BUILDING INCLUSION, SUSTAINING SOLIDARITY TOWARDS MIGRANTS IN FRONTLINE LOCAL COMMUNITIES

The case of Poland during the Ukrainian Refugee Crisis

FXB Center
for Health & Human Rights
at Harvard University

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Cover photo: POZNAN, POL - MAR 12, 2022: Toys as humanitarian aid for Ukraine organized by civil society in Poland after Russian invasion on Ukraine in 2022

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Korczowa, Poland 5.03.2022 -
Refugee children from Ukraine at the border crossing in Korczowa

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CONTEXT

The François Xavier Bagnoud (FXB) Center for Health and Human Rights at Harvard University has a long history of working on issues of refugee protection and human rights access for forced migrants. Its work in this field has included research, policy development and dissemination, advocacy and educational activities. In the aftermath of Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the FXB Center, in collaboration with a small team of Polish migration researchers, designed a study to explore the response of Polish local communities to the large scale arrival of Ukrainians forced to flee their homes, the largest European refugee exodus since World War II. The goal of the study was to probe the extent to which the European Union decision to welcome Ukrainians with legal status, access to rights to work, study, receive benefits and shelter influenced the sustained demonstration of solidarity by local Poles. The working hypothesis, which this preliminary study set out to test, was that generous, preemptive and comprehensive state engagement with the needs of forced migrants sustains local community solidarity. By contrast the opposing (all too commonly witnessed) situation, where state engagement is absent or insufficient and halting, undermines the expression of local community solidarity towards forced migrants.

This project was supported by the Pershing Square Foundation (PSF) and is expected to contribute significantly to the existing body of literature on local communities solidarity.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The availability and persistence of local community solidarity are crucial resources for distress migrants[1], as they cope with the consequences of ruptured lives. Local solidarity humanizes the experience of distress migrants and propels sharing of material and emotional resources, the protection of human rights, and the propagation of positive experiences at a crucial and often uniquely traumatic moment in the lives of distress migrants. Local solidarity enhances the political viability of inclusive public policies and builds strong communities during times of crises by promoting collective engagement across national and ethnic divides. Evidence of the impact of local solidarity has emerged again and again – at the shores of Lesvos, Greece in response to the arrival of hundreds of thousands of fleeing Syrians, in villages in Sicily and Southern Italy in response to refugees from the Middle East and Sub Saharan Africa, along the route of the Central American "Caravans" as they laboriously walked through Mexico. The existing literature points to a wide range of factors ranging from historical and social drivers to personal and shared experiences and collective memories of forced migration as drivers of these expressions of local solidarity.

However, this solidarity is neither inherent nor permanent. It is rather a *fragile* and finite resource that can erode if not properly sustained and reinforced. Anecdotal data from the field shows that when states fail to accompany and support their citizens in their spontaneous expression of solidarity toward distress migrants, solidarity rapidly dissipates and is replaced by fatigue, resentment and eventually outright hostility. This preliminary empirical study's goals are to document the factors that generate local solidarity and examine whether generous, well implemented state policies fueled by state actors' preemptive attention to predictable needs (shelter, education, social protection, health care) can protect local communities from fatigue, and instead sustain solidarity and social inclusion of distress migrants over time.

To achieve this goal, the FXB Center conducted exploratory, qualitative research in 5 front-line local communities in Poland. Poland was chosen because of its state-driven vigorous and welcoming response to the very sizeable numbers of fleeing Ukrainians crossing into Poland after the Russian invasion in February, 2022. The dramatic asymmetry in the Polish response to Ukrainians arriving at Poland's eastern border (with Ukraine) compared to all other recent refugee arrivals, including Iraqis, Afghans, and Syrians, at Poland's northeast, Belorussian border provides an additional lens for examining the impact of the different types of state engagement on local responses to distress migrants, responses that range from solidarity to virulent anti-migrant sentiment.

Data was collected between September, 2022 and February, 2023, from 121 in-depth interviews, 56 with experts and 65 with members of the local communities operating or

1 The term "distress migration" is used to refer to migration that stems "from desperation, vulnerability, and needs, from living circumstances that are experienced as unbearable or deeply unsatisfactory and that precipitate serious obstacles to a reasonable or tolerable life" (Bhabha, 2018). This usage of distress migration is broader than other terms in common usage such as refugee, survival or forced migrant, and thus also encompasses people who have no choice but to leave home, but who do not fall into those categories (Bhabha, 2022).

living in five key geographical areas of Poland affected by the mass influx of Ukrainian refugees, as well as other distress migrants. These areas were: a) the Ukrainian-Polish border zone from Kroscienko through Rzeszow and Przemyśl, b) the cities that received the largest number of refugees from Ukraine after February 24, 2022: Krakow, Warsaw and Wroclaw, and c) the Belarusian-Polish border zone, the main entry points for non-Ukrainian refugees entering by way of Belarus.

The analysis yielded insight into four factors that generated the willingness of locals to support and assist Ukrainian refugees: a) social context; b) cultural proximity c) personality traits and characteristics of the local community; and d) perceptions of the deservingness of solidarity. The analysis further showed that while the Polish government's response to Ukrainian refugees did not generate the initial local solidarity and generosity which predated the activation of the EU's temporary protection directive, it clearly did provide the necessary means for Polish front line communities to sustain their initial solidarity and generosity. This positive response allowed the government and especially local governments to turn "solidarity to refugees" from a grassroots, localized movement to a state-funded project reducing the burden on locals. The institutional foresight and action enabled a relatively smooth refugee inclusion, reducing the burden on local communities and reinforcing their interest in continuing to building an inclusive public space. Further, the radical change in the official political narrative on refugees represented by the public media, from xenophobic and hostile to welcoming and receptive, contributed to the continuing manifestation of local solidarity.

