From Grassroots Humanitarianism to Mutual Aid: Citizen Responses in Poland and the Czech Republic to Russia's War in Ukraine

SIMONA FOJTOVÁ	Transylvania University, USA
E-MAIL	sfojtova@transy.edu
PATRICE C. MCMAHON	University of Nebraska-Lincoln, USA
E-MAIL	patricemcmahon@gmail.com
HANA WAISSEROVÁ	University of Nebraska-Lincoln, USA
E-MAIL	hwaisserova2@unl.edu

ABSTRACT

Russia's full-blown war in Ukraine created an unprecedented humanitarian crisis in Europe. By the end of 2022, over eight million Ukrainians had become refugees throughout Europe, with more than 11 million crossing Ukraine's borders (UNHCR Operational Data Portal). The Ukrainians have fled to many countries, but Poland and the Czech Republic have received some of the largest numbers of Ukrainian individuals seeking protection. The multilayered response to this influx of people has been impressive and surprising, with ordinary individuals showing up at the border to provide food and transportation while ordinary citizens and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) mobilized to create local systems of humanitarian assistance. This paper explores grassroots citizens' aid in Poland and the Czech Republic from February 2022 until August 2024. It argues that in both countries, private individuals and small volunteer-run groups organized creative grassroots initiatives that went beyond providing immediate material assistance. Solidarity with Ukrainians also fueled citizen-led mutual aid and transformative spaces of care aimed at altering existing institutions and practices and integrating Ukrainians.

KEYWORDS	grassroots humanitarianism, mutual aid, voluntarism, Ukrainian refugees, Poland, the Czech Republic
DOI	https://doi.org/10.32422/cjir.899
PUBLISHED ONLINE	7 May 2025

INTRODUCTION

Russia's full-blown war in Ukraine, which began in February 2022, led to an unprecedented humanitarian crisis in Europe. In one week of the war, more than one million people sought refuge in neighboring countries. By the year's end, over eight million Ukrainians had become refugees[1] throughout Europe, with more than 11 million crossing Ukraine's borders (UNHCR OPERATIONAL DATA PORTAL). The Ukrainians have fled to many countries, but Poland and the Czech Republic have received some of the largest numbers of Ukrainian individuals seeking protection; by July 2024, 1.8 million Ukrainians had applied for temporary protection in Poland, and over 600,000 did so in the Czech Republic by August 2024 (UNHCR OPERATIONAL DATA PORTAL). The Ukrainian refugee crisis constitutes the most substantial migration event in the Czech Republic's contemporary history (BRYAN ET AL. 2023).

Since the beginning of the full-scale war, the multilayered response to this influx of people has been both impressive and surprising, with ordinary individuals initially showing up at the border to provide food and transportation while citizens and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) mobilized to create local systems of humanitarian assistance and small volunteer-run groups engaged in mutual aid. Although the war is ongoing, it is essential to take stock of these grassroots responses, and evaluate their importance to the provision of aid, as well as their potential impact on Polish and Czech society. In this paper, we explore the following questions: To what extent has grassroots aid encouraged new forms of activism or even social movements within these societies? Do these forms of assistance and activism reveal and replicate historical forms of dissent mobilization to oppose Russian oppression in these countries? Or do they represent novel spontaneous acts of goodwill?

These informal, ad hoc forms of aid, deemed both "impressive" and "generous" by the United Nations (UN) Special Rapporteur on the human rights of migrants, were also quite unexpected given the harsh reaction refugees and asylum seekers provoked previously in Central and Eastern Europe (UNOHC 2022). In Poland, for example, both the government and the public indicated that they were opposed to migrants and refugees coming into the country in 2015, and they did so again in 2021 (TILLES 2021). In response to a surge of people trying to enter Poland from Belarus, a 2021

poll found that more than half of the Polish population (55%) was opposed to allowing people to come to Poland, while almost half were even supportive of building a wall to keep migrants out (IBID.). Similarly, a 2016 poll in the Czech Republic found that almost two-thirds of Czech citizens were opposed to taking in refugees from war zones (HOVET 2016). The 2015 EU refugee relocation plan, which sought to distribute asylum seekers from Greece and Italy across member states, faced strong opposition from Central and Eastern European countries.[2] The Czech Republic, Hungary, Romania, and Slovakia voted against the quotas. While Poland eventually voted in favor of the quotas and pledged to accept 100 refugees, it later reneged (QUELL 2020). As Jarosław Kaczyński, the leader of Poland's Law and Justice Party (PiS) put it, this is because *"migrants carry all sorts of parasites and protozoa, which [...] while not dangerous in the organisms of these people, could be dangerous here"* (CIENSKI 2017).

Yet, when Russia launched its full-scale war on Ukraine in late February 2022, forcing Ukrainians to flee, Poland and the Czech Republic's attitudes and behavior shifted suddenly, given the Central Europeans' more positive views of Ukrainians than of refugees from the Middle East (BLOMQVIST MICKELSSON 2025; ZOGATA-KUSZ ET AL. 2023), and numerous initiatives were created not only by the governments,[3] but also by Polish and Czech citizens (BRYAN ET AL. 2023; JELÍNKOVÁ ET AL. 2024; MACKOVÁ ET AL. 2024; BLOMQVIST MICKELSSON 2025; ZOGATA-KUSZ ET AL. 2023). While the Czech and Polish governments decided not to activate the EU Temporary Protection Directive for Syrian refugees during the migration surge in 2015 (MACKOVÁ ET AL. 2024), both governments almost immediately granted legal status to Ukrainians via a temporary protection directive, while also granting Ukrainian refugees access to the respective country's social welfare system (e.g. free health care and education).[4] Importantly, the war also prompted city governments and citizens to act, as they showed up at the border, for example, with food, clothing, and transportation. As the Mayor of Medyka, a border town in Poland, explained, *"These refugees have lost almost everything. We need to help them. Even if that means we'll have to learn to live with less"* (SALTMARSH 2022).

In the war's first three months, private citizens in Poland spent as much as $2.1 billion supporting Ukrainian refugees, according to the Polish Economic Institute's estimates, while the Polish government pledged $3.4 billion for this cause for 2022 (ROSMAN 2022). In the Czech Republic,

individuals and NGOs organized legal and psychological services for Ukrainian refugees, in addition to providing significant amounts of material aid. By the end of the summer of 2022, private Czech citizens had donated almost $80 million in aid for Ukrainians – far more than what was collected for previous natural or human-induced disasters (WESELOWSKY 2022). And by the end of the year, Czechs donated five times more than in previous years, with most of the funds meant to help Ukraine.[5]

In the initial days and weeks after the full-scale invasion, migrant-assisting NGOs and volunteer movements were among the first to respond to Ukrainian refugees' needs, providing the majority of the aid for them (BRYAN ET AL. 2023; CULLEN DUNN – KALISZEWSKA 2023; JELÍNKOVÁ ET AL. 2024; MCMAHON 2022; MIRGA-WÓJTOWICZ – TALEWICZ-KWIATKOWSKA – KOŁACZEK 2022). In both countries, private individuals organized creative grassroots initiatives that went beyond supplying immediate material assistance by providing housing, teaching refugees new skills, and helping them integrate into society. Although the Polish and Czech governments each played an important role in providing humanitarian aid for Ukrainians fleeing the violence in their country, this article is focused on the informal, spontaneous, and makeshift responses that were driven by volunteers, or what we call grassroots humanitarianism. Some of these initiatives and demonstrations of mutual aid are new and spontaneous, as they were formed in response to the dramatic situation in Ukraine, while others have operated for a longer time period, since they had been created during previous humanitarian crises and then adopted and expanded for the new reality in the spring of 2022.

Although many terms can be used to describe how ordinary citizens and volunteers initiate and deliver aid, we use two terms in particular – grassroots humanitarianism and mutual aid – because they both capture the small-scale, bottom-up character of these activities, as well as the location where the humanitarian activities are carried out. Anne-Meike Fechter and Anke Schwittay (2019: 1772) define this as aid that is provided by citizens to strangers in need who live in the citizens' own communities (and not in some far away locale). However, we argue that these grassroots initiatives are not always just short-term, ad hoc, apolitical acts focused on providing immediate relief; sometimes this behavior represents, reflects, and shapes civil society activism within these countries. As scholars examining grassroots humanitarianism toward refugees in Belgium and Germany observe,

this aid includes short-term relief, but it can also include advocacy work and activities aimed at supporting sustainable development and longer-term structural changes in the host country with the aim *"to improve migrants' precarious situation in the future"* (VANDEVOORDT – FLEISCHMANN 2020: 188). To describe and understand the initiatives that exist over an extended time period and move beyond immediate relief, we use the term *mutual aid* (SPADE 2020A, 2020B; CARSTENSEN – SEBIT 2020) in our analysis of grassroots initiatives in Poland and the Czech Republic. Mutual aid involves individual efforts but also the work of groups and communities that come together to provide support, resources, and assistance based on solidarity with the refugees. These efforts thus sometimes seek structural changes and aspire to create new institutions and mechanisms to receive and integrate refugees.

Building on these concepts, our comparative study of Poland and the Czech Republic since February 2022 makes two related arguments. First, we argue that this continuum of grassroots organizing has not only helped meet the immediate needs of refugees, but it has also altered social relationships in these societies. By providing mutual aid to refugees, citizens' initiatives and organizations are building solidarity with the refugees and are starting to create alternative institutions and spaces of collective care. We see mutual aid as an important aspect of this grassroots organizing that brings individuals and groups together. Second, although this research is preliminary and these actions are difficult to evaluate at this point, we argue that these grassroots initiatives are upending the existing global humanitarian system, which is dominated by large international organizations based in North America and Western Europe. We cannot predict the future, but there are reasons to believe that this do-it-yourself (DIY) citizen activism will have lasting effects on Ukrainian refugees, the Polish and Czech societies, and the provision of humanitarian aid in other places (LSE Department of International Development 2023).

In the next section, we explain the methodology of our paper and the questions we posed during our semi-structured interviews. Section II provides some historical context for our framing concepts – grassroots humanitarianism and mutual aid – which are relatively new terms that emerged from several different disciplines interested in humanitarianism, international development, and social movements (FETCHER – SCHWITTAY 2019; SPADE 2020A, 2020B; MCGEE – PELHAM 2018; SANDRI 2017; VANDEVOORDT – FLEISCHMANN 2020).

