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Organisation of Support in Aid Centre “Szczecin for Ukraine” (Centrum Pomocy “Szczecin – Ukrainie”) from a Research Perspective

Organizacja wsparcia w Centrum Pomocy
„Szczecin – Ukrainie” w perspektywie badawczej

Abstract: This research aimed to show the process of establishing and organising the Aid Centre, and the scale of its support activities for Ukrainian refugees. The study was conducted using the analysis of existing data, references to the experiences of individuals engaged in creating and managing the Centre (problem-centred interview) and Ukrainian refugees’ opinions about the Centre’s functioning. A thematic analysis was applied (a qualitative analysis technique) to identify shared topics in the respondents’ answers. The analysis presented herein focused on five areas that are crucial to identify the experiences of staff who developed and run the Centre, viz., 1) the initial weeks of the Centre’s functioning, starting on 9 March 2022, 2) interpersonal relations within the team, 3) difficult situations, 4) situations motivating work and 5) expectations concerning the future functioning of the Centre.

Keywords: Ukrainian refugees; social support; war trauma.

Abstrakt: Celem prowadzonych badań jest ukazanie procesu tworzenia i organizacji Centrum Pomocy „Szczecin – Ukrainie” oraz prowadzonej w nim skali działań pomocowych na rzecz uchodźców i uchodźczyń z Ukrainy. W badaniach zastosowano

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analizę danych zastanych, odwołano się do doświadczeń osób szczególnie zaangażowanych w tworzenie i prowadzenie Centrum (wywiad skoncentrowany na problemie), jak również opinii na temat funkcjonowania Centrum wyrażanych przez uchodźców z Ukrainy. Zastosowano analizę tematyczną (technikę analizy jakościowej), która ma na celu identyfikację wspólnych tematów w odpowiedziach udzielonych przez uczestników badań. Prezentowana analiza dotyczy pięciu obszarów tematycznych, kluczowych dla rozpoznania doświadczeń pracowników w zakresie projektowania i prowadzenia wsparcia w Centrum: 1) pierwsze tygodnie funkcjonowania Centrum, począwszy od 9 marca 2022 roku; 2) relacje interpersonalne w zespole; 3) doświadczane sytuacje trudne; 4) sytuacje motywujące do pracy; 5) oczekiwania w zakresie funkcjonowania Centrum w przyszłości.

Słowa kluczowe: uchodźcy z Ukrainy; wsparcie społeczne; trauma wojenna.

1. Introduction

The military invasion of Russia into Ukraine caused a massive outflow of Ukrainian citizens, mainly women and children, seeking refuge in the neighbouring countries. According to the estimates of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, during the six months since the escalation of Russia's aggression on Ukraine on 24 February 2022, over 11,536,470 Ukrainians fled their homeland. During the same period, 4,984,904 people returned to Ukraine. At that time 1,338,339 refugees were staying in Poland (Długosz, 2023). The Border Guard Service estimates that by the end of August 2022, about 6 million individuals had entered Poland (as of 1 September 2022), while 4,157,000 people had returned to Ukraine (Ibidem). According to the report by the Research and Analysis Centre, Paweł Adamowicz Union of Polish Metropolises, the majority of Ukrainian citizens has been staying in 12 Polish cities: Białystok, Bydgoszcz, Gdańsk, Katowice, Kraków, Lublin, Łódź, Poznań, Rzeszów, Warsaw, Wrocław and Szczecin (Raport, 2022). The mass influx of refugees, mainly women with children, and seniors, required immediate aid response. The institutional, organisational and human potential of local government units, NGOs and the private sector enabled the development of a support system flexible enough to respond to the dynamically changing emergency. Notably, due to the scale of the challenges, as well as the lack of legal regulations, the local authorities would not have been able to provide such comprehensive assistance had it not been for the solidarity of Poles

who stood up as one and responded magnanimously, passing the test of humanitarian conduct.

The object of the study was the activity of the Aid Centre "Szczecin for Ukraine" (Centrum Pomocy "Szczecin – Ukrainie"). The research aimed to show the process of establishing and organising the Centre, and the scale of its support activities for Ukrainian refugees. The study used the analysis of existing data, references to the experiences of individuals engaged in creating and managing the Centre (problem-centred interview) and Ukrainian refugees' opinions about the Centre's functioning.