The case of Polish frontline communities vividly illustrates how these local entities can directly impact and transform the broader national conscience of which they are a part. In the case of Poland, the solidarity locals exhibited to the Ukrainian refugees, generated by a wide range of cultural and individual factors, led to prompt political action and support, and complementary national policies. It became a democratic resource, forcing the State to step up and implement auspicious policies that enabled refugee inclusion. In other words, the study revealed a reciprocal loop – with local engagement with newly arrived migrants contributing to generous state policies, but also preemptive and carefully structures state measures feeding into and sustaining local solidarity. The question raised by this study is whether the current government's response is sufficient to effectively sustain local community solidarity and promote collective engagement between locals and refugees for the longue durée, or whether it needs to be adapted and refined to better address the challenges of an ongoing and more permanent influx.

Despite its limitations, this study adds to the existing body of literature by documenting the role of foresight and pro-active engagement with local community issues as a significant contributor to migrant-facing solidarity. It also lays the ground for future research with a larger and more representative sample to quantify the drivers of solidarity and incorporate the voices of refugees. Future comparative research with other front-line communities like Greece, Mexico and Colombia are envisaged, to document how variation in governance support to local communities impacts the continuing expression of migrant solidarity.

1. BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

"Solidarity is an emblem of the transformation - a force of the times. [..]. Solidarity is about being together, despite differences, for a good cause, for freedom of thought, and conviction ... it is a collective force" (Participant, 2023)

Migration scholars and human rights advocates have long examined the impact of state policy on distress migrants' access to protection, security and well-being (Kraly et al, 2023). They have shown how ruthless border exclusion policies aggravate the risks facing refugees and how discriminatory domestic laws deprive displaced populations of sorely needed safe shelter, health and welfare services. However, much less attention has been paid to the impact of state policy on the ability of local societies to provide solidarity to displaced populations. Yet, the availability and persistence of local community solidarity are crucial resources for migrant well-being as they cope with the consequences of ruptured lives. At a time when experiences of dramatic loss and fear are likely overwhelming, the welcoming embrace of local communities can be transformative.

Local community solidarity humanizes the experience of distress migrants and propels sharing of material and emotional resources, the protection of human rights, and the propagation of positive experiences at a crucial and often uniquely traumatic moment in their lives. If sustained, it enhances the political viability of rights-respecting and non-discriminatory public policies that generate inclusive and diverse societies, rather than nativist and racist ones. It builds strong communities during times of crises by promoting collective engagement between the wider community and the vulnerable (Berardi et al., 2020; Hoffman, 1977; Tori & Batson, 1982). It further enables state providers—border officials, shelter staff, hospital employees—to conduct their work in an atmosphere of support and common purpose (Sirriyeh, 2018). Evidence of its force and impact has emerged again and again – at the shores of Lesvos (CNN, 2016; Digidiki, 2016), in villages in Sicily and Southern Italy, along the route of the Caravans through Mexico, at the Turkish border with Greece. On the other hand, solidarity deficits foster indifference, biases, resistance or -in the case of distress migrants- hostility and xenophobia that enable punitive policies that fuel exclusion, encourage anti-social behavior and increase human suffering (D'Amico, 2018; Dixon et al, 2019; NYT, 2020).

Local community solidarity is neither inherent nor permanent. It is rather a fragile and finite resource that can erode if not properly sustained and reinforced. Anecdotal data from the field are instructive. At the Italian and Greek southern borders of the European Union, there is evidence that initial welcoming behavior by locals towards refugees and other distress migrants from the Middle East and further afield has been replaced by resistance, fear and even hostility (Hernàndez, 2020; NYT, 2020). On the Greek islands for example, previously empathetic locals have in the aftermath of years of solidarity with refugees in 2015 and thereafter, shown signs of exhaustion. Formerly generous locals have now joined the ranks of those calling for better protection of Greek borders and closed detention centers to replace open migrant camps. These local voices have encouraged the Greek government to adopt increasingly restrictive migration measures, including maritime pushbacks and the growth

of detention centers (Hernàndez, 2020). Across the Atlantic, in Tapachula, Mexico, the same residents who lined the highway giving out food and water to migrant caravan a few years ago, have become increasingly wary of Central American migrants, and less forthcoming with assistance (Green, 2019). Local communities' fatigue has also been documented in Peru, Bangladesh and Colombia.

As large scale distress migration becomes a permanent feature of the 21st century global order, protection, sustenance, and replenishment of frontline local community solidarity is an urgent imperative. Previous research demonstrates that a wide range of factors ranging from historical and social drivers to personal and shared experiences and collective memories of forced migration contribute to expressions of local solidarity toward distressed migrants. Recent evidence from fieldwork shows that when states fail to accompany and support their citizens in their spontaneous expression of solidarity toward arriving distress migrants, solidarity rapidly dissipates and is replaced by fatigue, resentment and eventually outright hostility. This preliminary empirical study's overarching goal is to examine whether generous, well implemented state policies and government's preemption of needs can protect local communities from fatigue, sustain solidarity, and incentivize inclusion of distress migrants.

The FXB Center, with the generous support of PSF, conducted exploratory, qualitative research using 5 front-line local communities in Poland as a case study. Poland was chosen because of its state-driven vigorous and welcoming response to the very sizeable numbers of fleeing Ukrainians crossing into Poland after the Russian invasion in February, 2022. Because of its all-in, welcoming approach, Poland is a useful case for studying the impact of state-driven, welcoming migration policies on local solidarity. The dramatic asymmetry in the Polish response to Ukrainians arriving at Poland's eastern border compared to all other recent refugee arrivals, including Iraqis, Afghans, Syrians, at Poland's Byelorussian border (Cielemęcka, 2023) provides an additional lens for examining the impact of the different types of state engagement on local responses to distress migrants, ranging from solidarity to virulent anti-migrant sentiment. The findings of this study have implications for migration policy and preparedness in Europe and beyond. They contribute to ongoing academic and policy debates about the steps needed to build a dynamic public space that enables successful inclusion of distress migrants, while ensuring social cohesion and democratic politics.

Previous research demonstrates that a wide range of factors ranging from historical and social drivers to personal and shared experiences and collective memories of forced migration contribute to expressions of local solidarity toward distressed migrants.