The scholarship from which these terms emerged is large and interdisciplinary, but in using these particular terms, we call attention to the size, motivations, and activities of these bottom-up initiatives, as well as their relationships to other actors to differentiate them from large aid organizations and similar terms. Section III turns to our case studies, which describe and analyze a few small-scale grassroots aid organizations that, while informal and operating on the margins of the established humanitarian industries in Poland and the Czech Republic, demonstrate the important links between providing aid to Ukrainians and activism and collective action. Since these activities are ongoing and changing, we conclude with some general observations, as well as the potential impact of these grassroots activities on refugees, these countries' civil societies, and the global humanitarianism industry.

METHODOLOGY

This research uses an inductive qualitative approach based on field work and interviews conducted in Poland and the Czech Republic between June 2022 and August 2024, as well as a textual analysis of secondary sources written in English, Czech, and Polish. When we started conducting the interviews and fieldwork on this topic in the summer of 2022, there were few peer-reviewed articles on this topic. As we continued our research, more articles emerged along with gray literature from foundations, international organizations and local NGOs, as well as books written in Polish (RUDNICKI 2023; KALINOWSKA 2023) and Czech. In both countries, we used semi-structured interviews, allowing the interviewees to express ideas in their own words and to move in a different direction while still providing comparable data. We also employed reflexive practices, including ongoing self-reflection and consultations with each other to ensure a balanced and comprehensive approach to the research.

In Poland, 35 semi-structured interviews were conducted in the summer of 2022 and throughout the spring and summer of 2023. These interviews were conducted in Polish or English with officials from Polish humanitarian organizations and government agencies, as well as with citizens directly involved with providing assistance. These interviews were conducted in public places and lasted no longer than one hour. In the summer of 2022, ten semi-structured interviews were conducted. In the spring

and summer of 2023, while McMahon was a Fulbright Scholar at Adam Mickiewicz University, 25 interviews were conducted in Warsaw, Krakow, Lublin, and Poznan. In addition, this author was a participant observer at conferences and workshops discussing and analyzing the reception and integration of Ukrainian refugees in Poland. In the Czech Republic, participation in aid activities and 28 semi-structured interviews were conducted in the summers of 2022, 2023, and 2024, and in January 2024 with individuals directly involved with providing humanitarian assistance as well as those receiving assistance in Prague.

This article describes and analyzes the activities of two grassroots initiatives in Poland, *Women Take the Wheel* (*Kobiety Za Kółko*), and *Wrocław's Central Railway Station Initiative*. These groups from Poland were chosen for their similarities: both were formed immediately after the war began, were created by private individuals, and were focused on the immediate needs of refugees. However, they are still quite different. While *Women Take the Wheel* organizes in-person aid online and still exists, *Wrocław's Central Railway Station Initiative* organized and implemented in-person aid but only for a short period. In the case of the Czech Republic, we highlight the work of two organizations, *Prague's Main Train Station Initiative* (*Iniciativa Hlavák*) and *Grandmas without Borders* (*Babičky bez hranic*). These organizations were also created by private individuals without any government involvement when they began, and while they focus on the immediate needs of refugees, they also engage in pro-migrant advocacy and integration. Both organizations are located in Prague, the Czech capital, which has received a disproportionate number of Ukrainian refugees. Both organizations also provided assistance to refugees prior to Russia's invasion of Ukraine: *Prague's Main Train Station Initiative* was established during the migration surge in 2015; *Grandmas without Borders* has a longer history going back to their dissent against the Czech communist regime prior to 1989, but more recently this group has been engaged in pro-migrant advocacy for refugees from Syria, Chechnya, and Afghanistan.

By analyzing the activities of these four organizations in two Central European countries, this article provides a diverse sampling of the extensive and wide-ranging humanitarian aid offered in these countries while still demonstrating some overlap in how people organized their responses. Importantly, in each country we highlight one initiative that was created by

women for women, with feminist ideals in mind. It is certainly the case that many existing women's organizations, like *Grandmothers without Borders*, broadened their missions to include and assist Ukrainian refugees, while many new initiatives, like *Women Take the Wheel*, were formed in direct response to the war in Ukraine.

FROM LARGE INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS TO CITIZENS' AID

In this section, we summarize the interdisciplinary literature on humanitarianism, explaining how we arrived at the terms *grassroots humanitarianism* and *mutual aid* to describe the unfolding situations in Poland and the Czech Republic. To be clear, we do not suggest that these are the only terms that can be used in this regard, but we do contend that in the ongoing situation in CEE, they capture the actors and their activities well while differentiating them from the global humanitarian industry that emerged and developed after World War II. Grassroots humanitarianism and mutual aid, because they are carried out by individuals in their own communities, contain behavior and activities that are also traditionally associated with activism and social movements.

The modern humanitarian system has been dominated by governments, multilateral aid organizations, and large international nongovernmental organizations (INGOs) from North America and Western Europe, which constitute the so-called three pillars of international aid (KENNEDY 2005; BARNETT 2006, 2011, 2017). While governments, or the first pillar of aid, provide direct bilateral assistance like loans and technical assistance, multilateral aid agencies like the United Nations (UN) are the second pillar and tend to leverage their authority and expertise to reform countries' macroeconomic structures and social policies (DEVELTERE – DE BRUYN 2009: 912). The third pillar of aid is associated largely with INGOs based in North America and Western Europe which carry out the work of governments and UN agencies working closer to the ground.

Governments, multilateral agencies, and INGOs dominate the humanitarian space, but they do not control it entirely. As scholars like Alison Schnable and Bertrand Taithe observe, although most of the relevant research overlooks or downplays citizen aid and grassroots humanitarianism,

small-scale, individual efforts, the fourth pillar of aid, have always co-existed with large, governmental organizations and initiatives (SCHNABLE 2016; TAITHE 2019; DEVELTERE - DE BRUYN 2009). In the 2000s, however, this heterogeneous group of do-it-yourself (DIY) activists started to attract more attention as the number and reach of these non-specialists grew (SCHNABLE 2016).

The fourth pillar of international aid includes a broad range of citizen initiatives that are privately funded and undertaken by individuals. Grassroots humanitarianism is one form of citizen aid that is implemented in the immediate area by those who are most familiar with local conditions; it draws attention to the location where the aid is provided and the actions carried out. Grassroots humanitarianism is decentralized, flexible, and fast-acting, seeking to meet the needs of people in one's community (FECHTER – SCHWITTAY 2019: 1769–1780). This kind of citizen activism and the localized networks it creates have a long and consistent history throughout Europe and North America, as they respond to people's needs at home but also abroad. In the past, these initiatives were not only locally rooted, but they demonstrated how global issues were mediated and responded to in the Global North (TAITHE 2019: 1782). Different from the large-scale efforts of UN agencies and the work of INGOs, the fourth pillar of aid is more explicitly connected to domestic politics, religion, and local society. And while many of the citizen initiatives' activities remain small-scale or even perfunctory, their actions can contribute to international solidarity and societal change.

Globalization, technology, and international networking have all contributed to the rise of citizen activism and grassroots humanitarianism, but so too have the poor performance and arrogance of governments, multilateral organizations, and INGO humanitarian organizations that dominate the global humanitarian system. As Michael Barnett and Peter Walker observed in 2015, expectations of humanitarian organizations increased significantly in the post-Cold War period, but the organizations often did not respond adequately or appropriately, and relief work was considered *"something that is done to others, not alongside them"* (BARNETT – WALKER 2015: 131). In fact, the criticism of the organized and hierarchical network of states, donors, international organizations, and INGOs comes from many places, and includes anthropologists (TICKTIN 2014), international relations scholars (ROTH 2019), and developmental economists (COYNE 2013). Researchers identify different specific concerns associated with the so-called "Humanitarian

Club," but they share a common observation: in humanitarian crises, power remains concentrated in the hands of wealthy donors from the Global North, and these actors largely perpetuate the status quo, giving little money or power to locals who could stimulate more effective results. For decades, large humanitarian organizations made promises to reform the system, sometimes allowing local organizations to diagnose a problem or implement aid projects, but they rarely allowed them to design projects or monitor them, which prevented meaningful systemic change (BARNETT – WALKER 2015).

The 2015 Syrian refugee crisis provoked a different humanitarian response in Southern Europe. According to Elise Pascucci and Maria Gabrielsen Jumbert, the grassroots reactions of ordinary citizens to this crisis challenged traditional humanitarian organizations and notions of citizenship, and created alternative structures of aid (PASCUCCI – GABRIELSEN JUMBERT 2021: 2). These grassroots responses worked in a localized and agile manner to restructure domestic institutions and expand notions of belonging. Ordinary citizens not only provided short-term relief, but they anticipated the long-term needs of refugees; their intention, according to Katerina Rozakou (2017: 100), was to engage in relationships with the refugees and to change the humanitarian system. At least in the case of Greece, these informal initiatives never considered the people they encountered in the streets as "beneficiaries," nor did they see their activities as "services" or even "humanitarian aid" (IBID.). Their activities were, instead, an effort to engage in partnerships with refugees beyond just gift-giving.

These grassroots humanitarians also took issue with the official humanitarian system, its bureaucratized principles, and its modes of action (PASCUCCI – GABRIELSEN JUMBERT 2021). Since these grassroots humanitarians were making changes in their community, some scholars started to interrogate their behavior as the beginnings of a new social movement bent on improving the rights of refugees and asylum seekers. Reflecting on specific aspects of social movement development, Dean Spade writes about a variety of crises and how individuals and communities respond when governments fail to act and leave people in need. Viewing mutual aid as an undervalued aspect of social movements, Spade emphasizes its importance as a bottom-up, local expression of radical collective care.

Mutual aid is considered radical because it is a *"form of political participation in which people take responsibility for caring for one another and changing political conditions, not just through symbolic acts or by putting pressure on their representatives in government but by actually building new social relationships"* (SPADE 2020A: 136). Importantly, coordinated collective care created by individuals and grassroots efforts generates a sense of community or "communality," where people not only self-organize to help others, but in doing so, they rebuild the social fabric and, thus, experience their neighborhoods and country differently. Although often overlooked and undervalued, mutual aid and collective care demonstrate a longer-term commitment to changing institutions and social practices which are fundamental for building and sustaining social movements.