2. Life situation of refugees with war trauma experience

Regardless of the aspect – sociocultural, political, economic, legal or psychological – the situation of refugees is complex and difficult. They are a group at high risk of disfunction, necessitating the provision of special psychological support (Wysocka, 2007). In post-conflict countries, the mental disorders indicators are high (Długosz, 2023). People in war-torn areas experience strong psychological stress, including sadness, anxiety and fear with somatisation (Ibidem). During the previous Russian aggression against Ukraine in 2014, it was observed that 65% of internally displaced persons had had traumatic experiences (Johnson et al., 2022). The full-scale war involving the whole country, forcing people to flee from their homes, has caused symptoms among the refugees of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Rizzi et al., 2022). PTSD in refugees involves distorted psychical functioning and behaviours, due to the experience of traumatic war events and escape from war-torn regions (Wysocka, 2007). The general response to this intense mental trauma is terror, helplessness and fear, leading to persistent anxiety or agitation. A person who has experienced severe trauma can struggle with recurring depressive memories, nightmares, flashback episodes, mental stress in response to signals reminding them of the trauma and different physiological reactions (Ibidem). Such individuals avoid the stimuli they associate with the trauma by repressing thoughts and emotions connected with the situation, avoiding people and situations which evoke traumatic memories; they maintain emotional and social distance towards others and feel that they lack prospects. Due to increased nervous system activity, they experience various problems like sleep disorders, outbursts of anger, poor

concentration, inadequate reactions to harmless stimuli (James & Gilliland, 2005), etc. PTSD symptoms can be direct or remote manifesting as mental health problems (depression, panic attacks), psychoactive substance abuse, somatic diseases (stress-related) (Wysocka, 2007), etc. Trauma is not recognised based on the suddenness or the intensity of experience but on the resulting, established impact on individuals' mental and physical wellbeing (Woydyłło & Harland, 2022). PTSD is a significant factor hindering the refugees' adaptation in the receiving country. A survey by InfoSapiens (2022) indicates that 96% of war refugees who remain abroad experience negative emotions. They mainly feel lost and hopeless (55%), guilty when thinking about those left behind in Ukraine (50%), struggle with emotional instability (50%), terror, fear, panic (47%), apathy, depression (45%), anger, and irritation (35%). Other symptoms observed in refugees include poor concentration, sadness and helplessness (Długosz et al., 2022).

The results of the survey research among 737 war refugees from Ukraine showed that they experienced mental disorders such as PTSD and depression (Ibidem). Trauma was observed in as much as three quarters of the refugees. It was measured through the RHS-15 scale (Refugee Health Screener-15), a tool to diagnose anxiety, depression and PTSD among displaced persons. Almost three quarters of the respondents showed an elevated level of life stress.

The biggest problem for the refugees as they fled Ukraine was the separation from their loved ones, fear of air raids and shootings, and concern about the safety of other family members who stayed on in Ukraine. Other major stressors during the escape were feeling of deficiency due to ignorance of Polish language, leaving all possessions in Ukraine, and the lack of sufficient financial resources, the numerous essential things left behind in Ukraine and clear plans for the future. The problems crying for solution are not limited to meeting the basic existential needs in the receiving country but include problems in the country of origin, related to one's family, professional and economic situation. The complexity of the refugees' life situation determines a process which involves 1) traumatic experiences in the country of origin, 2) a decision to leave the country, 3) a situation of escape experienced as trauma, 4) a situation of being on hold, of waiting and uncertainty e.g. in a refugee centre and 5) problems with adaptation in the receiving country (Wysocka, 2007).

Refugees are a group particularly vulnerable to discrimination and social exclusion (Szmagalski, 2008). In light of changes accompanying the refugee

influx, 'awaking and reinforcing the sensitivity towards the needs of "others" becomes a pedagogical challenge' (Pilch, 2007, p. 8). A challenge in the area of social assistance, in turn, is to redefine the practice of social work which is open to an anti-oppression/anti-discriminatory approach. The preparation of social workers to act in a non-oppressive and non-discriminatory manner in times when we observe increasing signs of discrimination towards foreigners is the key issue (Dominelli, 1998, 2002; Kantowicz, 2010; Morgaine & Capous-Desyllas, 2014). The potential of anti-oppressive social work involves not only service improvement and raising the awareness of the service recipients but also supporting them by recognising structural problems which must be resolved before we can consider social justice activities.