Poland as a Janus-faced Frontline State for Forced Migrants

Poland, situated between the western edge of Russia and the affluent West, has recently become a transit and destination point for migrants, including asylum seekers. Just a decade ago, the inflow of foreigners to Poland was limited (Górny & Pudzianowska, 2010; Okólski, 2012; King & Okólski, 2019) with some estimates placing the number of immigrants at 100,000 in 2011 (Duszczyk & Kaczmarczyk, 2022). Russia's invasion of eastern Ukraine in 2014, along with Poland's rapid economic growth, radically changed the situation, turning Poland from an emigration to an immigration country. In 2019, the number of registered migrants actively working in the country reached two million (Tilles, 2020), making Poland the top issuer of first residence permits related to employment in the EU (Eurostat, 2023). Yet despite being a willing and major destination country for labor migrants, Poland refused to comply with its legal obligations under the European Union's 2015 temporary mechanism for the relocation of applicants for international protection (Council Decision (EU), 2015), at a time when large numbers of refugees and other distress migrants were fleeing civil wars at home and seeking protection in the EU. As a result of this decision- a direct result of the intensification of xenophobic discourse in the country linked to the mainstreaming of ideas about Islamification of Europe (Pędziwiatr, 2018), - Poland became one of the least welcoming countries for refugees seeking safety in Europe (Narkowicz, 2018).

Poland's hostile attitude towards distress migrants did not change when a migration crisis erupted at its borders with Belarus in 2021, as thousands of asylum seekers from the Middle East attempted to enter Poland. Sticking to its anti-immigrant stance, the country reacted by enacting a no-access zone at the border (Ociepka, 2023), banning non-residents- including humanitarian aid organizations and journalists- from entering, while sending thousands of troops and police officers to reinforce border guard patrols, erecting a steel wall to protect its borders and implementing legislation that allowed migrant pushbacks to Belarus (Roache, 2021). Declaring a state of emergency the same year, and despite the scrutiny the country received for the treatment of vulnerable migrants and violation of international law, Poland continues to this day with its army-led efforts to secure its border with Belarus, including by refusing to accept applications for international protection from those arriving at that border.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 and the massive influx of Ukrainian refugees that followed marked a turning point in Poland's approach to migration flows. Over 1.3 million Ukrainians arrived in Poland within two weeks of the start of the Russian invasion, and an additional 1.2 million (for a total of 2.5 million) arrived the following month (UNHCR, 2022). Despite the country's unpreparedness for such a massive influx, the response was decisive, swift, and generous, and wholly counter to Poland's previous hostile response to migrants. This new response aligned with Europe' decision to activate the Temporary Protection Directive (TPD) (Council Directive 2001/55/EC of 20 July 2001). Following the TPD, instead of closed borders, policies that allowed for pushbacks, arduous asylum procedures

and discriminatory social welfare (Musyimi, 2023), the Polish government instituted simplified border crossing procedures for Ukrainians, offered them free transportation, and permitted access to a Polish personal identification number (PESEL), automatically legalizing Ukrainians' stay in the country. Legalize residence also opened the door to access to medical assistance, education, social benefits and the labor market (Talik, 2023). Further, the Polish government provided monetary 'allowances' in the form of 500 PLN ($123.5) for each child[2] and a package of social benefits and services that assisted Ukrainians with finding a job or registering as unemployed. These systems were highly effective: according to available data (EWL Migration Platform, 2023), 82% of adult Ukrainian refugees in Poland have taken up employment.

Making smooth access to education for Ukrainian children a priority, the Polish government provided school enrollment information in Ukrainian, offered open admission to Polish kindergartens and schools for Ukrainian children, facilitated their introduction into school, and offered remedial classes to those who did not speak the Polish language. To reduce the burden on schools, the Polish government provided open-ended financial support to local governments to cover the costs associated with the education of Ukrainians from pre-school through post-secondary education and vocational training. (Ministry of Education and Science, 2022). Further, places were opened in Polish universities for Ukrainian students to study for free, and for academics and researchers to seek employment. Polish local authorities provided additional support by collaborating with Ukrainian sister-cities to purchase goods and organizing collections and transport of essential items for people internally displaced in Ukraine or receiving shelter in places of temporary refuge in Poland (Falinski, 2023).

The rapidly-formed public assistance infrastructure for Ukrainians in Poland contrasts sharply with the speed, nature and scale of assistance directed to asylum seekers in other EU countries and to non-Ukrainian migrants in Poland. Supported by this state-generated infrastructure, there has been an unprecedented outpouring of frontline local community solidarity, with locals committing to generous and varied forms of assistance for Ukrainian refugees. These include transporting refugees from the borders (Higgins, 2022) and providing them accommodation,[3] helping them navigate the country's bureaucracy, organizing crowdfunding, providing meals and opening free "shops" for Ukrainians (Krasnicka et al., 2023). Locals have set up support groups providing Polish language classes, play and leisure facilities for children as well as employment opportunities. Through these spontaneous

2 Persons whose stay in Poland has been legalised under the Act of 12 March 2022 on Assistance to Ukrainian Citizens in Connection with Armed Conflict on the Territory of Ukraine (Journal of Laws, item 583, Specustawa) may benefit from various forms of support, including child benefits such as 500+ and family care capital. However, the Specustawa provides that if a refugee leaves Poland for more than 30 days, he or she loses the right to legal residence and the consequent right to money for children. See: https://serwisy.gazetaprawna.pl/emerytury-i-renty/artykuly/8425686,500-dzieci-z-ukrainy-warunki-zus-blokuje-wyplaty.html

3 See examples: Humanitarian Support for Ukraine, The Republic of Poland (July 4, 2022), https://www.gov.pl/web/usa-en/humanitarian-assistance-for-ukraine

efforts, thousands of citizens have provided diversified, multi-level, help directly to refugees. According to one commentator, the exceptional commitment of Polish civil society has transformed the country into a giant humanitarian NGO (Talik, 2023).

