaptation in Poland. Therefore, this study addresses this particular gap in current research.

⁴ The benefit was available until 30 June 2024.

⁵ As of January 1 January 2024, the amount of the benefit is PLN 800 monthly per child.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This paper aims to present selected findings from qualitative research carried out in May – July 2023, which consisted of five individual interviews and one focus group interview conducted with staff of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and institutions working with refugees from Ukraine in the Warmińsko-Mazurskie Voivodeship. Interviews were conducted with representatives of: “Caritas” Refugee and Migrant Assistance Point in Olsztyn, “Sala Parafialna” Association at the Greek Catholic Church in Olsztyn, “Dwa Skrzydła UA” Foundation in Olsztyn, the Association of Possible Initiatives Rzeczą Jasna from Ostróda, and the guesthouse in Ilawa, where refugees are accommodated. The nine persons who participated in the focus interview were employees of NGOs (chiefly from the Federation of Social Organizations of the Warmińsko-Mazurskie Voivodeship) and the Warmińsko-Mazurskie Voivodeship Office in Olsztyn.⁶

A qualitative procedure was selected for empirical research in view of the fact that interviews (both with individuals and groups) offer the opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of the social issues and phenomena one seeks to examine. The attitudes and behaviors of interviewees can also be better observed in their natural surroundings, as opposed to the somewhat artificial conditions of survey research. However, interview participants are not chosen randomly, which is why they are not a statistical representation of any population (Babbie, 2003, pp. 310, 330). In the case of a focus interview, the presence of other participants may have a “cathartic” effect, encouraging the interviewees to share about the various dilemmas they are experiencing. Such circumstances facilitate a frank exchange of views (Orzechowski, 2021, p. 24).

As part of these descriptive and exploratory investigations, the principal research problems - analyzed in this paper - centered around the following questions:

- How do the respondents assess the NGO support provided to war refugees?
- In the opinion of the respondents, what would constitute the strengths of NGO activities for war refugees?
- In the opinion of the respondents, what are the difficulties and limitations of NGO activities for war refugees?

3. SURVEY RESULTS

3.1. Overall assessment of the NGO support for war refugees

According to the interviewees, the activities of humanitarian agencies aimed at supporting war refugees can be divided into two distinct stages, which generally correspond to the broader situation that the war in Ukraine brought about. These phases are typified by the different needs and problems of the war refugees themselves, which, in effect, require different kinds of support. In the first stage, which lasted for several months after the outbreak of hostilities, the most urgent needs involved providing food and shelter for the Ukrainian population. Standard humanitarian aid was therefore mobilized to meet those needs. On the other hand, the second stage saw the emergence of other issues and needs among the refugees. Besides the unquestionable trauma of war, they would resemble the difficulties usually faced by migrants in a foreign country, and, in many cases, they were not unlike everyday problems experienced by the citizens of Poland. The assistance provided during that period shifted towards personal development in order to promote self-empowerment and integration into the host community. Given the above, the assessment of reach-out efforts in the different stages cannot be identical. The investigations were conducted at a point when stage one had already ended while stage two was in progress, and it may be noted that it

⁶ Interviews were coded according to the gender of the interviewees and the order in which they were conducted (woman/man W1 and so on). Focus interviews were coded with the letter “F”. Individual interviews took from 26 minutes (the shortest) to two hours and five minutes (the longest). The duration of the focus interview was two hours.

is still ongoing. Therefore, the results presented here prioritize the overall assessment of NGO activities in the first stage - as this is easier to make *ex post facto* - as well as highlight certain challenges which NGOs confront in the dynamically changing next stage, where much is still unknown.

The broad assessment of the NGO support provided to war refugees from Ukraine is very positive. It was expressed by the representatives of the organizations themselves, who emphasized the tremendous role played by the grassroots initiatives of the Polish public. Their opinions are a direct reference to the eponymous "levy in mass"⁷.

People and NGOs, I believe, have risen to the challenge. Because no one had it written into their lives that they'd do such things, not on that level and not on that scale. And organizations that had never dealt with any refugees, and not just one organization, but there really were a lot of them, which, quite simply, did what they could, and most often more than they could, right? (...) So here, that kind of help was not systemic but more of a levy in mass. And it turned out that we can deliver many things the grassroots way (man, W5).

