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Polish Local Government Aid to Refugees from Ukraine on the Example of the City of Poznań¹

Adrian Wojtasz²

Abstract

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 resulted in a mass migration of refugees. Poland, as a neighbour, took in those fleeing the war and deployed them in cities in different parts of the country. A large part of the population was taken in by towns and cities in the east of Poland, but Ukrainian citizens were leaving further west. One city that provided assistance was Poznań, which, in cooperation with many local institutions, created living conditions for the refugees. The article analyses the actions that the local government carried out to deal with the migration crisis and what goals guided them.

Keywords: migrants; refugees; Ukraine; aid; Poznań.

Introduction

The outbreak of armed conflict within Ukraine has resulted in an influx of refugees into bordering countries. One of them was Poland, which has so far accepted more than 7.7 million people (Straż Graniczna, 2022, November 14). Assistance to persons at risk is guaranteed by the Republic of Poland through “The Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees”, also known as the 1951 Refugee Convention (Konwencja, 1951). According to a report by the Centre for Analysis and Research of the Union of Polish Metropolises, most refugees from Ukraine went mainly to 12 cities. These were: Białystok, Bydgoszcz, Gdańsk, Katowice, Kraków, Lublin, Łódź, Poznań, Rzeszów, Szczecin, Warsaw and Wrocław (Raport o uchodźcach z Ukrainy, 2022). One of the first actions of the Polish government was the adoption by the parliament of the Act on “Assistance to Ukrainian Citizens in Connection with the Armed Conflict on the Territory of Ukraine”. This happened already on 12 March 2022. It regulated many issues related to social life and the existence of refugees in the new reality. Those who crossed the Polish border after 24 February 2022 were given the possibility of legal residence for a period of 18 months (Ustawa o pomocy, 2022). Article 12. para. 4. of the same Act gives the possibility, among others, to the local self-government, on its own initiative and within the scope of its financial resources, to provide assistance to Ukrainian citizens. Previously, they did not have such possibilities. In Poland, local self-government is divided into three levels: commune,

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district and voivodeship. They are not subordinate to each other, but operate on the principle of subsidiarity (Dolnicki, 2021: 316-324).

The city of Poznań, when organizing aid for refugees in the Greater Poland voivodeship, took a joint initiative with a number of organizations, both governmental and non-governmental, and established a provincial reception point and a warehouse for aid products (Poznań, 2022, February 28). The aim of this paper is to present the ways in which local government in Poland provides aid. The activities of the authorities of the City of Poznań, which is an important urban centre in the western part of the country, are used as a case study. The following research questions are addressed in the paper: How does Poznań stand out from other cities in providing assistance to refugees? What measures have been taken to assist refugees arriving in the city? These were answered by attempting a situational description from the outbreak of war in Ukraine until September 2022.

Reception Point

Already at the beginning of the war, the administration of the City of Poznań made a concerted effort to welcome refugees into the agglomeration. Cooperation was established with the Poznań International Fair and the Greater Poland Voivode, who is the central government's representative in the region. Since 28 February, a reception point has started operating in one of the fair halls at the main railway station (Poznań, 2022, February 28). The hall was divided into 3 zones: information and registration, café and storage and accommodation. The point on the grounds of the Poznań International Fair was set up to provide refugees with a hot meal or basic medical care. Volunteers, who were soon recruited, provided key information on their status and residence options (Caritas, 2022). From the reception point, refugees were also deployed to their assigned places of stay. At the same time, 700 accommodation places were prepared in the halls of the Poznań International Fair, while 400 places were prepared in the nearby Arena Performance Hall. These activities were carried out by the MTP Group Company in cooperation with the Greater Poland Voivodeship Office in Poznań, the Poznań City Hall and the In_Spire Foundation. Overnight, an accommodation facility was set up in the halls of the Poznań International Fair. On the first day of its operation, all the places were occupied (MTP, 2022).

A storage area was set up in Pavilion No. 4, where Poznań residents were able to bring donations of food, hygiene items and clothing from 2 March 2022. Blankets, sleeping bags, mattresses, medicines and clothing were also stored in the 3,6000 sq m hall. The items were later transported to a location near Lublin in the Podkarpackie voivodeship, where the warehouses of the Government Strategic Reserve Agency are located. Only from there they were distributed to the war-affected area of

Ukraine. Some of the donated items were distributed to refugees in Greater Poland (Poznań, 2022, February 28).

In August 2022, the reception desk was moved to another building in the Poznań International Fair complex. This was due to the reduced number of refugees coming into the city. All services offered by the office were retained there, these included SIM card registration, medical care, COVID-19 vaccination, legal and psychological advice (TVP, 2022, August 10).