In sum, the determination to offer solidarity to newly arrived Ukrainian refugees appears omnipresent and stands in stark contrast to Poland's treatment of non-Ukrainian refugees on the Poland- Belarus border. Why? The perception of religious and racial commonality (corroborated by the instances of hostility towards Roma Ukrainians and African foreign students also fleeing the Russian invasion of Ukraine (Fekete, 2023) is a key element underpinning the differential response. Other key pillars of Polish expressions of solidarity towards Ukrainians include the shared history of Soviet domination (Rymsza, 2022) and a sense of common contemporary threat (Jasiecki, 2023). To these one can add the pre-existing contacts and social networks established by an already present Ukrainian diaspora in Poland, and a history of pre-invasion Polish/Ukrainian cross-border cooperation. Underpinning these intersecting drivers of local Polish solidarity is the positive political rhetoric emanating from the Polish government complemented by the unprecedented state-initiated roll-out of generous reception and inclusion services and facilities.

The case of Poland, one can argue, provides a unique opportunity to test the hypothesis that dispersion and weakening of interpersonal solidarity are related to governance failures rather than to innate xenophobic tendencies. Given the country's documented anti-immigrant stance, becoming a "home" for millions of Ukrainian refugees overnight constitutes a sea change. As the conflict continues without a clear end in sight, it will be important to examine the longitudinal expression of solidarity over time, to establish the extent to which institutional state support can generate and underpin sustainable, long term societal support.

POZNAN, POL - MAR 12, 2022:
Humanitarian aid for Ukraine organized by civil society in Poland after Russian invasion on Ukraine in 2022

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 Study Design

The study consisted of two phases. During the first phase, a comprehensive literature review was conducted on local community solidarity, the drivers of such solidarity and the role of institutional support and governance failures, across different geographical contexts. A additional literature review was conducted in an effort to understand the historical context of Poland and the drivers behind its widespread anti-immigrant sentiment.

During the second phase, which started 7 months after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, semi-structured, in-depth interviews with experts and members of selected front line local communities were conducted to explore five central themes: a) governmental and non-governmental efforts to support Ukrainians, b) drivers that generate local community solidarity; c) drivers that sustain local community solidarity; d) drivers of local community hostility to non-Ukrainian refugees; e) the role of institutional support in generating or destroying solidarity.

The exploratory study conducted in Poland is part of a larger research effort to understand the factors that generate or dissipate solidarity among frontline local communities aiming to build an inclusive polity that embodies mutual respect and non-discrimination (Clarke, Hoggett, & Thompson, 2006; Flam & King, 2005; Goodwin, Jasper & Polletta 2001). Other case studies in progress or planned include Greece, Colombia and Mexico, all destination countries with significant numbers of asylum seekers and other distress migrants.

Main Research Themes

- The independent variables that generate solidarity towards Ukrainian refugees in 5 Polish frontline local communities that have acted as main entry points for over 2 million Ukrainian refugees fleeing war;
- The factors that sustain the locals' solidarity towards Ukrainian refugees;
- Whether solidarity has shifted over time and if so the ways it has shifted, and the factors that have driven that shift;
- The factors that influence the difference in local approaches towards Ukrainian refugees as opposed to distress migrants from other countries seeking protection in Poland.
- The institutional investments that local communities consider necessary to continue to support the solidarity they have so far shown toward Ukrainian refugees, given the likely continuation of Ukrainian refugees' arrival in Poland.

2.2 Sample

Qualitative data was gathered from 121 in-depth interviews, 56 with experts and 65 with members of the local communities operating or living in five key geographical areas of Poland that have been affected by the mass influx of Ukrainian refugees:

- Ukrainian-Polish border zone from Krościenko through Rzeszów and Przemyśl and its surroundings, as the main entry points for Ukrainian refugees to Poland. The city of Rzeszow that is located approximately 102 kilometres from the Ukrainian border crossing has a population of 200,000 residents that grew by 100,000 at the peak of refugee arrivals, with Ukrainians making up 35% of the population during the period of data collection.
- Kraków, Warsaw and Wroclaw, as cities that host a significantly large number of Ukrainian refugees that arrived in a very short period of time and have contributed to the growth of their population and cultural-national diversity. In particular, during data collection, Krakow had 270,000 Ukrainian refugees (almost 20% of the city's population), Warsaw had 104,000 (Widera-Ciochoń, 2023) and in Wroclaw, one in every four residents was Ukrainian. These three cities were also chosen due to the number of projects implemented there to support refugees. The city of Warsaw allocated PLN 52 million ($11.660 million) to help refugees and the city of Cracow allocated PLN 197.418 million ($44.266 million), with only a small amount coming from the state's budget (Widera-Ciochoń 2023).
- Belarusian-Polish border zone, as the main entry points for non-Ukrainian refugees entering by way of Belarus.

Interviewees were initially recruited using a haphazard sampling methodology that allowed the research team to approach experts with extensive experience working in different capacities with refugees and asylum seekers in the identified areas, as well as members of the local community that have been in the frontline supporting Ukrainian refugees. Subsequent interviewees were recruited using the snowball sampling methodology (Parker et al., 2019; Naderifar et al., 2017), which allowed the research team to contact other critical experts, as well as members of the local communities on the frontline supporting Ukrainian refugees or had expressed concerns around the influx. The final sample of 121 interviewees included: interlocutors from state institutions both on the central and local level (14), members from 21 non-governmental, international and local organizations, employees of educational institutions (21), members of the local communities (65).

All the interviewees were of Polish or other nationalities but had lived in the country for a long time. Thus, the interviewees were well aware of both the situation on the ground as well as the political, systemic, economic and societal context relevant to refugee arrival and local needs.

2.3 Data collection and Analysis

Data was collected between September, 2022 and February, 2023. Identified experts were initially contacted by e-mail that included necessary information about the study (Engward et al., 2022, Taquette et al., 2022). If interested in participating, experts were asked to reach out to the research team to schedule an interview. Participants were able to choose the location of the interview. All selected locations allowed for confidentiality and privacy to be retained. A significant number of interviews were also conducted virtually, per the participants' request.