Still, should such self-appraisal be considered a somewhat ungrounded or unconvincing eulogy of one's own activity, it should be noted that a similar opinion concerning the support launched by NGOs is shared by the surveyed representatives of provincial authorities, as in the following statement:

As far as NGOs are concerned, I think it really worked great in our province, didn't it? Starting from that commitment. Well, everyone got involved, but (...) even at the next stage, where (...) our organizations got into projects, drafted projects, and applied for funding, isn't it? All that was very good here (woman, F).

Among the respondents, Polish language courses were the most popular form of available assistance, which, as they claim, are still much sought after:

They still want to learn Polish, as they find A1 or A2 level is not enough, (...) no educational activities enjoyed such interest as the Polish language classes, and vocational courses, too (woman, F).

Also, translation assistance was readily and widely taken advantage of:

A lot of people came to us asking to have documents translated, whether it was the recognition of diplomas, birth certificates, or death certificates, so the translator we provided was also in great demand (woman, F).

Moreover, the less widely used psychological and legal support, as well as all kinds of assistance related to care for Ukrainian refugee children, were still highly appreciated.

3.2. Strengths of NGO activities for war refugees

The research problems selected for analysis may be presented as strengths on the one hand as well as difficulties and limitations affecting NGO activities for war refugees. Based on the conducted interviews, the strengths of NGOs include:

- **Efficiency**, understood both as the speed of the response to a situation (humanitarian support was launched immediately) and the scale of actual efforts, evinced by the considerable number of organizations involved in providing assistance, as well as the multitude of its recipients:

(...) several million people who came here all at once, because it was a very short time after all, they were taken care of in a sense, right? All of them (man, W5).

(...) at first, as I said, we had 200 people coming to us daily! (...) so it was a real shock at the first meeting (...), it's a thermal shock that we've got a crowd of people here to handle, with a tape barrier pulled over here; people - we used to ask them to back up a little - were literally hanging over the desks. It was really, really a lot (woman, W4).

⁷ 'Levy mass support' - phrase coined by an NGO worker during an individual interview (own research).

Furthermore, efficiency should also be understood as satisfactory results of undertaking actions, reflected in the previously cited positive opinions, for instance. They certainly should be attributed to the professionalism of NGO staff, including their skills in writing project applications and raising funds for specific goals:

(...) I think a lot really managed to get done, these projects were very professional (...). This also shows a professional approach, because those are really interesting things, innovative solutions (woman, F).

- **Multiplicity of support forms:** as already noted, NGOs offered greatly diverse assistance, spanning financial aid, everyday items, food, accommodation, finding employment and access to medical care, psychological and legal support, training and education (including language courses), advice on the necessary formal procedures.

I think that what we did, this multifaceted, multidimensional integration, all the projects which we provided to refugees, from helping in cultural integration to technical assistance, related to, for example, translations, assistance in obtaining certificates or registering with various institutions, so I think that all those efforts were, well targeted and we acted as far as our scope and funds allowed (man, F).

In light of the collected data, it was precisely such comprehensive assistance to Ukrainians fleeing the war which most likely obviated the need for refugee camps in Poland. In the course of the interviews, a respondent stated, for instance:

As far as I know, there's Americans coming already and starting to make syllabuses in Poland for their universities, like how do you look after refugees in the country, right? Directly adjacent to the frontline. After all, there have been camps everywhere, haven't there? In Syria, in Turkey, all over the world, nothing but camps, right? (man, W5).

According to the interviewees, such a state of affairs does not necessarily imply an exclusive success of the Polish state.

Only it wasn't, thanks to the state, that the camps weren't there, right? Refugee camps. I mean the state didn't set them up them. (...) Good, because if they had, they'd be here. And as they didn't set them up, you have to thank the Polish state for being so disorganized, right? (man, W5). In their opinion, it turned out that big organizations failed to deliver in this crisis. With the result that (...) Poland is a model in which the country managed to cope with the refugee crisis, even though there were no tools that are globally (...) used in such crises (...), such as UNHCR, the UNESCO there and the large, international, corporate NGOs, right? When they did come here, it was already over and done with. There was no problem anymore (man, W5). Certainly, all entities providing assistance contributed to the success, but according to the interviewees, Polish citizens and NGOs were the most significant among them.

- **Flexibility:** NGOs showed flexibility in the sense that assistance to refugees was provided by a diverse range of organizations that, for the large part, had no experience working with migrants (including refugees). In other words, problems were identified, and an immediate response followed. Even so, it must be noted that the representatives of the third sector were not infrequently self-critical, admitting a lack of professionalism in the early undertakings.