3. Methodological assumptions of the research

To present the scope of activities of the Centre and the results thereof, analysis has been performed of existing data, collected and provided in the reports of the Department of Social Affairs of Szczecin Municipal Office, managed by the author of the research, which has been directly involved in organising support for the Ukrainian refugees.

The analysis of experiences of individuals engaged in supporting refugees from Ukraine is based on 10 interviews conducted with the Centre staff members who had particularly contributed to the Centre's establishment and functioning. The technique of problem-centred, semi-structured interview was adopted with the respondents' consent. All interviews were conducted in person at the Aid Centre "Szczecin for Ukraine" and lasted 20 to 60 minutes. The interview aimed to collect narratives about experiences related to work at the Centre. The interviews were conducted based on general, guiding questions. The topics included in the instructions were: 1) the initial weeks of the Centre's functioning, starting from 9 March 2022, 2) interpersonal relations within the team, 3) difficult situations, 4) situations motivating work and 5) expectations concerning the future functioning of the Centre. The interviews about the process of supporting Ukrainian refugees, with a focus on the Centre, were conducted with the Deputy Director of the Department of Social Affairs and the Centre coordinator [MK], the Honorary Consul of Ukraine [HK], the Deputy Director of the Department of Social Affairs [AK], a worker of the

Department of Social Affairs delegated to work at the Centre [MKo], caregivers in the children's club in the Centre, managed by Towarzystwo Przyjaciół Dzieci (Children's Friends Association, TPD) [AP] [VB], a translator working at the Centre [OL], the Director of the Poland-Ukraine Local Government Cooperation Convention and an assistant to the Honorary Consul of Ukraine [KK], a worker of the Organisational Department and a volunteer at the Centre [KZT].

A thematic analysis was applied (a qualitative analysis technique) to identify shared topics in the respondents' answers. Every statement quoted in the text was labelled with one of the initials listed above, to enable the identification of individual respondents and their roles.

In addition, to explore the opinions and expectations of the refugees benefiting from the Centre services, a group interview was conducted with eight individuals who came to Poland after 24 February 2022: [R1] female, 28 years, arrived in February 2022; [R1] female, 24, arrived in March 2022; [R3] female, 68, arrived in April 2022; [R4] female, 45, arrived in May 2022; [R5] female, 55, arrived in April 2023; [R6] male, 65, arrived in May 2023; [R7] female, 80, arrived in July 2023 and [R8] female, 70, arrived in August 2023. Their statements quoted herein are signed with the above-mentioned symbols.

Individuals who were at the Centre on 18 August 2023 were asked to participate in a conversation to express their opinions and expectations regarding the Centre's work. Participation in the study was voluntary. Given the unpredictable emotional state of the respondents and to ensure that the ethical standards of the study were met, a group interview was conducted with a translator and a psychologist present. When identifying the guiding instructions, the main focus was on the assistance received in the Centre and expectations regarding the support provided therein.

4. Results

4.1. Aid Centre “Szczecin for Ukraine” – activities and results

The Aid Centre “Szczecin for Ukraine” established as part of the Support Program “Szczecin for Ukraine”¹ was launched on 9 March 2022 in a building located at Marii Skłodowskiej-Curie 4 street in Szczecin, before even the so-called “Special Purpose Act” was adopted. The decision about its location was already made by Piotr Krzystek, the President of Szczecin, on 27 February 2022, which means that it took about ten days to adapt the unoccupied building, develop the whole concept, organise the work and training of the team, secure the funds and invite NGOs to collaborate. The Centre coordinates assistance services for Ukrainian citizens who came to Szczecin due to war activities in Ukraine. The main role of the Centre is to provide free access to information, counselling and administrative services related to supporting Ukrainian citizens in their daily functioning and meeting their basic needs.

In a 750-square-metre building, a room with the following service desks was prepared: 1) information and counselling regarding administrative procedures and issues, b) job matching and labour market counselling and c) counselling regarding the education system, i.e. how to enroll a child in a school or a kindergarten. Other services included a psychological office, a day club for children, a desk to submit applications for one-time financial benefit, checkouts issuing one-time benefits, an Internet café, an in-kind support point and an accommodation assistance desk.

The role of the Centre is to provide support and assistance in the following areas:

1. Comprehensive counselling and advisory services, including
 - Administrative issues – administrative counselling, in particular regarding procedures in Szczecin City units, assistance in dealing with basic administrative matters, such as filling in forms, creating a trusted profile, registering free SIM cards, or more complex issues like securing temporary custody over a minor, obtaining disability certificate, marrying in Poland, etc.;

¹ <https://szczecinukrainie.szczecin.eu/> [last accessed: 09.03.2023].