Interviews lasted typically an hour and were conducted in Polish and English by two Polish researchers. For confidentiality purposes, no personal information was used in the study. During the analysis of the data, an inductive approach was adopted to gain a holistic, in-depth understanding of the drivers that generate, sustain or destroy local community solidarity. Though researchers had a working hypothesis driving the study, an inductive approach was considered a better fit over the deductive approach given the exploratory nature of the study. During the data analysis, a tentative thematic coding scheme was developed based on the main concepts that surfaced throughout the interviews. Data was subsequently analyzed to identify secondary themes and concepts. The final coding scheme reached saturation after the analysis of 32 interviews.

2.3.1 Limitations and ethical considerations

This study has a series of limitations that should be considered when discussing findings. Firstly, the study does not provide an exhaustive analysis of the situation in all parts of Poland, but rather focuses on a subset of communities that host some of the largest numbers of refugees during the first year of the mass influx. As such, the findings cannot be expected to cover all bottom-up and top-down practices and actions on the part of national and international agencies, nor capture the attitudes of communities beyond those where data collection took place. Secondly, findings cannot be expected to apply to time frames beyond those of this study. Changes to the prevalence of migrant flows, manifestations of violence and aggression at the country's borders, or new political measures taken as a result of this fluid situation could introduce new factors that may ultimately impact the manner in which solidarity is generated and sustained. Additionally, as the sampling methodology employed does not use random selection, there is an increased risk of margin of error and of sample bias, as participants tend to refer people that they know, increasing the risk of having participants with similar backgrounds and beliefs. Further, given the nature of the study and the size of the sample, this study did not aim to quantify the drivers of solidarity but rather to document them. Thus, it cannot assert which drivers of solidarity are stronger, but it can highlight all those factors that can generate, sustain or destroy solidarity.

Despite the limitations, this study adds to the existing body of literature by documenting the drivers of solidarity and the role of positive political stance and successful governance on local community solidarity in a country known for not exhibiting migrant solidarity previously. It also lays the ground for future research that can employ a larger and more representative sample in order to quantify the drivers of solidarity and incorporate the voice of refugees. It can also become the basis for comparative studies with other front-line local communities like Greece, Mexico and Colombia, where the variation in governance support to local communities can be studied in relation to the local solidarity expressed. Data from this initial case study reveals relevant themes and offers new insight for developing future recommendations to better inform solidarity-affirming policy.

3. FINDINGS

European popular solidarity towards Ukrainian refugees is clearly an important aspect of the contemporary response to large scale distress migration. Contrary to the 2015 European migration crisis that unfolded in Europe's South Eastern borders, the Ukrainian refugee crisis generated both a democratic, privatized model of solidarity driven response as well as a politically centralized, public response. This study documented the solidarity of locals in 5 locations in Poland during the first year of the mass influx of Ukrainian refugees. The analysis yielded insight into 5 factors that nurture the willingness of locals to support and assist Ukrainian refugees: a) social context; b) cultural proximity c) personality traits and characteristics of the local community; d) deservingness of solidarity; e) governance stance and response.

A. Social Context

According to existing literature, solidarity can be built on and sustained by a sense of belonging to a shared community, "by an ethic of social membership" (Harrell et al, 2021: 983). The history of Soviet domination that both Poland and Ukraine share, as well as the sense of a common existential threat have cemented a deep understanding between the two nations that their fates and security are linked (Kuzio, 2023), further strengthening the sense of a shared community *despite* the two countries' unresolved historical interpretations that linger in the background (Prokip, 2023).

A sense of common contemporary threat

Historically, Poles and Ukrainians have much in common when it comes to dependence on Russia (Klimkiewicz, 2022). Both countries are united in their experiences of totalitarian dominance and instances of collective trauma during the course of the 20th century at the hands of the same abuser. While over 30 years now separates today from the collapse of the Soviet Union, the memory of the Soviet period and the trauma suffered remains a significant issue for all post-communist societies of Central-East Europe (Prather, 2022).

The sense of community and closeness associated with the historical experience of being a victim of Russia as a driver of their solidarity to the Ukrainian refugees was mentioned by a significant number of participants. As one local noted:

> *"Russia's attack on Ukraine has a special dimension in Poland, where resentment against the Russian aggressor and Russian partitioner is somewhere in the back of one's mind all the time.[..], because we know what it means to be under the Russian boot. As a result, solidarity emotions were activated."*

Another factor that strengthens participants' sense of a shared community with the Ukrainian refugees was the perception of Russia as a common contemporary threat. The two countries' common history includes a number of painful events that have formed the basis of Poles' historical consciousness (Drozdzewski, 2016), making it difficult if not impossible to ignore

Russia's attack on its neighboring country. In fact, the perception of Russia as a direct threat to the security of Poland long predates the invasion of Ukraine. In 2008, the President Lech Kaczyński, had warned about Russia's intentions

> *"We know very well that today it is Georgia, tomorrow it will be Ukraine, the day after tomorrow the Baltic States, and perhaps the next one in line will be my country, Poland." (Prezydent.PL 2008).*

The stance of the country's leadership against Russia resonates well with Polish society's perception of Russia as a whole, with 79% of Poles believing that "the war in Ukraine threatens the security of our country" (CBOS Public Opinion Research Center survey, 2022). With Polish people constructing the notion of their independence as freedom from Russia, the proximity of the threat has galvanized a strong sense of solidarity towards Ukrainians, as they identify themselves and their struggle with Ukrainians and their fight against Russia for freedom. As a local vividly mentioned:

> *"it is imperative to help the Ukrainians, because they (the Russians) will come to us right away. [..] This is our common fight against a common enemy, against a common aggressor, in their case already real, and in our case potential.[..] today you, tomorrow we. It's like situating ourselves in the face of a common enemy."*