I mean, I think that (...) as far as NGOs are concerned, it was a new situation for us, too. We were also making our way a bit in the dark. We went all out on organizing collections of donations in kind, and transport of donations abroad. We collected various things, which, as it later turned out, were not really suitable to be shipped to Ukraine, for example, or they simply could not be transported (man, F).

Secondly, through grassroots activity, NGOs are in direct contact with the refugees, which enables them to respond quickly to the dynamically changing situation, flawlessly identify the current needs of Ukrainian migrants and adapt the range of support to address them.

(...) I'm able to do this flexibly, adapting to very volatile circumstances, emerging, as it were, from those needs. (...) Well, for example, because there's no way, in the extreme case of the refugees, they don't come, let's say, from 7 a.m. to 3 p.m. And they don't come from Monday to Friday. So, (...) it's like if an institution were to handle it, any institution, then each would be open (...) one-third

of the time, five days a week, and two days were totally out of the question. Well, that means it's not going to respond to any problem. So what about those people? Are they supposed to stand around for two days? Waiting for the door to open? (man, W5).

Thus, NGOs easily adapt to new circumstances and respond instantly, also demonstrating much greater skill than public administration institutions in spending funds relative to actual needs. In addition, due to their specific nature, generally associated with the absence of a bureaucratic structure, they often do not have to go through formal procedures before taking action:

Administration - there's a lot of paperwork, a lot of everything, everyone's afraid to take a decision or anything there. And here [at NGOs - author's note] it's like that, they act (woman, W4).

- **Robust cooperation of third sector organizations:** the statements of our interviewees also indicate that NGOs supported one another intensively and cooperated in various fields of assistance provided to refugees.

Well, cooperation between NGOs also in the context of information exchange, exchange of participants, or simply we give something, the other organization gives something, we provide training, we provide the professionals, the Food Bank provides humanitarian aid (...). At the beginning, everyone kind of wanted to do everything, but then we sort of divided these areas, responsibilities, everyone did what they did best, so it seems to me that these areas of cooperation between NGOs between each other (...) well, it passed the test in this difficult situation (man, F).

However, it should be stressed that not all NGOs have the same capacity to engage in cooperation, including an equally well-developed network of social contacts. This is especially true of smaller organizations, those with little experience or located in minor urban centers.

- **Commitment and dedication of NGO staff.** One cannot fail to mention that the quality of human capital is a major asset of NGOs. One of the remarkable features of the volunteers and people working in such organizations is their high sensitivity to what others have suffered and their considerate approach to victims fleeing war. It would be impossible to quote all the relevant statements of the respondents, but it evidently follows that they delivered heroic work, sacrificing their time, energy, mental well-being or private funds.

We worked around the clock the whole time, and Saturday, Sunday, the whole weekend, then we slowly switched off individual days, that is, we switched off Saturday, then slowly Sunday, so that we ourselves also had to rest (woman, W4).

Of course, you'd drive the person using your private car if there was a need to access medical services, and we'd just chip in among ourselves simply to support it in some way (man, F).

The determination of the NGO staff was also reflected in the creative strategies for solving problems which resulted, for example, from financial shortages.

(...) We buy at... or we get liquids or oils or whatever in big bottles, and we just divide it in half or one-third of such a bottle. So, the hotels collect the small bottles for us, so here the girls sit afterwards and do the pouring over. We divide the tea into 10 bags (...) per family, so it's all there. Here, the day starts with dividing, and we have to divide it all first so there's enough for people (woman, W4).

3.3. Difficulties and limitations in NGO activities for war refugees

Based on the interviews, difficulties, limitations or deficits that the NGO sector confronted while providing aid to war refugees included:

- **Lack of a comprehensive state policy towards migrants (including refugees).** The interviewees observed that at the time of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, no formal aid system existed in Poland, and any activities undertaken in that field should rather be described as an emergency response, which does not have any underpinning in the (non)existing migration policy. According to the speakers, systemic weaknesses include, e.g. lack of higher-level, comprehensive crisis management (notably management of

support processes), lack of legislation defining the competences of the various entities, the emergence of *ad hoc* regulations and their provisional nature, inaccuracies and ambiguities of the procedures issued on an ongoing basis. All that, particularly at the initial stage, led to enormous chaos, while all support institutions, including NGOs, had to navigate that territory in the dark. This is aptly illustrated in the following statements:

In my opinion, there was basically no system. There existed, simply (...) a levy in mass of support. Among the people. (...) Even the institutions, (...) which launched support, especially some local government institutions. They had no formal grounds at the very beginning to do it at all (...). This whole mess, in the sense that there was no one to manage the processes (...), because you could've done a lot of things more efficiently still. Or manage the crisis, manage it at all, right? Well, so (...) we don't have a migration policy at the level of (...) the state (...), the state doesn't have any policies, and local governments in general (...). If local governments had, they would've functioned based on the regulations from the very beginning, as soon as the war broke out. There were no such regulations. The regulations were in the special acts (...) Regulations of some kind, they're temporary too (...). They're being changed all the time, and don't apply to other (...) people than refugees from Ukraine (man, W5).