These ways of organizing and helping are neither new nor limited to humanitarian crises, but have always been part of anti-capitalist, anti-racist social movements and marginalized communities whose needs have not been met by formal systems of care (IBID.). While the idea and practice of mutual aid gained attention during the Covid-19 pandemic when individuals organized workshops, groups, and networks in many countries to help people in need, there is a long history of mutual aid in indigenous and underserved communities in the United States, as well as in left-leaning social movements that are critical of capitalism and government.

The immediate response of the global humanitarian system to the full-scale war in Ukraine was deemed both "unprecedented and generous," with the European Union, the United States, and other donor countries contributing significant amounts of money to support humanitarian needs (REFUGEE INTERNATIONAL REPORT 2022). Like other countries in Europe, the governments of Poland and the Czech Republic also stepped up quickly. However, it was the highly visible response of ordinary citizens, local NGOs, and small-scale community organizations, which was decidedly not orchestrated by the international community or any government, that attracted the most attention and recognition.[6] And in both Poland and the Czech Republic, various forms of locally inspired mutual aid flourished after February 2022 and have continued until the time of this writing. Commenting on the citizen-led aid that boomed in the first two weeks of the war, Hugo Slim warned that the *"creativity of locally-led aid must not be smothered and marginalized by the big beasts of the UN, Red Cross, and NGO world"* (SLIM 2022). Given

the history and power of the formal humanitarian system, Slim's concerns at the beginning of the invasion are understandable. However, more than two years into the conflict, the surge of local grassroots initiatives and local organizations providing assistance to Ukrainian refugees continues to be visible, their speed and flexibility recognized, and many of their efforts institutionalized.

Given citizens' multifaceted responses to Ukrainian refugees and the evolving literature on humanitarianism and mutual aid, the next section provides an in-depth look at four grassroots initiatives, two in Poland and two in the Czech Republic. In each of these cases, we examine their activities and analyze the extent to which their humanitarian outreach is immediate and short-term, or whether and how these initiatives are working to promote broader social or political changes, particularly those related to migration and integration.

FROM HELPING OTHERS TO BUILDING SOLIDARITY

The very day the Russian government initiated its attack on Ukraine in February 2022, the global humanitarian system reacted. Within a few days, the United Nations (UN), the European Union (EU), and its member states, along with the United States, pledged record amounts of money to provide life-saving humanitarian assistance to protect the citizens of Ukraine. Ukraine's neighbors, specifically Poland and the Czech Republic, had been known for their hardline positions against accepting refugees and migrants. Both countries had developed modern asylum systems in the 1990s after transitioning to democracy, accepting refugees from the Balkan wars in the 1990s and migrants from other countries around the world, but neither country had a long or significant history of refugee initiatives (HARGRAVE – HOMEL – DRAŽANOVÁ 2023).

Yet, in February 2022, their governments immediately criticized Putin for his actions and promised to protect and help Ukrainians. Their strong reaction to Russia's war in Ukraine and the refugees that flooded their countries is neither surprising nor revolutionary, considering Poland and the Czech Republic's political history vis-à-vis Russia and the Soviet Union (ANDREJUK 2023). Although Katarzyna Andrejuk's analysis is focused on Poland's response and is based on over 100 statements of public

stakeholders in documents, speeches, and general discourse, it is inarguably the case that the Czech Republic – like Poland and Ukraine – had also been stuck in the Soviet Union's sphere of influence for decades. Ukraine's proximity to the Czech Republic, fears of a renewed Russian expansionism in Central Europe, and the historical trauma of the 1968 Soviet invasion, which crushed the Prague Spring reform movement, significantly fueled the Czech support (JELÍNKOVÁ ET AL. 2024: 5).

Therefore, it was not surprising that as an act of solidarity, some Czech nationals sent the symbolic amount of 1,968 Czech crowns ($80) to Ukraine – in addition to providing other aid – to help it defend itself against Russia and to commemorate the invasion (MULLER 2022). For both the Polish and Czech governments and people, Ukraine was defending "them," as well as the rest of Europe, from Russia. Thus, *"the need to join the fight against the aggressor and to help was realized not by military action in the country of war, but by humanitarian action in the country receiving refugees"* (ANDREJUK 2023: 7). As Macková et al. (2024: 15) argue, the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine "led to a societal and political consensus regarding helping refugees" in both Poland and the Czech Republic. In their view, *"this consensus was strengthened by the geographic and cultural proximity of refugees and the structure of the migration wave that consisted of many vulnerable groups, including women and children"* (IBID.).

While each government planned its response and INGOs raised money, ordinary individuals and civil society organizations in Poland and the Czech Republic acted immediately, rushing to the border with food and clothes and organizing a range of services and support. In both countries, much of the aid came from local citizens who organized spontaneously to provide small-scale assistance (food, clothing, transportation). As the war continued into the summer of 2022, various activities aimed at providing for long-term needs (apartments, training, jobs) were also created, not only to address those long-term needs, but also to help integrate Ukrainians into the local society (CULLEN DUNN – KALISZEWSKA 2023). Citizen aid is difficult to track and measure, but like others, we argue that in Poland and the Czech Republic, grassroots humanitarian action not only upended the existing global humanitarian system, but some of the initiatives, in fact, morphed into examples of mutual aid and tried to restructure aspects of Polish and Czech society. The following section identifies two small-scale grassroots

initiatives in each country, first the ones in Poland and then those in the Czech Republic.

POLISH RESPONSES

On March 12, 2022, the Polish parliament adopted a comprehensive law that provided Ukrainians fleeing the war with protection and the right to work in Poland (OFFICE FOR FOREIGNERS 2022). Ukrainian refugees were also given access to free health care and public education. This and subsequent laws gave Ukrainian families seeking shelter in Poland one-time payments to help cover expenses like food and school supplies. Local governments in Poland responded even faster. Every Polish city organized relief and integration efforts differently, but most worked with local civil society organizations, health care professionals, and citizen groups. Since many of the cities that received the largest numbers of Ukrainian refugees were led by mayors from opposition parties (Warsaw, Gdansk, Wrocław), city officials complained that the national government was getting the credit for the country's well-managed crisis while they – local governments and ordinary Polish citizens – were the ones paying for and doing the work (WANAT 2022).

The reaction of the Polish government and local NGOs to the influx of Ukrainian refugees has been substantial and inspiring, but it was the actions of private Polish citizens and volunteers that surprised and impressed the world, earning the country the title of a humanitarian superpower (GF. – BRZEZINSKI 2023). Especially in the first months of the war, most of the aid for Ukrainian refugees in Poland was spontaneous, and provided by individuals and informal ad-hoc needs-based partnerships (RUDNICKI 2023). As the UN Special Rapporteur on the human rights of migrants observed in July 2022, Polish citizens demonstrated both "solidarity and generosity" in responding to the Ukrainian refugees (OHCHR 2022).

It is difficult to estimate precisely how much money or in-kind assistance private individuals provided for Ukrainian refugees in Poland during 2022. One survey found that a month and a half after the beginning of the war, 75% of Poles polled indicated that they provided in-kind assistance; 59% contributed financially while 12% organized aid initiatives, 8% accepted refugees in their homes, and 6% were volunteers at refugee reception points that were created around the country (CBOS 2022: 8). Polish citizens,

moreover, overwhelmingly supported the assistance and activities provided to Ukrainians by Polish society (96%), NGOs (85%), local government (83%), the central government (79%), and the Catholic Church (55%) (Ibid.: 10). Over time, the private citizen involvement decreased. Nevertheless, since the beginning of the conflict, a stable percentage of Polish citizens, averaging around 80%, have indicated that they are in favor of continuing to accept and support refugees from Ukraine (CBOS 2023: 4)

According to Olga Byrska, within the first few months of the full-scale war, hundreds of volunteer initiatives were created to lay the foundation for the humanitarian aid in Poland (BYRSKA 2023; RAZEM 2024; RUDNICKI 2023). And as the war continued and state and local actors failed to provide the needed support, Polish humanitarians started to establish small-scale and informal initiatives aimed at integrating Ukrainians into Polish society. Of the hundreds of spontaneous initiatives that have emerged, the following highlights just two. These examples not only highlight how these activities unfolded, but they also illustrate the continuum of citizen aid, from providing immediate material goods to creating programs aimed at providing longer-term community support and promoting integration.

Because the most obvious and sustained grassroots assistance in Poland surfaced in railway stations throughout the country, which witnessed, *"as never before, mass mobilizations of thousands of ordinary people and a true explosion of citizens' commitment to the cause of the refugees"* (DOMARADZKI ET AL. 2022), we first discuss the Wrocław Central Train Station Initiative. Within days of Russia's invasion, ordinary citizens, usually prompted by Facebook posts and news that the city would be inundated by Ukrainians, showed up at train stations to help (INTERVIEW MCMAHON WITH PAWEL RUDNICKI, MARCH 27, 2023, WROCŁAW). As one of the initiators of the relief effort in Wrocław recalls, *"The main concern was to ensure the safety of both those arriving and those staying at the station. It was also a matter of providing at least a minimum of care and assistance to those arriving in Wrocław"* (PERCHLA-WŁOSIK 2022: 171). Since the station's managers did not know how they would accommodate a large influx of people, they approached the "Stacja Dialog café" (Station Dialog Cafe) located within the main hall of Wrocław's main train station.

Since 2021, the café has been run by the *Christian Association Aid to the Church in Need*, an international non-governmental organization founded in

Germany in 1947 that is linked to the Catholic Church. As a missionary café that received refugees, served drinks, and provided temporary shelter for asylum seekers, *Station Dialog* agreed to help with the influx of Ukrainians. By engaging in "ad hoc crisis management," volunteers alleviated some of the stress placed on the national and local governments by providing Ukrainians with food, travel support, and shelter, if they chose to stay in Wrocław (IBID.). As the weeks went by, hundreds of citizens from Wrocław donned a yellow vest and worked a shift in the railway station. According to Pawel Rudnicki, the author of *Who, if Not Us? Community and Action at the Main Railway Station in Wrocław* (*Kto, jak nie my? Wspólnota i działanie na Dworcu Głównym we Wrocławiu*), it was easy to become a volunteer at Wrocław's main train station, and, as Rudnicki says, *"I was looking for an opportunity to do something"* (Interview McMahon, March 27, 2023). There were forms online, and people could volunteer as little or as much as they liked.