Further, many participants argued that their solidarity stems from the portrayal of Ukrainians as the defenders of Poland against Russia, as their victory will put a stop to Russian imperialism. According to a participant:

> *"It is known that what is happening in Ukraine somehow also protects our country. I personally heard statements in which people pointed out that we should help the Ukrainians more, because this is also helping our own country. It is securing our country."*

Pre-existing contacts and social networks established by an already present Ukrainian diaspora in Poland

Poland has a long history of ties to Ukrainians and the territories of contemporary Ukraine dating from the 14th century (Brunarska et al., 2016). Contemporary flows of Ukrainian migrants to Poland, however, started in the 1990s, establishing local forms of mobility between the two countries. By the end of 2021, Poland was considered a major destination country for Ukrainians who constituted the largest group of foreigners in Poland, with approximately 1.3 million Ukrainians residing in Poland (Bukowski & Duszczyk, 2022). Though Ukrainian migration to Poland was considered predominantly temporary and circular, with highly repetitive cross-border

> The sense of community and closeness associated with the historical experience of being a victim of Russia as a driver of their solidarity to the Ukrainian refugees was mentioned by a significant number of participants.

movement, still it created a space for interpersonal interaction with locals, allowing for personalized relationships that further led to the empathetic understanding of the Ukrainian refugees predicament. As a participant explained:

> *"People who fled Ukraine very often were already in Poland before, or had family or friends here, including among Polish citizens. These are not anonymous people about whom we know nothing. This social relationship between these people and Polish society has been established. [..] the refugees are someone's former babysitter or work colleague or a gentleman who was doing someone's renovation. These are people who have entered into these relationships before, and this always makes mistreatment more difficult."*

History of pre-invasion Polish/Ukrainian cross-border cooperation

Despite the historical tension that characterizes a large part of pre-conflict Polish-Ukrainian relations, mostly stemming from views and perspective of bilateral relations during the Second World War in Western Ukraine (Kononczuk, 2018), the two countries have active cross-border collaborations enabled by the introduction of the EU's Neighborhood Program, a cross-border program that allows for official collaboration between centers of education, science and culture, the implementation of joint cultural events, the exchange of specialists in the field of education, the development of cross-border infrastructure to modernize existing transport networks, and the implementation of common policies in the area of labor relations and cross-border legal employment. As a result of this collaboration, local communities have development partnerships projects that have strengthened the relationships between communities and created strong ties between the Polish and Ukrainian people. As a participant explained:

> *"the presence of Ukrainians in the city is quite sensibly/ And this is not only because Ukrainians study at our universities. During the war, the city partnerships, the constant visits to each other cities turned out to be extremely important. Our officials constantly traveled to Ivano-Frankivsk or Lutsk. We ourselves went to Lutsk many times, because we had partnership projects there. So for us it's just close and for those people who live here, Ukraine is close."*

B. Cultural proximity

Poland is considered one of the most ethnically and religiously homogenous countries in Europe with foreign citizens making up just 3 percent of its population in 2018, a direct result of Holocaust, widespread racism during the post-1945 era and the shifting of the country's borders during the Soviet era (minority rights, 2018). The country's unwelcoming approach towards asylum seekers and the mass deportations of foreign nationals with no legal title to stay in Poland have also contributed to the formation of a rather homogenous and culturally monolithic country, with 97% of the population being identified as Polish and 87% as Christian Catholic (minority rights, 2018). As the country's evolution from a socialist satellite state to an independent liberal country started less than 35 years ago, Polish society

still experiences the impact of this transition that has created a sense of insecurity and the fear of identity loss. As a result, Polish society tends to cling to cultural values and traditions and reject foreign influences in an effort to eliminate external threats and establish a feeling of security (Morath, 2017). As such, the arrival of a significantly large number of ethnically diverse migrants, with distinctively different religious and cultural identities, is perceived as a very real and present danger to Polish cultural and religious homogeneity (case of migrants from middle East and Africa by way of Belarus). On the contrary, the arrival of a people who share many common characteristics with the Polish people – from similar physical characteristics to similar religion and history – activates a shared social identity that diffuses expected threat discourses despite other factors that could objectively constitute a threat. As many participants explained, the lack of cultural proximity with asylum seekers in general is a reason for concern that could potentially lead to the dissipation of solidarity. According to a participant:

> *"[..] we are able to communicate. Even if everyone speaks their own language, we can understand, catch certain things. The cultural background is very similar, we also have a lot in common in terms of history and religion. In terms of mentality, we are also very similar. There is a lower level of fear and concern that we will not find a common language..[..] On the other hand, if it were millions of people cultural strangers.. Then maybe I would have a little more concern."*

C. Personality traits and characteristics of the local community

Altruism and humanitarianism

The propensity and willingness to help others, even without a readily perceived benefit or when the costs associated with this altruistic behavior are high, is a natural human inclination dependent on the individual and situational context in which it manifests (Schwartz & Howard, 1984). Many participants highlighted how the plight of refugees in general activated their own compassion which lead to their altruistic actions. This altruistic spark, when coupled with perceptions of social closeness and cultural proximity of Polish people with the Ukrainian people, ignited a larger, more sustained altruistic response. As a participant noted:

> *"It was a natural reaction, connected both with surprise, and with horror, and with great compassion [...]. And such a human feeling for the great tragedy of these people who had to leave their homes overnight. It was something unimaginable. It seems to me that when people saw these crowds of people, dogs, children, deprived of everything, it was simply a gust of heart and a sense of duty to help."*

Existing research supports the role of social closeness as a highly relevant factor for altruistic behaviors to others, and helps explain further why the Polish people show altruistic behaviors to Ukrainian refugees but deny the same to non-Ukrainian refugees, despite the underlying humanitarian plight suffered by both groups (Nyeste, 2017).