I remember that at the beginning (...) different kinds of procedures, modes of actions were sort of not fully (...) tested and underdeveloped. (...) early on, we didn't know who to turn to on various issues, who to turn to regarding registering refugees for residence, registering, requesting food or humanitarian aid (...) Things that have been in place for a year now are kind of transparent (...). But every time a new procedure comes in, I can see it's not fully stabilized, perfected and there are always some doubts (...) So, as I say, these procedures which (...) were implemented, well, they should've been refined beforehand, and so everything was tested in combat, in the heat of war (man, F).

- **Difficulties in cooperation with public administration**, manifesting particularly in the extensive bureaucracy, as well as in specific political interests being pursued by certain officials. It is obvious that in order for actions to be efficient in general (and especially so in crisis situations), cooperation between different entities is absolutely vital. As previously noted, it has been running smoothly between the NGOs themselves. Meanwhile, the relations between NGOs and the public sector leave much to be desired, as illustrated in the following statement:

The provincial office bowed out last year (...). The provincial office, and if whatever, wherever I ask for any support, it's either literally talking to a brick wall, or it's something given as a stopgap when it comes to offices. As for the (...) the city hall, well, in general, they give everything possible a wide berth. Other offices, if they already hold any collection there (...), I'm not saying they shouldn't, because they might not give anything, so they always give something, and then they come here and (...) take pictures of themselves (...), because they've donated so many wonderful things (woman, W4).

In addition, certain representatives of the organizations highlight far-reaching bureaucracy as an important obstacle to their activities:

(...), I've only been writing these projects for a short time, so there's a lot of things I don't know, a lot of things are new to me, I'm learning a lot, maybe I don't know, if someone already gives money, then they demand such a settlement that I practically don't know how to even get at it sometimes and plus I should have here an accountant hired permanently and all, just to carry out a trifling project. It's the same when you apply for some funding that the city, the province, whoever, (...) wants to give (...). The basic things I don't know. I don't know how other organizations do it, but I'm struggling with that (woman, W4).

Nonetheless, it needs to be noted that the opinions on cooperation between the public sector and NGOs are not always negative. A number of interviewees indicate that it was correct:

As far as cooperation with public administration, with public institutions is concerned, it (...) passed the test to a large extent because we implement many projects, many projects were tailored to the situation in which we found ourselves, we were able to pursue really diverse activities adjusted to, to the situation, thanks to which we helped many, many, many people, so I see many advantages of that cooperation (man, F).

- **Insufficient financial and human resources:** the research shows that when carrying out activities for war refugees, funds are the chief problem facing NGOs. Unsurprisingly, the scale of needs is enormous, and the possibilities of satisfying those are always limited. This was aptly summarized by one of our interviewees: *If there's money, everything can be done, honestly* (man, W5). Financial issues are also seen as a major future challenge, as assistance to refugees - in the opinion of the respondents - is still necessary to increase their independence and integration into Polish society. Compared with the initial period of the refugee influx into Poland, the opportunities to obtain funding for such undertakings are now negligible.

Back then (...), current needs had to be met. And that was done in, in such an emergency, express mode. Now it's completely different. It's the reverse, in a way. So there are far fewer people (...) Only this is long-term, grassroots work, right? It's a completely different kind of work. And, for example, while there was money for humanitarian aid for organizations like ours, at the moment, there's practically nothing for these activities. (man, W5).

Another issue NGOs often face is the shortage of human resources: *you have to realize that, that wave, the number of people (...), imagine the staff you'd have to have to really work with almost every person, unfortunately. And learning the language, and the awareness, and overcoming barriers and many other elements on top of that* (woman, F).

Inevitably, financial and personnel issues generate further problems: diminished resources in terms of time, energy to be applied, limited competences, a more modest network of social connections and contacts, etc.

You could do better, even with those meagre or sometimes no resources at all, if these organizations, (...) simply, we don't have the time to get out there and meet other people (...). I know a couple of organizations (...). But in fairness, I don't have the time for that anymore, nor do I have any resources, whether staff or funds, to go and, you know, travel and look for solutions together, as they often do exist (man, W5).