Importantly, the people who volunteered at Wrocław's main train station were ordinary citizens without any background in humanitarian assistance who merely wanted to "do something" with their time, skills, and resources. Some volunteers organized around one of the many priests who were involved in this initiative, who became one of the first leaders in Wrocław to institutionalize and organize volunteer activities. According to Perchla-Włosik, *"[a]ctivities were carried out on many levels. From the reception of arriving people by the so-called 'platform people', giving them a word of encouragement, a warm meal, information on what and how they can use, [and] handing out the most necessary things brought by the inhabitants of Wrocław"* to finding accommodation in the halls of the station, helping to organize places to stay, providing medical aid, and helping with luggage (IBID.: 171).

As Rudnicki admits, *"[w]e didn't expect so many people,"* but hundreds, if not thousands, of Ukrainians passed through the Wrocław station every day after February 24 and for about three months during the spring of 2022. Since Wrocław had many citizens whose families came from eastern Poland (what is now Ukraine), the city became one of the main hubs and destinations for refugees coming from Ukraine. More than 100,000 refugees passed through the railway station in Wrocław during the first 4 weeks of the war, and by April 1, 2022, the Ukrainian population in Wrocław doubled, reaching over 140,000 residents, or approximately 23% of the city's total population (WOJDATA ET AL. 2022). About 6,500 new Ukrainian children were

attending educational institutions in Wrocław in the fall of 2022, including 1500 in kindergartens, 4325 in primary schools, and 672 in secondary schools (BŁASZCZYK ET AL. 2024: 194).

The spontaneous volunteering, however, did not last long. After a couple of weeks, the Ukraine Foundation, a non-governmental organization based in Wrocław, stepped in to organize the volunteers and ensure that other longer-term needs of refugees were being addressed. Created in 2013 to support migrants and refugees from Ukraine living in Lower Silesia, in 2016 the Foundation started to work with migrants from other countries who were living in Poland and wanted to integrate into Polish society. In 2016, the Ukraine Foundation created the Ukrainian Center for Culture and Development, and a year later it expanded to include the Information Point for Migrants. Since the Ukrainian Foundation had resources and experience, it started to play a crucial role in the main train station's efforts. According to one of the volunteers, *"[t]he Ukraine Foundation took the volunteers under its wings after about three weeks, when it became clear that the helpdesk should be open 24 hours a day, every day"* (PERCHLA-WŁOSIK 2022: 172).

As these volunteers joined with *the Ukraine Foundation* and other groups, an action plan was created: people familiar with computers created applications to collect and recruit volunteers, lawyers created documentation and forms for volunteers to authorize their actions, and other volunteers created parental consent forms for children and young people. However, as many confirm, it was "the people" who reacted first, and *the Ukraine Foundation* and the city joined in these activities later.

By the summer's end, the activities in Wrocław's main train station slowed, with *the Ukraine Foundation* taking over the management of humanitarian assistance and formalizing its activities by obtaining a separate room at the railway station where its employees were paid to provide information to migrants and refugees from any country. The solidarity with migrants and refugees, however, led to the creation of *the Information Point*, which is managed by the *Ukraine Foundation's Institute of Migrant Rights* and provides information on employment, housing, education, cultural activities, and important matters to foreigners who are interested in settling in Wrocław. Although the large numbers of volunteers disappeared from the train station by the end of 2022, ordinary citizens in Wrocław, driven by

feelings of solidarity with the refugees and the circumstances they faced in Poland, continue to provide support while creating new social institutions and initiatives to help integrate Ukrainians into Polish society. Referencing a quintessential example of mutual aid, Rudnicki explains, *"We were providing help for refugees, but also helping ourselves because we saw support for Ukrainians as a form of progress for Polish society, which wanted to 'do something' to create a new kind of civil society. For many, this 'small activism' was a way to demonstrate a new kind of Polish society, 'one that creates something good'"* (Interview McMahon with Rudnicki, March 27, 2023).

Similar to the *Wrocław Central Train Station Initiative*, another group that emerged spontaneously to fill an important need was *Women Take the Wheel (Kobiety Za Kółko)*, which was started in early March of 2022, just after the war started. Unlike in the cases of the train station initiatives that cropped up in several cities throughout the country, Elżbieta Jarmulska organized this virtual group completely online, using Facebook to connect refugees with drivers who would pick them up at the border. This citizen aid was started by women and was designed to help women; according to Jarmulska, she *"empathized with those arriving, alone or with children, after a difficult journey to a different country where the language is foreign and men, however well-intentioned, are offering rides, sometimes late at night"* (PETRI 2022). Since approximately 90% of the refugees from Ukraine were women and their children under 18 years old, Polish women, from the beginning of the full-scale war, were thinking about the unique circumstances women and their children face.

At least initially, the border towns were littered with a lot of men standing with cardboard signs with Mexico, Turkey, Switzerland, or Germany written on them, ostensibly inviting the women to come to live with them in these countries. Although Jarmulska realizes that most of the men were probably harmless, she also imagined seeing them through the eyes of Ukrainian women who had just fled violent Russian troops (WOMEN TAKE THE WHEEL 2022). The women and children arrived in Poland from a terrible war. They didn't speak Polish or English. They didn't know what was going on, and they believed what anyone told them. The goal of the informal initiative was quite simple: to provide Ukrainian refugees with a "bubble of safety" (POLISH RADIO 2022). Within a month, members of *Women at the Wheel* safely transported around 300 women and children from the border.

Although *Women Take the Wheel* is an all-women initiative, the organizers know how important safety is, and all of their drivers are required to follow specific instructions. For example, the volunteers register themselves at the reception point with their passport or ID, so that the officials know who they are and can track where the volunteers are taking the refugees. And for every group transported, *Women Take the Wheel* representatives provide printed materials that ask the refugees for basic information, including where they want to go, where they are coming from, and whether or not they have a place to sleep. The group also provides riders with hot spots for their cell phones in their cars, so that they can inform their relatives back home that they're safe. Their husbands often ask for a video to make sure that their families are safe. As of early 2024, the association has more than 2,500 members on Facebook from all over the world, and while almost three years have passed since the organization was created and its posts are less frequent and urgent than in 2022, the online group still exists, posts information and answers requests to transport people or things.

CZECH RESPONSES

Similarly to Poland, on March 17, 2022, the Czech Republic also signed into law a comprehensive package of three governmental bills, referred to in the media as Lex Ukraine, that provided Ukrainians fleeing the war with a temporary residential status and the right to work in the country. Ukrainian refugees were given access to free health care and public education, and provided with subsidized accommodation. However, after a year, the state funding – particularly for shelters and accommodation – was reduced, leaving many refugees facing numerous challenges and even homelessness.[7] A month after the state funding was reduced, the media reported that seven out of ten Ukrainian refugees in the Czech Republic lived below the poverty line (PROKOP ET AL. 2023). A new law – *Lex Ukraine V* – shifted the responsibilities for the refugees from the government to NGOs and civil society groups. From the beginning of the war, however, individuals provided significant support, spontaneously volunteering, buying train tickets (before Ukrainians were allowed to travel for free), providing transportation, buying groceries, and even opening their homes to the first wave of Ukrainian migrants.

While the Czech government had substantially supported Ukrainian refugees by providing them with legal status and access to social welfare benefits until the passage of Lex Ukraine V, many Czech citizens, NGOs, and non-state affiliated groups also provided material and non-material help after the Russian invasion began. In their analysis of Czech NGO leaders' perspectives on the Ukrainian refugee crisis, Tara Kolar Bryan et al. (2023) stress the crucial role that Czech NGOs played as first-line responders for Ukrainian refugees since the Czech government did not pass the temporary protection legislation for almost a month after the Russian invasion. The authors argue that *"during the beginning days and weeks of the Ukrainian crisis, Czech NGOs were on the ground helping refugees immediately after the outbreak of the Russian invasion, while the central government was slower to respond"* (IBID.: 39). Other scholars also stressed the importance of the NGOs' rapid assistance and expertise in the initial phase of the Ukrainian resettlement while pointing out the challenges migrant-assisting NGOs in the Czech Republic experienced in their relationship with the government. Because the state wanted the NGOs to distribute assistance without politicizing the issue, it pressured the NGOs to adopt roles of simple service providers rather than serving as advocates for the migrants (IBID.; JELÍNKOVÁ ET AL. 2024).

The major NGOs, including the *Czech Red Cross* and *People in Need* (*Člověk v tísni*), took the lead in providing aid to Ukrainian refugees from the beginning of the war. These well-established NGOs, which had also been present in Ukraine since the annexation of Crimea, and a consortium of migrant-assisting NGOs, formed a cluster of initiatives called Help Ukraine (*Pomáhej Ukrajině*). The consortium included several organizations, such as *Organizace pro pomoc uprchlíkům (OPU)*, *Adra*, *Most*, *Charita ČR*, *Sdružení pro integraci a migraci*, *Inbáze*, *Meta*, *Amnesty International*, *Amiga*, *Nesehnutí*, *Diakonica*, *La Strada*, *Člověk v tísni*, and *Pomáháme lidem na útěku*, and they had a bold media presence. While many of the involved NGOs provided basic material and non-material help,8 some of the organizations were also responding to specific and immediate needs, such as morning-after pills for assaulted women or medical and therapeutic help for women who could not receive help either in Ukraine, Poland, or elsewhere. This included help and placement for those in urgent medical need, including cancer and critical-care patients.

Rather than focusing on established Czech NGOs or the cluster initiative Help Ukraine and its actors, we analyze two smaller organizations – Prague's *Main Train Station Initiative* (*Iniciativa Hlavák*) and *Grandmas without Borders* (*Babičky bez hranic*) – and their bottom-up initiatives driven by volunteers who are part of the wave of local support. Both of these organizations focused on migration issues prior to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and both continue to deal with long-term migrants' issues, promoting women's solidarity and racial inclusion. Both have also provided support to Syrian refugees and other migrants who arrived during the major migration wave in 2015. Besides offering direct help for almost a decade, both organizations have also engaged in pro-migrant advocacy, reinforcing citizens' solidarity and inclusive integration.