Collective memories of forced migration

For many Polish people, the war in Ukraine triggered memories from their own family histories (Wylegała, 2016), the terror and brutality of the Second World War, Stalinism and the Red Army. It is only when one considers how deeply these memories are embedded in people's memories and how central they are in intergenerational transmission that one can understand how people can instantaneously identify themselves with some refugees and not others. As a participant explained:

> *"It is impossible to put into words. Demons from my grandparents' stories have awoken. The most terrible monsters of the Second World War have come to life, and after all, it was supposed to have been 'never again'.[..] My dad is a refugee from 1944. [..]At the age of 13, he had to flee, leaving behind everything he knew and loved. As a result, I personally understand the situation of the Ukrainians."*

This collective memory can be understood and conceptualized as a cultural narrative that reveals how locals interpret their history and use it to share an ideological framework that informs their perceptions, attitudes, and behavior toward Ukrainian refugees. The narrative of *"we experienced the same, by the same enemy"* seems to minimize any differences that may exist, while emphasizing the common, shared experience and enhancing solidarity.

D. Deservingness of solidarity

Many experts have noted the influence of perceiving migrants as "deserving" or "undeserving" on solidarity as a requirement to offer help (Holmes et al., 2022), with many highlighting the continuously increased burden on asylum seekers to prove both their vulnerability and assimilability in order to be considered deserving of protection in contemporary migration contexts (Welfens, 2022). Further evidence suggests that the concern with deservingness is a stable feature not only of today's migration and refugee governance but also of public opinion in the West (Harell et al. 2022), that can further affect public attitudes and hospitality towards asylum seekers. According to existing literature, deservingness judgments depend on the control someone has on the plight they suffer (Applebaum, 2001; Cook, 1979; De Swaan, 1988; Feather and Dawson, 1998) and on the identity of those seeking help (Ford, 2015; Ford and Kootstra, 2016). Other experts have argued that deservingness is multi-dimensional, with the need of the support that people require, the perception of people's gratitude for the help they receive and the possibility of them contributing back to the society also playing an important role (van Oorschot, 2000).

According to participants, Ukrainian refugees have earned the title of the deserving victims, as not only they were forced to flee from a known aggressor (had no control over their plight) but also because male Ukrainians stayed in Ukraine to fight for their country, letting only women and children flee. As a participant explained:

"In the case of the refugees from Ukraine, they were mostly women with children, which automatically sets off a whole series of positive feelings, references to the men who stayed to fight the enemy. In our context, historically it is the job of men to defend the country, the city, the population (and Ukrainians do it). This is the ethos of a man and a soldier."

The theory of deservingness could also partially explain why some participants were more reluctant to show solidarity to non-Ukrainian asylum seekers, who, in their opinion, have control over their plight and attempt to violate Polish immigration law. As a participant noted:

"Non Ukrainian refugees entering from the Belarussian border are not people fleeing the Lukashenko regime (like Ukrainians are fleeing from Putin). Their situation involves some moral blackmail (they are brought by planes to Minsk, their tickets are paid, and then are used as a human shield), but it's not the same as fleeing from the war in Ukraine. Also all Ukrainians go through legal border crossings, they don't want to violate the law, and in this sense we respect them."

E. Governmental response

The Polish government's reaction to the Ukrainian refugees was unprecedented and in stark contrast with its response to asylum seekers from other countries. A month after the Russian invasion, the government passed a special act on Aid for Ukrainian citizens codifying the TPD at the national level granting Ukrainian refugees the right to stay in the country for 18 months, to access labor markets and the healthcare systems, to attend schools, and to receive social benefits. By assigning them a PESEL number, the government gave Ukrainians the same access to public services as Polish citizens (Ministry of the Interior and Administration Republic of Poland 2022). 3 months after the mass influx, 200,000 Ukrainian children were attending Polish schools, 5,700 had applied to Polish universities which they could attend for free, upon acceptance (Amnesty International, 2023), and a significant number of adults were taking free Polish language classes. Despite the country's political division and democratic backsliding experienced after the 2015 elections, local governments followed the directives of the federal government providing ongoing aid and support to refugees without pushback (McMahon, 2023). In 2022, Poland spent more than $8.8 billion on supporting Ukrainian

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There is no doubt that the reaction of the Polish government was generous, inclusionary, non-discriminatory and vital for the reception and initial integration of Ukrainian refugees. The main question though is whether it was also the driver of the individual solidarity that locals demonstrated. According to participants, it was the locals' generosity and solidarity that drove the government's positive reaction to refugees instead. As a participant explains:

> *"The government's first reactions were not at all that positive, but the authorities quickly backed off, seeing the massive help from Poles. The authorities saw exactly that if they go against the tide of public expectations, they will simply lose a great deal, both internally and internationally". I think they stood in a twist and very seriously considered whether it was more profitable for them to go along with Orban on this issue as well, or to go along with the European Union and the entire civilized world. I think it was the Polish public that ultimately decided that the choice went this way."*

As the findings illustrate, in the spontaneous phase, much of the work of addressing the day-to-day needs of Ukrainians was shouldered by volunteers, ordinary people and civil society organizations, with the government delaying to take immediate action, indicating that individual generosity did not stem from government reaction. The Polish government's positive reaction, while it may not have played a role in generating local solidarity, it did play a critical role in sustaining it. The institutional foresight and action enabled a relatively smooth refugee inclusion, reducing the burden on local communities and reinforcing them to continue building an inclusive public space. As a participant explained:

> *"It seems to me that what was important were the messages coming from the top."*

Further, the radical change in the official political narrative on refugees as represented by the public media enhanced local solidarity. Many participants highlighted the radical shift in discourse, from a government that preached anti-migrant rhetoric capitalizing on fear and stereotypes, to an evolved pro-migrant discourse that depicts refugees as *"brothers and sisters"* and how political stance can fuel resentment or enhance solidarity. A participant noted:

> *"In my opinion, political and media activities that incite people to such attitudes contribute (to resentment or solidarity). [..]The restriction of movement on the Polish-Belarusian border is justified on the grounds that this is not really refugee migration, [..].There is a political interest in producing a community hostility toward another." Another participant added: "[..] the government sees Ukrainians as our brothers and sisters, while telling other immigrants who are similarly fleeing war, that they are strangers. [..]. Government and media unfavorable to asylum seekers do their part to discourage the public (from showing solidarity)."*

The negative governmental response to asylum seekers, often times followed by criminalization of solidarity and the depiction of humanitarian activists as colluding with Poland's enemies (Hargrave & Jarosz, 2023) has enabled xenophobic responses towards asylum seekers, while preventing locals from showing generosity and solidarity, at least openly and freely. On the other hand, the positive response followed by capacious state policies has enhanced a multifaceted demonstration of solidarity in Poland.