Own City Actions

Resolution No. LXI/1136/VIII/2022 of the Poznań City Council of 24 March 2022 introduced a specific list of assistance for refugees from Ukraine. According to the provisions of this document, the city is to provide them with accommodation, all-day collective meals, financing of transport, provision of cleaning and personal hygiene products, clothing and food and other products necessary for day-to-day functioning, supporting the process of adaptation, integration and professional activation, financing of municipal services, financing of educational tasks related to the education, upbringing and care of children and pupils (Uchwała, 2022). In accordance with the decision of councillors and the Municipal Transport Company, all Ukrainians who arrived in Poland after 24 February were given the opportunity to travel free on public transport. Travel on buses and trams within the Poznań agglomeration was possible on the basis of special certificates (Poznań, 2022, June 7). The document was valid for 30 days from the date of issue, but the decision was extended to 60 days. In June 2022, Poznań city councillors decided that all certificates could be used until a maximum of 30 June. After this time, refugees had to buy the same tickets as Poles (Radio Poznań, 2022). The free travel was motivated by the municipal authorities so that refugees could deal with some of the formalities, such as applying for a national identification number (PESEL) organizing a place to stay or applying for cash benefits.

A municipal helpdesk has also been set up in Poznań on Bukowska Street to specifically assist refugees who have settled in the city. Its opening took place on 28 February 2022. The site was administered by Poznań City Hall staff employed by the Department of Health and Social Affairs (Poznań, 2022, March 19). In addition to the possibility of obtaining food products, advice from a lawyer and a psychologist is offered there. It is also possible to sign up for Polish language classes. There are also plans to run classes for pregnant women (TVP, 2022, April 19). The initiative called 'Czuły Poznań-Punkt Bukowska' (Tender Poznań - Bukowska Point) brought together many volunteers who also provided knowledge of the Ukrainian language. A special guidebook was produced, which included information about the city, a map of the centre of Poznań and a Ukrainian-

Polish glossary. The guide was distributed, among others, at the City Assistance Point and at the reception desk (Czuły Poznań, 2022).

Poles who decided to welcome refugees into their homes could count on financial support from the city budget. This was part of an aid programme guaranteed by the government in Warsaw. The benefit amounted to PLN 40 per person per day (approximately €8.50) and was paid for a maximum of 60 days. The money is intended to cover the costs associated with providing accommodation and food for Ukrainian citizens. Applications for the benefit were made on paper at the office of the Municipal Housing Resources Board, as well as online via the Electronic Platform of Public Administration Services. City officials verified the applications to ensure that the number of people applied for in a particular flat matched the number stated in the document (Poznań, 2022, March 22b).

Assistance activities were also carried out by a specialized unit of the Poznań City Hall, the Municipal Family Assistance Centre. Employees of this institution assisted refugees in completing applications for social benefits such as the parental benefit, the family care capital and the "Good start" benefit. The Municipal Family Assistance Centre was also active in granting social assistance benefits, which were of an ad hoc and short-term nature. Refugees from Ukraine were also entitled to non-monetary assistance, which included meals for children and young people, food products or food allowance, Periodic allowance, Care services, Protected housing, Social work, Specialist counselling, and Crisis intervention (MOPR, 2022)

Education

In terms of education, pupils from Ukraine were admitted to Polish schools. For the first month of the war alone, 3013 children found a place in Poznań schools (Poznań, 2022, March 22a). In contrast, 4417 Ukrainian pupils were admitted to schools from the new school year. At the same time, special preparatory classes were launched, in which study lasts one year with the possibility of extension to two years. Students learn Polish language and culture in such classes. In the 2022/2023 school year, 17 additional preparatory classes have been launched. However, pupils from Ukraine have the opportunity to attend classes with children from Poland. Additional Polish language classes are provided for them. In groups of up to 15 pupils, they can take lessons for 6 hours a week. The city authorities have always indicated that no Ukrainian children were admitted to schools under special conditions (Poznań, 2022, September 8).

Conclusions

As the capital of the province, Poznań was able to carry out large-scale relief operations for refugees. The fact that the buildings of the Poznań International Fair were used for this purpose seems

exceptional. The capital of Greater Poland appears to be an important destination port on the map of the country. It is therefore an important centre in western Poland, which has started to carry out activities with such important partners as the government administration in the region and the MTP Group. The measures that were implemented from the beginning were well-thought-out and could be refined over time. We note this by looking at the aid measures through the objectives of their application. The impossibility of estimating the end of the conflict in Ukraine led to the creation of aid plans on a large scale and also on a long-term basis. It should be noted that the city's strategy includes tasks such as teaching refugees to speak Polish, making them economically independent and establishing contact with the local community. These three factors are part of the concept of social adaptation of Ukrainians in Poland (Klaus & Chrzanowska, 2007: 3). With each passing day, the activities carried out by the City of Poznań were reviewed and updated on social media profiles and websites. The actions sometimes went beyond the usual duties imposed by law, and should therefore be appreciated. The social work applied introduced the possibility for Ukrainian families to strengthen and regain their ability to function in their new environment and to develop their life activities (Klaus & Chrzanowska, 2007: 19). At a later stage, it is important to consider how these measures actually influenced the adaptation of Ukrainian citizens in the poznanian region and whether they could have been better guided.

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