As a grassroots organization, *the Main Train Station Initiative* has been supporting migrants arriving by train to Prague's main train station – known as *Hlavák* – for a decade. While the organization has provided aid to migrants from Syria, Afghanistan, and other countries since 2015, it has been focused largely on coordinating help and providing assistance to the thousands of Ukrainian refugees who have been arriving in the Czech Republic since the Russian full-scale invasion. By late summer of 2022, the organization was helping between 200 and 450 Ukrainian refugees a day (INICIATIVA HLAVÁK 2022). Along with providing food, clothing, and information, its volunteers helped Ukrainians arrange accommodations, which were often provided by individual citizens. They also assisted with information, particularly regarding *the Regional Assistance Center for Help to Ukraine* (*Krajské asistenční centrum pomoci Ukrajině, KACPU*) in Prague, where Ukrainian migrants could apply for temporary protection and thus receive a legal stay and access to social benefits. While the organization has several official positions, it relies heavily on a large pool of volunteers who have provided food, clothing, short-term accommodations and information to migrants arriving from various countries.

The Main Train Station Initiative describes itself as the only organization that, in the absence of state services, provides daily support to migrants, and is committed to providing assistance until the war in Ukraine ends (INICIATIVA HLAVÁK 2022). When the war started in February 2022, members of the *Main Train Station Initiative* worked alongside governmental and city representatives when providing help to Ukrainian refugees. In the

first days of the war, the group successfully handled as many as 7,000 refugees from Ukraine daily (IBID.). Their front desk at the main train station in Prague consisted of volunteers and immigration officers checking the refugees' documents and sending them to the regional assistance centers run by the Czech government for paperwork processing and further services sponsored by the government.

The Czech government's response to the influx of refugees, however, was not all positive. In summer 2022, with Prague's main train station serving not only as a transit hub but also as a site for months-long accommodations for Roma Ukrainian refugees, *the Main Train Station Initiative* criticized the government's neglect of the Roma refugees. Due to racial and ethnic prejudice, the Czech government failed to find suitable accommodations for about 300 Roma Ukrainians in the summer of 2022, even though it was able to provide housing for close to half a million non-Roma Ukrainian refugees. As a result, the Roma Ukrainians had to resort to sleeping at Prague's main train station in undignified conditions that were never designed for long-term stays. According to *the Main Train Station Initiative*'s statement, over 3,800 people spent at least one night at the railway station during April 2022, and at the beginning of May 2022, about 400 people were sleeping in the train station each night (IBID.). In the vast majority of cases, these were Ukrainian Roma women and children. Some slept on emergency beds or in a parked train. However, a significant number of them had to spend the night on the ground in the train station building.

The representatives of *the Main Train Station Initiative* consequently publicly and openly criticized the Czech governmental interventions regarding their role and conduct in the reception of Roma Ukrainians, especially since the government proposed building humanitarian tents to accommodate the hundreds of Roma Ukrainian refugees rather than being able to find more permanent accommodations. The organization insisted on remaining "independent" of governmental actors and their objectives, pointing to other shortcomings in the handling of Roma Ukrainians (e.g., they exposed political pressures not to help certain groups of refugees before the elections) and demanding reforms because after the idea of using humanitarian tents was rejected, the Czech government proposed housing Roma Ukrainians in detention centers. The integration of the Roma population

into Czech culture is a work in progress in the whole region, where Roma still experience a great deal of prejudice and discrimination (IBID.).

Václav Walach (2023) analyzes the failure of the Czech government to find suitable accommodations for Ukrainian Roma in the context of individual, institutional, and structural anti-Roma racism in Czech society. He also discusses instances of racism involving Czech volunteers who provided help on the Slovak-Ukrainian border, but who then refused to transfer the Roma refugees past the border to other countries; drivers who refused to allow Roma refugees to board their buses at the border; and volunteers at Prague's main train station who chose to leave rather than help Ukrainian Roma refugees (TAIT 2022). In addition to individual racism, Walach argues that institutional and structural anti-Roma racism also played an important role in the failure to provide Ukrainian Roma with protective status, housing, and other social benefits.[9]

Grandmas without Borders, composed of civic activists and founding members of a variety of civic initiatives, is another group that has been helping Ukrainian refugees, as well as refugees and migrants from several other countries. Operating mainly from Prague, the collective is predominantly composed of women, and includes activists, writers, artists, journalists, doctors, and former dissidents who were opponents of the communist regime prior to 1989. The group has been offering material, practical, psychological, and legal help to refugees from Syria, Chechnya and Afghanistan, as well as Ukraine. Since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the group's activities have included a wide spectrum of assistance, including fundraising, hosting refugees in their homes, and donating food, clothing, and their time. While they organize practical help, they also engage in pro-migrant advocacy, writing open letters to politicians, organizing petitions, publishing their pro-migration views in brief statements, and engaging in public discussions on migration and integration issues. While they have been active for years, Russia's war in Ukraine has concentrated their energy on the influx of Ukrainian refugees.

Building on the wave of grassroots aid and solidarity in Czech society in 2022, *Grandmas without Borders* became more active and mobilized a large group of volunteers who understood the need to donate time and resources. One of the group's initiatives focused on creating a safe meeting

space for Ukrainian women. From March to August 2022, the group ran *Café Žinka* ("Women's Cafe" in Ukrainian) in Prague as a networking point for Ukrainian women to meet and find local help and services. Two afternoons a week, *Café Žinka* provided a safe and clean meeting space for Ukrainian women where, over free refreshments, they could reconnect with others, take Czech lessons, meet with a social worker or an art therapist, and network with other Ukrainian women or Czech visitors who brought clothing, food, and language books, and who shared information about jobs, transportation, and housing (Interview Fojtová and Waisserová with Jana Hradilková, June 2023; *Café Žinka*'s Facebook page, *Café Žinka*'s meeting participation June 2023).

Jana Hradilková, one of the founders of *Grandmas without Borders*, explained that the impetus behind the creation of *Café Žinka* came from members of the group, which exemplifies how the group operates through cooperation among the many volunteers. Like many Czechs who housed Ukrainian refugees in their homes, members of *Grandmas without Borders* provided accommodation for Ukrainian women and in the spring of 2022, members of the group identified the need for a dignified place where Ukrainian women could connect with other women. Using her personal contacts and resources, Hradilková reached out to people from other organizations to inquire about the possibility of creating a protected meeting space. Another friend, Juanita Kansil, herself an immigrant from Indonesia who owned a café called *Javanka* in Prague, responded and offered her café as a meeting space in the afternoons between lunch and dinner. Even though the *Javanka* café owner had originally intended to sell her business, she decided to keep the café open for six additional months in order to host *Café Žinka*.

Initially, *Café Žinka* was primarily an information hub, but then it became a place that provided donated clothes and a space to gather. As Hradilková emphasized, the group asked that volunteers bring only nice clothes, those they would want to *"give as a gift rather than to discard"* (Interview Fojtová and Waisserová with Jana Hradilková, June 2023). Soon, other services emerged organically based on the needs of Ukrainian women, including providing Czech and English lessons, as well as therapy sessions and administrative help. Volunteers would also bring their own homemade cakes, fruit from their gardens, and language books, and they

offered rides and provided work and accommodation advice. When *Café Žinka* was established in March 2022, *Grandmas without Borders* and the Ukrainian women refugees were in a state of shock from the invasion and living day-to-day in a very emotionally charged atmosphere, as Hradilková describes. However, even though they all had different experiences, they could come together. As Hradilková explained, *"You are in a different space, we are in a different space, but we can create a parallel space"* (Interview Fojtová and Waisserová with Jana Hradilková, June 2023). *Café Žinka* thus became a "parallel space" that provided a protected location for helping people and providing aid; it also served to inspire people to do something productive, whether it be the Ukrainian women coming to *Café Žinka* to access essential services, or the group's members volunteering. Building on individual strengths and skills, the volunteers created a wide variety of services that developed organically and spontaneously through solidarity, mutual aid, and cooperation.

However, it was challenging for *Grandmas without Borders* to secure a permanent meeting place. In September 2022, the original *Café Žinka* was closed when the owner had to sell her business. Fortunately, a new space became available. The new space offers a well-equipped kitchen, thus providing new opportunities for Ukrainian women to cook together while the Grandmas raise money for groceries or other needs. *Café Žinka* continues to run its own kitchen in its new location. As Jana Hradilková explained, *"I was cooking soup for over one year, but now the Ukrainian women have taken over and cook for themselves"* (Interview Waisserová with Hradilková, January 2024). In addition to preparing and eating meals, the women who visit *Café Žinka* share recipes and knitting needles, they talk and sing together, and they sell what they make. In this new phase of *Café Žinka*, the Ukrainian women run a space where they also provide therapy, support each other, and offer opportunities for the women to regain their dignity. They also gather with displaced women from earlier Russian invasions, women from Chechnya, Georgia, and Ingushetia. These women have taken over the leadership of the weekly Thursday sessions: they lead various workshops, exercise, engage in communal cooking, and organize cultural events that highlight their food and folk music. As Hradilková explains, this was always part of the plan because *"we wanted the [Ukrainian] women to take over and be in charge"* (Interview Fojtová and Waisserová with Hradilková, June 2023). Beyond the immediate relief that the participants of *Café Žinka* offer each

other on a weekly basis, they are also engaged in strategies of future-making and initiating structural changes in migrants' lives.

While we focus only on *Grandmas without Borders* and *the Main Train Station Initiative*, it is important to highlight that these initiatives networked with existing local NGOs with different capacities and goals. Founded by women with extensive experience in working with refugees, as well as a history of dissent pre-dating the 1989 revolution, *Grandmas without Borders* has considerable social capital among Czech aid organizations and has used it to attract volunteers and secure meeting places. After it was established in 2015, *the Main Train Station Initiative* developed close relations with other Czech NGOs, and this cooperation proved to be significant during the influx of Ukrainian refugees. However, working with established NGOs did not change the nature of their work but only expanded their reach and authority.