Przemysl, Poland - February 27 2022: Ukrainian children after crossing the Ukrainian-Polish border in the Polish city of Przemysl after fleeing Ukraine

4. CONCLUSIONS

"Poland's solidarity with refugees from Ukraine has been exceptional and cannot be taken for granted."

Kevin J. Allen, UNHCR Representative in Poland[4]

The analysis indicated that while the Polish government's positive response to Ukrainian refugees did not generate initial local solidarity and generosity which predated the activation of the EU's temporary protection directive and the expansive Polish government policies that ensued, it did provide the necessary means for Polish front line communities to sustain their initial solidarity and generosity. This positive response allowed the government to turn "solidarity to refugees" from a grassroots, localized movement to a state-funded project reducing the burden on locals. As this study was conducted only 11 months after the influx of refugees began, the question that is raised is whether the current government's response is enough to properly sustain local community solidarity and promote collective engagement between locals and refugees, or whether it needs to be adapted and refined to better address the challenges of an ongoing influx.

Already reports from the ground show that during the data collection period, long-term planning for the needs of Ukrainian refugees was lacking, and that volunteers who provided critical support faced exhaustion. In late 2022, surveys showed that 63% of Polish people were helping Ukrainians, dropping to 41% a few months later (Deutsche Welle, 2023). Many participants referenced the lack of systematic and long-term support for both refugees and locals, along with the duration of the crisis, as one of the main factors for the depletion of their solidarity. As a participant noted:

> *"When it comes to aid practices, after such initial mega-commitment, it's hard to expect people to be consistently so committed. It's hard, it's exhausting, it's often time-intensive by design. [..]the positive attitude of local communities will decline. It's nice to welcome someone home, but it's harder to put up with them for two years. [..]And if they don't have some kind of systemic permanent support (to help them)."*

Exhaustion and discouragement also stem from overburdened social systems which Ukrainians have been automatically included in by virtue of the special law. Despite the government's efforts to anticipate refugees' needs, challenges have emerged in the state effort to cater for the welfare needs of a continuously growing population. The Polish welfare system was already under strain before the influx of refugees, further challenging access to services for both locals and refugees. Without sustained injection of central funding support, the level of welfare assistance is proving hard to sustain. A participant explained:

4 UNHCR Polska (2023): UNHCR docenia Polskę za solidarność z uchodźcami i wzywa do ich dalszego wspierania. Available at: https://www.unhcr.org/pl/14623-unhcr-docenia-polske.html

"Along with the fatigue people asked what this would look like in the long term and where the budget for this would actually come from. At this point, I have a sense that people are taking a more critical approach to the situation as it is, and are thinking more about how both we as individuals, as well as the state, will be able to cope with an additional 10 percent or so. Issues related to the availability of either medical care or access to kindergarten or nursery school also come up somewhere. [..]"

As the war in Ukraine continues with no clear end in sight, concerns for a dissipation of initial solidarity and a rise in hostile behavior increase. According to a participant:

"Some of the people are tired of keeping someone under their roof for months on end. At the same time, refugees are finding it more and more difficult to move out to another place, because housing prices have gone up a lot. [...]"

As signs of burn-out among locals grow, the transition from short-termism to a more long-term and diversified system able to support both the needs of the refugees and the locals is imperative to prevent the erosion of initial solidarity and protect its long-term manifestation. A participant vividly explained:

"the community passed the test of helping people fantastically. And it would be even better if the authorities that are in power in the country were better able to support this [..]."

The case of the Polish frontline local communities vividly illustrates that frontline hosts can directly impact and transform the broader national conscience of which they are a part. In the case of Poland, the solidarity locals exhibited to the Ukrainian refugees, generated by a wide range of cultural and individual factors, led to prompt political action and support, and complementary national policies. The solidarity expressed by local people became a democratic resource, forcing the State to step up and implement auspicious policies that enabled refugee inclusion. Recent research shows that as many as 82 percent of adult refugees from Ukraine have taken up employment in Poland, with the figure reaching 84 percent among those of working age (EWL, 2023).

Good practice

The initiative at the railway station in Przemysl where Polish mothers left strollers, baby-carriages for Ukrainian mothers with children. The photo with the strollers[5] became a symbol of togetherness and solidarity.

5 Fot. F.Malavolta, Passeggini lasciati in stazione per le donne in arrivo dall'Ucraina con neonati., 03.03.2022: https://twitter.com/MalavoltaF/status/1499281114057396225/photo/1

The study further showed that local solidarity, while critical, is also fragile. It illustrated the temporality in which solidarity manifests by documenting that enthusiastic individual generosity can easily dissipate if not supported by effective, institutional action and resource commitment. A year after the Russian invasion, seeds of burn-out among locals in Poland demonstrate that welcoming policies are not enough if they don't contain plans to meet the long-term needs of a large refugee population and a local population that will at some stage exhibit exhaustion. According to the analysis, despite the initial positive stance of the government, needs related to accommodation of refugees, employment, education in local communities and integration are vast, burdening local communities. If action is not taken, the cost will be high and potentially irreversible, as once allowed to take root, a dissipation of local solidarity creates a fertile ground for hostility and anti-immigrant sentiment, leading to negative and foreseeable outcomes. State policies towards refugees should not only be welcoming, but should also be tailored to the needs and the size of the refugee population and be supportive of local communities as well.

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