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Ukraine/Poland

Evaporating Solidarity: The Response to Displacement Cannot Be Sustained by Empathy Alone

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After the second anniversary of Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, it is now time to ask what happens when the fragile social relations that were able to handle the arrival of millions of displaced people start to break down. Many commentators have argued extensively that [grassroots solidarity networks consisting of individual actors and local organisations](#) coming together in spontaneous forms of solidarity took the most active role in accommodating Ukrainian refugees arriving in the EU. But what are the long-term effects of the state’s outsourcing of responsibility to grassroots collectives that took on this burden?

Despite the claims that there was an “exceptional response” in Poland and other EU states to Ukrainian displacement, local and international volunteers have been exhausted, the precarity of the displaced has become an individualized rather than a collective responsibility. The fragile structures that used to support Ukrainian refugees have started to crumble. Poland received the [most EU funds](#) for helping Ukrainian nationals fleeing the war. But already in 2022, [the Polish government stopped offering financial support to families hosting Ukrainian refugees](#). In February 2023, some shelters accommodating the displaced started to charge a fee.

In this piece, I suggest that much of the costs of after-war mobility became individualized and redistributed along asymmetrical networks of care and support created long before 2022. There is a need to take some distance from what has been initially described as a [paradoxical sense of joy of collective action](#) amidst the looming tragedy and violence and to critically examine the consequences of outsourcing support to [grassroot collectives and individual actors](#) driven by feelings of responsibility and the need to help. This individualization of responsibility should be tied to wider politics and infrastructures of the EU asylum regime, which was never designed to sustain the lives of those seeking international protection, even of those supposedly “[blond and with blue eyes](#).”

Refugees as humanitarian workers

Ever since the start of the invasion, Ukrainian nationals living abroad faced new challenges of evacuating their families and relatives, hosting and feeding them, and volunteering and donating to Ukraine while at the same time continuing to work in precarious and insecure labour markets benefiting EU economies. The international coverage of Poland as a hospitable government quickly overshadowed an attack on women’s and LGBTIQ rights, the [ongoing violence against other life-seekers on the border with Belarus](#), and the fact that the country refused to accept the refugees allocated through the EU quota system. While the Temporary Protection Directive that was activated for the first time in response to Russia’s invasion opened the possibility for Ukrainian nationals to receive immediate and temporary protection in EU member states — protections shamefully not extended to other non-European, non-white asylum seekers — these were older networks of labour migration from Ukraine that largely bore the weight of the response to the displacement of people.

I came to Warsaw in the summer-autumn of 2023 as part of longer-term ethnographic research to follow up on my research participants – young Ukrainians, whom I had met in Poland in May 2022. Since then, many of them had been recruited in humanitarian aid organizations with precarious short-term contracts, a part of the expanding “project economy” and the NGO-ization of help funded by the EU, international organisations, and private donors. The funding is allocated to the organisations, which must deliver and demonstrate tangible results and products to justify the funds. Like [in other contexts of humanitarian aid work](#), these newly founded NGOs run on short-term funding and rely heavily on the labour of highly educated localized workers from displaced communities, to which Ukrainian refugees are no exception. The help that these NGOs provide is only possible thanks to the linguistic and

other professional skills of the humanitarian workers who had been often displaced by the war themselves.

Vasyl, a fresh graduate of a Ukrainian university, told me after searching for work that would match his qualifications for several months: “I was about to go to work in a factory as I needed money. Then, by chance, my relative told me about this humanitarian organization, so I applied for work there.” Vasyl’s work included interviewing Ukrainian refugees at bus and railway stations, and collecting data for a humanitarian organization he worked for. “All the people who do this frontline work are Ukrainians because they speak the language. But the higher you go in the hierarchy, there are fewer and fewer Ukrainian people with power to make decisions.”

When we talked in August 2023, he told me that his six-month employment contract was about to expire in a month, and he was ready to start searching for work again. During a WhatsApp call in January 2024, he said his contract was suddenly renewed for another six months, but he didn’t know if his organization would get more funding to continue this work. Ukrainian refugees like Vasyl become key protagonists of the social assistance provided to their communities through an increasingly privatized and outsourced aid model. Vasyl would tell me that his workday “would never begin and would never end” as Ukrainian people shared his phone number as the contact of a person who could help them. “I work 10 to 12 hours a day as people call me all day long even if they are not part of our programme. I cannot say no to people as they need help.” We joked that his phone number was shared all across Poland. This intense emotional involvement around the clock is draining and retraumatizing, but in the absence of wider stable institutions of support, it is Vasyl’s phone number that becomes a lifeline for many Ukrainian refugees in Poland. Meanwhile, he himself worries constantly about his future prospects and employment, which depend on unstable funding schemes of donor organisations.