For example, *the Main Train Station Initiative* has focused primarily on disseminating information about registration centers, and providing translation services and material help to Ukrainian refugees. Because the organization relied on hundreds of volunteers, it was important to have the assistance of another NGO to help with registering, training, and coordinating the volunteers. The NGO that fulfilled this role was *Organizace pro pomoc uprchlíkům* (OPU, *Organization for Aid to Refugees*). As the oldest and largest refugee and immigrant aid organization in the Czech Republic, OPU was founded in 1991 to provide legal and social aid to refugees and immigrants. Given OPU's large professional staff and their long-term legal expertise, members of *the Main Train Station Initiative* were able to discuss complex cases with OPU's legal and social departments.

Their beneficial cooperation has continued, as evidenced by both organizations' efforts to ensure a just distribution of aid to Ukrainian Roma refugees, and the eventual integration of the Ukrainian Roma into Czech society. The position of both organizations is that as long as the war in Ukraine is ongoing, all refugees are entitled to temporary protection and the Czech state should act accordingly. Because the Czech government has not, in fact, treated all refugees equally, members of these organizations have initiated both public protests and legal actions against the government. On the first anniversary of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, February 24, 2023, a press conference was held at Prague's main railway station during which

representatives of the capital city, *the Central Bohemian Regional Authority*, and several other institutions thanked the people who had been providing aid to those fleeing Ukraine. During the press conference, volunteers from *the Main Train Station Initiative* held a public protest to draw attention to the discrimination that Ukrainian Roma refugees faced after arriving in Prague the year prior, in 2022 (BAUDYŠOVÁ – ALBERT 2023). Beyond the public protest, OPU's lawyers have used their legal expertise to successfully address the systemic refusal by the Czech government to grant temporary protection to refugees from Ukraine if they were registered in another country, as was the case with many Ukrainian Roma refugees. According to OPU's website, the *"case is now pending before the EU Court of Justice in Luxembourg (ECJ) and now the Municipal Court in Prague confirmed our argument by rejecting the state's new approach of not deciding such individual refugee cases while waiting for the ECJ verdict and leaving them in limbo for an undefinite [sic] period of time"* (ORGANIZACE PRO POMOC UPRCHLÍKŮM 2024).

One of the reasons the grassroots initiatives discussed in this paper have been successful has been because they have been linked to and collaborated with local NGOs. The willingness of the grassroots organizations and established NGOs to cooperate has been crucial for all sides. Further comparative research can examine if this close and dynamic cooperation and networking in the context of providing assistance to Ukrainian refugees in CEE was unique to the Czech and Polish societies.

CONCLUSION: SOLIDARITY, MUTUAL AID AND COLLECTIVE CARE

The Polish and Czech organizations examined here – *Wrocław's Central Railway Station Initiative*, *Women Take the Wheel*, *Prague's Main Train Station Initiative* and *Grandmas without Borders* – have provided both material and non-material support to Ukrainian refugees, but their assistance is only a small part of what is actually a massive wave of grassroots humanitarianism across Poland, the Czech Republic, and other Central European countries. In this paper, we questioned whether there is any evidence that grassroots aid encouraged new forms of activism or even social movements in these societies. Although we found little evidence of social movements, we do maintain that these organizations are not only extending the limits of material assistance to those in need, but, in solidarity with the refugees

themselves, they are developing formal and informal institutions that promote social integration into these societies. Thus, this grassroots aid is, indeed, changing Polish and Czech society.

In their critique of grassroots humanitarianism – which they believe cannot sustain a long-term commitment – Elizabeth Cullen Dunn and Iwona Kaliszewska argue that so-called *"distributed humanitarianism handles small problems well but breaks down in the face of complex problems that require multiple steps and long-term commitment"* (DUNN – KALISZEWSKA 2023: 10). While we do not necessarily disagree with their overall assessment, our research and analysis of this spontaneous grassroots activism and mutual aid are more promising, suggesting that the groups – and the individuals within those groups – can develop a longer-term commitment to more pro-migrant advocacy.

We also questioned whether these forms of assistance reveal and replicate historical forms of mobilization, or if they represent novel and spontaneous acts of goodwill. Our research suggests both. Although some of these responses, like the train station initiatives and the virtual women's organization *Women Take the Wheel*, responded to a unique crisis and leveraged existing technology, other initiatives are rooted in these countries' recent histories and culture; for example, there is the former dissident identity of some of the activists in Grandmas without Borders or the rise of volunteering since the fall of communism. One study of volunteering in Poland, for example, indicated that although volunteering is a relatively new phenomenon in this country, there has been a significant increase in the number of Polish civil society organizations over the past 30 years since Poland transitioned to democracy (SENGUPTA – VERGHESE – RYS 2023). Moreover, levels of engagement in civil society participation have improved, with 43% of Polish youths providing unpaid time to volunteering in civil society organizations (IBID.: 4). With respect to Czech society, Eva Křížová has argued that "volunteering is deeply embedded in a civic, humanitarian paradigm instead of a religious faith and duty." Křížová adds that, in fact, *"volunteering is higher in the Czech Republic than in other former Eastern European countries and is evidence of a successful and rapid restoration of the civic sector"* (KŘÍŽOVÁ 2012: 110–115). In other words, grassroots assistance and advocacy for those in need are becoming the norm rather than the exception.

Our paper argues that the forms of activism we highlight in both countries resemble the concept of mutual aid, and that the individuals and groups engaging in them share similar objectives: to alleviate suffering and to provide resources, ranging from basic necessities to long-term support, to those in need. Because these initiatives are driven by compassion and solidarity, they represent an effort to honor the human dignity of the Ukrainian refugees. This, we contend, is different from the activities of large humanitarian organizations because it is inspired and carried out by ordinary citizens and not professionals. This kind of activism is also carried out by decentralized and community-led groups, unlike the more traditional humanitarianism that often involves larger organizations with external leadership and resources from the global North. Consequently, we contend that these examples of mutual aid are playing an important role in addressing and altering power dynamics, and issues of sustainability, reciprocity, and civic empowerment. This will have an important impact on the future of humanitarianism. Unlike large INGOs, which can, at times, unwittingly create dependency among the recipients and regularly leave them out of decision making, these local organizations and initiatives endeavor to build community resilience, create a sense of self-sufficiency among the refugees and help them to regain and sustain their dignity.

At the same time, these grassroots organizations face numerous obstacles, including limited resources, issues of sustainability, and low recognition. Although these citizen-led groups simultaneously create and facilitate new partnerships and reinforce collaboration between various mutual aid groups and humanitarian organizations, these partnerships have limitations that still must be observed and addressed. Bryan et al. (2023) found that Czech NGOs, while demonstrating flexibility and agility in the initial Ukrainian refugee response, faced significant capacity and governance challenges. These systemic barriers hindered their resilience. Similarly, Jelínková et al. highlight the frustration of migrant-assisting NGOs due to their exclusion from crucial decision-making processes involving government partnerships. Despite their unique strengths – a strong emphasis on advocacy and a capacity for collective action – Czech NGOs are marginalized in policy discussions, which leaves them grappling with the dilemma of either withdrawing from ineffective collaborations or remaining engaged in them in order to influence incremental improvements (JELÍNKOVÁ ET AL 2024: 7).

Despite these real challenges, the examined initiatives demonstrate a potential to challenge traditional humanitarian organizations and approaches. They also demonstrate the value of decentralized, flexible, and community-led approaches to humanitarian assistance that can address specific needs while empowering individuals and communities. Grounded in coordinated collective care, the mutual aid approach focuses on building new social relationships and changing institutions and social practices for receiving and integrating immigrants.

ENDNOTES

1 Like other authors, we use the term "refugee" for people fleeing the war in Ukraine (Macková et al. 2024). We also use this term *"as a broad umbrella term for people who are fleeing from conflict situations and not within the meaning of Article 1A of the Geneva Convention"* (Macková et al. 2024: 3). However, as Macková et al. (Ibid.) discuss, *"those who are provided with assistance might be more accurately described as 'holders of temporary protection'"*.

2 The Czech Republic's historical reluctance to accommodate refugees is exemplified by the limited reception of less than 9,000 during the 2015–2016 Syrian refugee crisis (Bryan et al. 2023, 37).

3 As Macková et al. (2024: 15) explain, both Poland and the Czech Republic *"were the most affected by the influx of refugees from Ukraine (one per capita, second in absolute numbers), and both introduced temporary protection institutes with similar features to create a safe haven for new arrivals. The EU Temporary Protection Directive was drafted only in the aftermath of the war in Yugoslavia, and it was first activated in 2022"*.

4 The temporary protections will end on March 31, 2025 in the Czech Republic and on September 30, 2025 in Poland.

5 The biggest sums were collected by *Člověk v tísni*, which received 2.35 billion CZK in 2022, which was five times as much as what it received in 2020 (0.435 billion). Out of this amount, the biggest sums went to supporting projects focusing on families and children. Other NGOs that collected funds for Ukrainian refugees included the *Via Foundation (Nadace Via), the Charter 77 Foundation* (*Nadace Charty 77*), and *Charita CR*.

6 Large numbers of Ukrainians started to migrate to Poland in 2014. Many of these migrants (rather than refugees) have worked with Polish civil society to provide assistance to refugees arriving in 2022.

7 The 5th amendment, referred to as "Lex Ukraine V", which came into effect on July 1, 2023, meant that a significant number of refugees no longer met the vulnerability criteria for receiving accommodation assistance. See Lex Ukrajina 5, <https://www.migrace.com/adm/_upload/docs/letak_lexu_unhcr_cz_linky_1686834485.pdf>.

8 In terms of the refugee integration field, Bryan et al. (2023: 39) argue that *"the roles of Czech NGOs are largely limited to delivering needed social services to migrants and refugees. Since its inception over twenty years ago, Czech integration policy has been carried out primarily by NGOs and then by integration centres, established in individual regions over the past decade"*.

9 While Czech officials claimed that many Ukrainian Roma did not qualify for refugee status because they were EU citizens holding a dual nationality, namely a Ukrainian-Hungarian nationality, or because they had specific housing requirements that made it difficult to accommodate large groups that did not want to be separated, the Czech anthropologist Filip Pospíšil highlighted the widespread anti-Roma prejudice and discrimination in Czech society in his focus on institutional and structural racism (Zabloudilová 2022). Specifically, he pointed out various forms of residential segregation, such as the refugee camps and detention centers that the Czech government had established. In his view, the problem of discrimination was particularly visible in the refugee tents at Prague's regional assistance center. Citing a prominent migration researcher, Nicholas De Genova, who drew attention to the fact that the so-called "migrant crisis" of 2015–2016 was actually a racial crisis (De Genova 2018), Walach (2022) analyzes how race plays an important role in contemporary societies in terms of access to resources, and he highlights how much race played a part in the Czech response to the Ukrainian refugees in 2022. For Walach, the events at Prague's main train station became the most visible symbol of a collective failure to provide quality housing to all refugees, regardless of race or ethnicity.