- **The specificity of the situation faced by NGOs.** For persons supporting war refugees, the very context of their activities, namely the ongoing war in the neighboring country, was a problematic one. Despite the fact that the daily work of our interviewees involves solving difficult social problems, nearly all admit that they were not prepared for direct exposure to people who had experienced war trauma. The issue of war trauma has been the focus of a number of academic publications (e.g. Dlugosz et al., 2022, pp. 32-38; Pisaruk et al., 2022; Gonçalves et al., 2022; European Commission, 2022). For example, Piotr Dlugosz's findings demonstrate that depression, anxiety disorders and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) can be observed in three-quarters of the refugees surveyed (N=737), while 66% of refugees experience mental distress (Dlugosz, 2023, p. 1)⁸. Hence, in many cases, the mental well-being of those providing assistance to refugees was also adversely affected.

We also had to hire a psychologist for the volunteers because the girls simply couldn't stand the pressure either, that burden, to put it simply (woman, W4).

Loss of home, loss of your city, loss of the homeland, loss of family, loved ones, or contact with them. Well, that put a heavy strain on us, and we had to deal with it somehow in a different way. In fact, here in the team, we supported each other a lot, and we continue to do so, because it is, well, difficult for everyone, even the most experienced helper (man, F).

Such issues, exacerbated by the protracted armed conflict in Ukraine, raise concerns about the depleting reserves of people's incredible enthusiasm for helping refugees:

Sometimes, your strength is virtually gone. It's always been said that it's not going to be a run like this, just a sprint or whatever. It's going to be a marathon, it's going to be a really long, long marathon. So you have to brace yourself for that as well, and we've been along the lines of, more like at the beginning, like - all right, maybe half a year, maybe a year, that's the max, so... And it's dragging

⁸ The RHS-15 scale (Refugee Health Screener-15) and a nominal scale measuring stress coping strategies were used in the study.

on, there's no end to it, and it's not going to end so soon. So, with your strength, it's, like, heavy on you. Volunteers, who early on kind of boasted that they'd go here, pop over there (...), collections are becoming more and more difficult, to (...), well, there's lots of things that are simply more difficult (woman, W4).

4. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In light of the collected empirical material, it should be concluded that the role played by third-sector organizations in terms of assistance provided to war refugees from Ukraine was impressive. The scope and scale of the activities are particularly noteworthy, as well as their positively assessed outcomes. In addition, NGO staff have demonstrated the ability to collaborate as part of their undertakings, also showing substantial flexibility and overall commitment. Despite such strengths, the functioning of NGOs - given the issues discussed - is problematic at multiple levels. They confront, e.g. systemic barriers because clear, predictable regulations based on which they could operate are lacking; cooperation with public administration is complicated, notably due to excessive bureaucracy; financial difficulties and other deficits have to be confronted as well. The results of the current study are in line with the findings from other studies on the role of NGOs and the problems faced by third-sector workers who assist refugees (Charycka et al., 2024, pp. 4-5).

Considering the above (the identified difficulties and limitations in the main), one may attempt to advance essential recommendations or proposals for changes which would benefit the activities of social organizations that provide assistance to Ukrainian refugees. Some have been formulated by the interviewees themselves, while others represent indirect conclusions from the analysis of the presented empirical material. Such recommendations or proposals include:

1. Developing a comprehensive state migration (and refugee) policy, which formally designates the institutions responsible for its implementation and defines their competences, so as to improve the process of migration crisis management, also in the future⁹.
2. Taking advantage of the existing human potential, valuable professional competences, expertise and all institutional knowledge accumulated by all entities providing support to war refugees.
3. Public administration support for NGOs involving financial, personnel, and psychological assistance, a system of training and workshops on intercultural education.
4. Creating province-level databases containing a list of public administration institutions and NGOs working in support of war refugees in order to enable the exchange of experience, good practices and pooling of various types of resources.

Both the conclusions from the research and the above recommendations apply to NGOs supporting war refugees from Ukraine. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that the acquisition of competences, knowledge and experience in working with refugees, combined with the determination of specific problems and limitations in this regard, can prepare the staff of outreach organizations to take even more effective action on behalf of migrants in general. The demand for such professional competences may likely arise in the near future.

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⁹ This expectation has become a reality since the Council of Ministers adopted a resolution in October 2024 on *Migration Strategy 2025-2030*.

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