When I volunteered for another local humanitarian organization providing clothes and food packages to Ukrainian refugees, its head was similarly concerned about funding. In the summer of 2023, they had a big office in the centre of Warsaw provided by the municipality for affordable rent. The central location of the office was indispensable to the provision of help: passers-by would occasionally drop by to make donations, while those in need of clothes and food would easily reach their office by public transport. Those who volunteered for this organization were other migrant workers, often women, who would come to help other displaced women with food packages and clothes after a day of work as cleaners, domestic workers or teachers lecturing on Zoom to school kids in Ukraine. After their work shifts, they came to the organisation to sort and give away food packages and clothes. These invisibilized practices often get lost in the initial accounts of European solidarity with Ukraine and Ukrainian refugees. When the international communities get fatigued by the war in Ukraine, an enormous amount of unpaid labour that sustains these spaces of help falls on Ukrainian migrant communities.

The “crisis” – to borrow this overused word — moved from the visible public spaces of railway stations and reception centres to less visible individual households, unequal labour markets, precarious project economy, and unstable funding schemes. In the summer of 2023, the Warsaw municipality started to demand higher rent. Then, the head of the office, who does all the work on a volunteer basis herself, told me: “Of course, this is a space right in the centre of Warsaw. They can make great money if they rent it to some restaurant.” She said they could not afford a higher rent as the donations that people used to make at the beginning of the war were starting to dry out. It was also unclear for how long their funder could keep supporting them. “People are tired of the war. We will need to move to the outskirts of Warsaw to afford rent. Those who need us will find it more difficult to find and reach us.” In late 2023 the office was still there but the same looming sense of desperation was in the air as the municipality was preparing to kick them out in search for more profitable tenants.

Not by empathy alone

There is still a lot to learn from the response to Ukrainian displacement. For instance, the arrival of 1 million

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asylum-seekers to the EU in 2015-2016 was framed both by researchers and the media as “a crisis”, leading to what has been now termed “(migration) crisis scholarship.” Now, Poland alone hosts over a million Ukrainian refugees, which shows that “crisis” has never been about numbers alone. This should not come as a surprise as the EU border regime has been [purposefully designed to keep non-European refugees out](#) and conditionally include some groups of desirable labour migrants. Prior to Russia’s full-scale attack, [Ukrainian nationals had been top recipients of labour-related residence permits and visas in the EU](#). Indeed, if we look at Ukrainian refugees’ destination countries after 2022, it becomes clear that their movement mirrored already established labour migration routes. Now, these migrant workers were confronted with new obligations of evacuating their families and relatives. This is why, as Vasyl said, the only choice left for a fresh graduate like him is between work in construction or service sector, and – often, almost equally low-paid – temporary work in humanitarian aid.

In many EU states, the Temporary Protection Directive – however generous it may be compared to the conditions imposed on non-European asylum-seekers – gives little but the right to work and keeps Ukrainian nationals often outside the domain of more extensive national welfare systems. It then comes as no surprise that once donations dry out and Europeans’ humanitarian feelings fade away, Ukrainians are left with the system that was never meant to support them, however “exceptional” and “unprecedented” the initial response was.

In the aftermath of the 2015 “refugee crisis”, [political theorist Ida Danewid wrote about the danger of centering pro-refugee activism in Europe exclusively around notions of empathy, generosity and hospitality](#). These feelings allow ‘Europeans to constitute themselves as “good” and “ethical” subjects, innocent of imperial histories that often pushed people to migrate in the first place. Questions of structural reform are then simply replaced by the feel-good action and mere empathy. The desire to help and save a distant stranger may easily replace and silence the political struggle, which is needed to abolish the violent asylum and border regime that continues to kill people across the EU frontiers. In this context, it becomes difficult to argue that the reception of Ukrainian refugees was exceptional — however grassroots-driven, precarious and temporary. But the accounts of my research interlocutors suggest that the asylum regime cannot be sustained simply by empathy, generosity, and hospitality of individual actors opening their homes to (some) strangers, as well as newly-minted NGOs precariously maintained by external funding and running on the labour of temporarily employed refugees.

The case of the reception of Ukrainian refugees offers a perspective on what happens when individualised fragile social relations that sustained the initial solidarity response to massive displacement start to crumble. This question is a pertinent one not only because the Temporary Protection scheme for Ukrainian nationals is set to expire in Spring 2025 but also in the context of the EU’s broader asylum regime. What is needed is not only access to international protection for all (including non-European) asylum-seekers but also functioning public institutions that can provide access to decent living conditions, accommodation, healthcare and work.

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Source: [LeftEast](#).

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