REFERENCES

A

Andrejuk, Katarzyna K. (2023): Rapid Evolution of Refugee Policy in Poland: Russian Invasion of Ukraine as a Focusing Event. *Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies*, pp. 1–14.

B

Barnett, Michael (2006): Building a Republican Peace: Stabilizing States after War. *International Security*, Vol. 30, No. 4, pp. 87–112.

Barnett, Michael (2009): Evolution without Progress? Humanitarianism in a World of Hurt. *International Organization*, Vol. 63, No. 4, pp. 621–663.

Barnett, Michael (2011): Humanitarianism, Paternalism, and the UNHCR. In: Betts, Alexander – Loescher, Gil: *Refugees in International relations*. Oxford: University Press, pp. 105–132.

Barnett, Michael (2017): Hierarchy and Paternalism. In: Zarakol, Ayşe: *Hierarchies in World Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 66–94.

Barnett, Michael – Walker, Peter (2015): Regime Change for Humanitarian Aid: How to Make Relief More Accountable. *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 94, No. 4, pp. 130–141.

Barnett, Michael – Weiss, Thomas G. (2011): *Humanitarianism in Question: Politics, Power, Ethics*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Baudyšová, Jana – Albert, Gwendolyn Albert (2023): PR Backfire: Prague Politicians Thanking Volunteers for Aiding Refugees from Ukraine Are Protested against by Volunteers Reminding Them Romani Refugees Were Discriminated against. *Romea.cz*, 25. 20. 2023, <https://romea.cz/en/czech-republic/pr-backfire-prague-politicians-thanking-volunteers-for-aiding-refugees-from-ukraine-are-protested-against-by-volunteers-reminding-them-romani-refugees-were-discriminated>.

Błaszczyk, Mateusz – Dolińska, Kamilla – Makaro, Julita – Pluta, Jacek (2024): Governance Agility in Reception of War Refugees from Ukraine: The Case of Wrocław, Poland. *Social Policy & Administration*, Vol. 58, No. 1, pp. 189–204.

Blomqvist Mickelsson, Tony (2025): Ukrainian Refugees' Differentiated Treatment: A Critical and Systematic Review. *Global Networks*, Vol. 25, No. 1, <https://doi.org/10.1111/glob.12502>.

Bryan, Tara Kolar – Lea, Monica – Hyánek, Vladimír (2023): Resilience, Ambiguous Governance, and the Ukrainian Refugee Crisis: Perspectives from NGO Leaders in the Czech Republic. *Central European Economic Journal*, Vol. 10, No. 57, pp. 35–49, <https://doi.org/10.2478/ceej-2023-0003>.

Byrska, Olga (2023): Civil crisis management in Poland: The first weeks of the relief in the Russian war on Ukraine. *Journal of Genocide Research*, Vol. 25, No. 3–4, pp. 463–470.

C

Carstensen, Nils – Sebit, Lodia (2023): Mutual Aid in Sudan: The Future of Aid? Humanitarian Practice Network, <https://odihpn.org/publication/mutual-aid-in-sudan-the-future-of-aid/>.

CBOS (2022): Polacy wobec uchodźców z Ukrainy. Komunikat z badań nr.62/2022 (April 2022), 8.

CBOS (2023): Polacy wobec wojny na Ukrainie i ukraińskich uchodźców. Komunikat z badań nr.12/2023 (January 2023), 4.

Cienski, Jan (2017): Why Doesn't Poland Want Refugees? *Politico*, 21. 5. 2017, <https://www.politico.eu/article/politics-nationalism-and-religion-explain-why-poland-doesnt-want-refugees/>.

Coyne, Christopher J. (2013): *Doing Bad by Doing Good: Why Humanitarian Action Fails*. Stanford University Press.

Cullen Dunn, Elizabeth – Kaliszewska, Iwona (2023): Distributed Humanitarianism: Volunteerism and Aid to Refugees during the Russian Invasion of Ukraine. *American Ethnologist*.

D

De Genova, Nicholas (2018): The 'Migrant Crisis' as Racial Crisis: Do Black Lives Matter in Europe? *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, Vol. 41, No. 10, pp. 1765–1782, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2017.1361543>.

Develtere, Patrick – De Bruyn, Tom (2009): The Emergence of a Fourth Pillar in Development Aid. *Development in Practice*, Vol. 19, No. 7, pp. 912–922.

Domaradzki, Jan – Walkowiak, Dariusz – Bazan, Dominika – Baum, Ewa (2022): Volunteering in the Front Line of the Ukrainian Refugee Crisis: A Brief Report from Poland. *Frontiers in Public Health*, 29. 9. 2022.

F

Fechter, Anne-Meike – Schwittay, Anke (2019): Citizen Aid: Grassroots Interventions in Development and Humanitarianism. *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 40, No. 10, pp. 1769–1780.

G

Gf – Brzezinski, Mark (2023): US Ambassador Calls Poland 'Humanitarian Superpower' for Response to Ukraine Crisis. TVN 24 News in English, 9. 5. 2022, <https://tv24.pl/tvn24-news-in-english/us-ambassador-mark-brzezinski-poland-is-a-humanitarian-superpower-5704260>.

H

Hargrave, Karen – Homel, Ksenyia – Dražanová, Lenka (2023): *Public narratives and attitudes towards refugees and other migrants: Poland country profile*. Odi.

Hovet, Jason (2016): Nearly Two Thirds of Czechs Oppose Taking in War Refugees. *Reuters*, 15. 2. 2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-europe-migrants-czech-poll/nearly-two-thirds-of-czechs-oppose-taking-in-war-refugees-poll-idUSKCN0VO1B3>.

I

Iniciativa Hlavák (2022): Vyjádření Iniciativy Hlavák k současné humanitární krizi na Hlavním nádraží [The Hlavák Initiative: Statement of the Hlavák Initiative on the Current Humanitarian Crisis at the Main Railway Station], 20. 6. 2022, <https://iniciativahlavak.cz/ceske/vyjadreni-iniciativy-hlavak-k-soucasne-humanitarni-krizi-na-hlavnim-nadrazi/>.

J

Jelínková, Marie – Plaček, Michal – Ochrana, František (2024): Achieving Better Integration of Ukrainian Refugees in the Czech Republic: Making Use of Expertise and Addressing Cultural Differences. *Nonprofit Policy Forum*, <https://doi.org/10.1515/npf-2023-0059>.

K

Kalinowska, Katarzyna et al. (2023): *Społeczeństwo łatwopalne: praktyki pomagania uchodźcom wojennym z Ukrainy w roku 2022 w Polsce*. Collegium Civitas.

Kennedy, David (2005): *The Dark Sides of Virtue: Reassessing International Humanitarianism*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Křížová, Eva (2012): Volunteering and Mutual Aid in Health and Social Care in the Czech Republic as an Example of Active Citizenship. *Central European Journal of Public Health*, Vol. 20, No. 2, pp. 110–115

L

LSE Department of International Development (2023): Transformational Humanitarian Response: The Example of Poland. LSE Department of International Development, a report commissioned by the Humanitarian Leadership Academy and Save the Children.

M

Macková, Lucie – Zogata-Kusz, Agnieszka – Filipec, Ondřej – Medová, Nikola (2024): Temporary Protection for Ukrainian Refugees in the Czech Republic and Poland. *Nationalities Papers*, pp. 1–20, <https://doi.org/doi:10.1017/nps.2024.61>.

McGee, Darragh – Pelham, Juliette (2018): Politics at play: locating human rights, refugees and grassroots humanitarianism in the Calais Jungle. *Leisure Studies* 37: 22–35, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/02614367.2017.1406979#abstract>.

McMahon, Patrice (2022): Poland's Warm Welcome to About 2 Million Ukrainian Refugees Draws Global Praise, but It Might Not Be Sustainable. *The Conversation*, 18. 8. 2022, <https://theconversation.com/polands-warm-welcome-to-about-2-million-ukrainian-refugees-draws-global-praise-but-it-might-not-be-sustainable-188782>.

M

Mirga-Wójtowicz, Elżbieta – Talewicz-Kwiatkowska, Joanna – Kołaczek, Małgorzata (2022): *Human Rights, Needs and Discrimination: The Situation of Roma Refugees from Ukraine in Poland: Report on Research and Intervention Activities*. Heidelberg: Central Council of German Sinti and Roma.

Muller, Robert (2022): Some Czechs Sending 1,968 Crowns to Ukraine in Memory of 1968 Soviet Invasion. *Reuters*, 21. 8. 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/some-czechs-sending-1968-crowns-ukraine-memory-1968-soviet-invasion-2022-08-21/>.

O

Office for Foreigners, Polish Government (2022): Amendment to the Law on Assistance to Ukrainian Citizens in Connection with the Armed Conflict on the Territory of the Country. Office for Foreigners, Polish Government, 28. 3. 2022, <https://www.gov.pl/web/udsc-en/the-law-on-assistance-to-ukrainian-citizens-in-connection-with-the-armed-conflict-on-the-territory-of-the-country-has-entered-into-force>.

OHCHR (2022): UN Expert Praises Generosity towards Ukrainian Refugees by Poland and Urges Belarus and Poland to End Pushbacks. OHCHR, 28. 7. 2022, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2022/07/un-expert-praises-generosity-towards-ukrainian-refugees-poland-and-urges>.

Organizace pro pomoc uprchlíkům (2024): Skvělá práce právníků OPU pro ukrajinské uprchlíky. OPU, 25. 3. 2024, <https://www.opu.cz/2024/03/25/zskvela-prace-pravniku-opu-pro-ukrajinske-uprchliky/>.

P

Pascucci, Elisa – Gabrielsen Jumbert, Maria (2021): Introduction: Citizen Humanitarianism at European Borders. In: Gabrielsen Jumbert, Maria – Pascucci, Elisa (eds.): *Citizen Humanitarianism at European Borders*. Routledge, pp. 1–14.

Perchla-Włosik, Aleksandra (2022): Pro-social Activities and Grassroots Initiatives during Russia's Attack on Ukraine-Institutional Field in Aid Activities for Ukraine (the Case of the "Wrocław Railway Station"). *Przegląd Nauk o Obronności*, p. 15.

Petri, Alexandra E. (2022): Women in Poland Volunteer as Drivers to Offer Safe Transit to Ukraine's Refugees. *The New York Times*, 9. 4. 2022.

Polish Radio (2022): Q&A Women Take the Wheel. *Polish Radio*, 10. 5. 2022, <https://www.polskieradio.pl/395/7789/artykul/2952726,qanda-women-take-the-wheel>.

Prokop, Daniel – Kavanová, Martina – Škvrňák, Michael – Levinský, Matyáš – Kunc, Michal – Bicanová, Jana (2023): *PAQResearch. Voice of Ukrainians: Education, Housing, Employment, Poverty, Mental Health*. Sociologický ústav Akademie věd ČR, <https://www.paqresearch.cz/content/files/2023/01/PAQ_VoiceOfUkrainians_English_reports_1-3_v3.pdf>.

Q

Quell, Molly (2020): EU Court Says Countries Didn't Meet Refugee Quotas. Courthouse News Service, <https://www.courthousenews.com/poland-hungary-czechs-broke-human-rights-law/>.

R

Razem NGO Forum (2024): Grand Bargain Localization Commitments (Poland Case Study), 27. 6. 2024, p. 14, <https://reliefweb.int/report/poland/grand-bargain-localization-commitments-poland-case-study-june-2024>.

Refugees International Report (2022): Crisis in Ukraine: Humanitarian and Human Rights Imperatives and the Response in Poland. Refugees International Report, <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/506c8ea1e4b01d9450dd53f5/t/623a3989fa68e16858723741/1647982998677/Ukraine+Report+-+March+2022+-+FINAL.pdf>.

Rosman, Rebecca (2022): Poland Has Taken in More Ukrainian Refugees Than Any Other EU Country. Local Mayors Say They're Running Out of Money. *The World*, 1. 11. 2022, <https://theworld.org/stories/2022/11/01/poland-has-taken-more-ukrainian-refugees-any-other-eu-country-local-mayors-say>.

Roth, Silke (2019): Humanitarian NGOs. In: Davies, Thomas (ed.): *Routledge Handbook of NGOs and International Relations*. Routledge, pp. 267–282.

Rozakou, Katerina (2017): Solidarity #Humanitarianism: The Blurred Boundaries of Humanitarianism in Greece. *Etnofoor*, Vol. 29, No. 2, pp. 99–104.

Rudnicki, Pawel (2023): *Kto, jak nie my? Wspólnota i działanie na Dworcu Głównym we Wrocławiu (marzec-kwiecień 2022)*. Wrocław: Scientific Publishing House of the Lower Silesian University of Technology.

S

Saltmarsh, Matthew (2022): Polish Border Town Welcomes Refugees from Ukraine, but Will Itself Need Help. UNHCR, 16. 3. 2022, <https://www.unhcr.org/us/news/stories/polish-border-town-welcomes-refugees-ukraine-will-itself-need-help>.

Sandri, Elisa (2017): 'Volunteer Humanitarianism': volunteers and humanitarian aid in the Jungle refugee camp of Calais. *Journal of ethnic and migration studies* 44.1: 65–80, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1369183X.2017.1352467#d1e118>.

Schnable, Allison (2016): The Era of Do-It-Yourself Aid: Possibilities and Perils. *Bridge/Work*, Vol. 2, No. 1, pp. 1–14.

Sengupta, Debashish – Verghese, Aniisu K. – Rys, Maciej (2023): Motivations of Volunteering during Crises – Perspectives of Polish Youths during the Ukrainian Refugee Crisis. *Administrative Sciences*, Vol. 13, No. 2, pp. 1–20.

Slim, Hugo (2022): Solidarity, Not Neutrality, Will Characterize Western Aid to Ukraine. *Ethics & International Affairs*, <www.ethicsandinternationalaffairs.org/2022/solidarity-not-neutrality-willcharacterize-western-aid-to-ukraine/>.

Spade, Dean (2020a): Solidarity Not Charity: Mutual Aid for Mobilization and Survival. *Social Text*, Vol. 38, No. 1, pp. 131–151.

Spade, Dean (2020b): *Mutual Aid: Building Solidarity during This Crisis (and the Next)*. Verso Books.

T

Tait, Robert (2022): 'They Won't Accept Us': Roma Refugees Forced to Camp at Prague Train Station. *The Guardian*, 25. 5. 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2022/may/25/they-wont-accept-us-roma-refugees-forced-to-camp-at-prague-train-station>.

Taithe, Bertrand (2019): Demotic Humanitarians: Historical Perspectives on the Global Reach of Local Initiatives, 1940–2017. *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 40, No. 10, pp. 1781–1798.

Ticktin, Miriam (2014): Transnational Humanitarianism. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, Vol. 43, No. 1, pp. 273–289.

Tilles, Daniel (2021): Most Poles Are Opposed to Accepting Refugees and Half Want a Border Wall: Poll. *Notes from Poland*, 26. 8. 2021, <https://notesfrompoland.com/2021/08/26/most-poles-opposed-to-accepting-refugees-and-half-want-border-wall-poll/>.

U

UNHCR Operational Data Portal (n.d.): Ukraine Refugee Situation. UNHCR Operational Data Portal, <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/ukraine>.

UNOHC, United Nations Office of the High Commissioner (2022): UN Expert Praises Generosity towards Ukrainian Refugees by Poland and Urges Belarus and Poland to End Pushbacks. United Nations Office of the High Commissioner, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2022/07/un-expert-praises-generosity-towards-ukrainian-refugees-poland-and-urges>.

V

Vandevoordt, Robin – Fleischmann, Larissa (2020): Impossible Futures? The Ambivalent Temporalities of Grassroots Humanitarian Action. *Critical Sociology*, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0896920520932655>.

W

Walach, Václav (2022): Záleží na romských životech? Ukrajinští uprchlíci a naše rasová smlouva. *Migrace Online*, <https://migraceonline.cz/cz/e-knihovna/zalezi-na-romskych-zivotech-ukrajinsti-uprchlici-a-nase-rasova-smlouva>.

Wanat, Zosia (2022): Poland's Generous Welcome of Ukrainian Refugees Shows Signs of Strain. *Politico*, 11. 3. 2022, <https://www.politico.eu/article/poland-dunkirk-moment-refugee-ukraine-war/>.

Weselowsky, Tony (2022): As Czech Support for Refugees Wanes, Ukrainians Fleeing the War are Facing Tougher Choices. *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 24. 8. 2022.

Wojdata, Marcin – Pachocka, Marta – Sobestjańska, Anna – Sopińska, Alicja – Wojno, Magdalena (2022): Nowy dom czy chwilowy azyl? Sytuacja uchodźców z Ukrainy wnioskujących o numer PESEL w 12 największych polskich miastach pod koniec kwietnia 2022 r. Centrum Analiz i Badań Unia Metropolii Polskich im. P. Adamowicza.

Women Take the Wheel (2022): Polish Women Band Together to Give Ukrainian Women Car Rides to Safe Refuge. *National Public Radio*, 21. 8. 2022.

Z

Zabloudilová, Táňa (2022): Systém pomoci uprchlíkům se řítí do průšvihu. Česku chybí nejen ubytovací kapacity. *Alarm*, 4. 5. 2022, <https://denikalarm.cz/2022/05/system-pomoci-uprchlikum-se-riti-do-prusvihu-cesku-chybi-nejen-ubytovaci-kapacity/>.

Zogata-Kusz, Agnieszka – Öbrink Hobzová, Milena – Cekiera, Rafał (2023): Deserving of Assistance: The Social Construction of Ukrainian Refugees. *Ethnopolitics*, pp. 1–20, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17449057.2023.2286779>.

NOTE

We would like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their comments.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Simona Fojtová is a Professor and the Director of Women's, Gender and Sexuality Studies at Transylvania University in Lexington, Kentucky. Her research focuses on issues of gender and sexuality and activism in Central and Eastern Europe. Her work has appeared in *Aspasia*, *Contemporary Literature*, the *NWSA Journal*, the *Journal of Lesbian Studies*, and *Queer Visibility in Post-socialist Cultures*. She has also contributed two chapters to *Czech Feminisms: Perspectives on Gender in East Central Europe*, edited by Jiřina Šiklová and Iveta Jusová, which earned the 2017 Heldt Prize for best book in Slavic/Eastern European/Eurasian Women's and Gender Studies.

Patrice McMahon is a Council on Foreign Relations International Affairs Fellow based at the Community of Democracies in Poland. She is a Professor at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln (UNL) in the United States. She is currently writing a book on Polish humanitarianism, Ordinary People, with a grant from the National Endowment for Humanities. Her research focuses on humanitarian affairs, peacebuilding, civil society activism, and U.S. foreign policy. Most recently, she was the co-author and co-editor of *Activism in Hard Times in Central and Eastern Europe: People Power* (Routledge Press). Her research has appeared in various publications, including *Foreign Affairs*, *Political Science Quarterly*, *Human Rights Quarterly*, *East European Politics and Societies*, *Democratization*, and *Ethnopolitics*.

Hana Waisserová is an associate professor of practice of Czech and Central European Studies and an affiliate of the Harris Centre for Judaic Studies at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. She co-authored a book titled *Women's Artistic Dissent. Repelling Totalitarianism in Pre-1989 Czechoslovakia* (Lexington Books, 2023) and contributed to *Modern Czech Literature: Writing in Times of Political Trauma* (Vernon Press, 2024). Her research concerns South Asian and Central European women's transnational literature, women's totalitarian experiences, women dissidents and their activism, medieval Czech literature, and Czech-American culture in Nebraska. Her research appeared in *Litteraria Pragensia*, *Pandanus, Kosmas*, *Czechoslovak and Central European Journal*, *Czech Language News, Literature*, *Media and Cultural Studies*, *American and British Studies Annual*, *Great Plains Quarterly*, and *Fema*.