- Labour market – job matching, the legality of employment, job search support
- Education – recruitment to kindergartens and schools, information about higher education opportunities;
- Social services – information about institutional care for children under 3 (nurseries), family benefits, health care, cultural, recreational and sports offer for children, youth and families in Szczecin, assistance services available for the elderly and disabled;
- Accommodation – information about housing assistance offered by the city, accommodation available in the Szczecin area, including private offers from the city residents;
- Legal counselling – individual counselling in legal and often complex matters. In March, the majority of cases were related to legal stay in Poland, also for individuals who did not have Ukrainian citizenship but had the right to permanent residence.

The Centre has four interpreters–Ukrainians employed by the Social Co-operative “Meritum.” They help not only individuals who come to the Centre but also Ukrainian office workers who call to seek assistance.

2. Psychological support and speech therapy

Szczecin became a haven of refuge for people who escaped from areas directly affected by war and Russian war crimes: Mariupol, Kharkiv, or Bucha. They struggled with traumatic memories and needed both crisis intervention and long-term psychological support.

3. Childcare

The Centre has a children’s day club run by the Children’s Friends Association, providing care for children up to 12. Educators from Ukraine look after the children through fun activities and leisure while their parents deal with other matters in the Centre.

4. Social assistance – information about available social benefits, receiving of applications for a one-time financial benefit by the Family Aid Centre in Szczecin, operating one-time benefit checkouts.

5. In-kind aid – thanks to the collaboration with the Food Bank Foundation, Naprzeciw Foundation, Warszewo Association and other donors, during the Centre’s initial weeks, every day, 100–180 individuals received a food package with groceries and toiletries; there is also a clothing warehouse on site.

The provision of comprehensive information about different aspects of everyday functioning required cooperation between the local authorities, NGOs and the private sector. Representatives of the Town Hall, Employment Office and Family Aid Centre in Szczecin were delegated to the Centre. Every day, the Honorary Consul of Ukraine provided support to Ukrainian citizens. From the first day of its functioning, the Centre had volunteers from, *inter alia*, the University of Szczecin, the Polish Scouting and Guiding Association and the West Pomeranian Business School. NGOs were also invited to cooperate. From the very beginning, there was an active collaboration with the Children's Friends Association and the Social Cooperative "Meritum."

The analysis of the Centre's activities during the first three months revealed that every day, about 150 individuals benefited from its services. In total, from 9 March to 8 June 2022, the Centre provided support to:

- Information desk – 5,650 individuals
- Employment Office counselling – 3,165 individuals
- In-kind aid – 6,018 individuals
- Psychological and pedagogical support (Ukrainian-speaking psychologist, child psychologist, speech therapist) – 838 individuals (as of 8 June 2022) (WSS, 2022a).

Since 1 July 2022, the Municipality has been carrying out a project at the Centre, called "Ukraine closer to us" ("Ukraina bliżej nas"), co-financed by the European Union under the Regional Operational Programme of the West Pomeranian Voivodship for the period 1 June 2022 to 31 December 2023, with a budget of PLN 3,047,500. The project aims to mitigate the effects of war trauma, offer PTSD-related psychological and therapeutic support, and improve the potential to adapt and live in the new conditions through protection and intervention support for individuals staying in Szczecin municipality due to war activities in Ukraine. So far, 864 individuals have participated in the project (the initial target was 500). The participants have access to psychological consultations, legal consultations, support of an integration assistant, Polish language lessons, interpreter's assistance, and workshops.

Since the beginning, the Centre's operation has been based on close cooperation with NGOs and public institutions. The involvement of the private sector and city-owned companies was equally important. The number of people who received support during the first year of the Centre's functioning is noteworthy:

- information and psychological support – 15,725 individuals, speech therapy – 4,783 individuals
- childcare in the day club – 7,400 children
- one-time financial benefit (total of 20,366 applications submitted, PLN 6,109,800 disbursed, of which the Centre received 13,370 applications)
- in-kind support – 15,657 individuals
- job matching – 6,135 individuals (WSS, 2022b).

Assistance for the Ukrainian citizens was provided at the Centre, as well as other institutions in Szczecin. The Aid Centre “Szczecin for Ukraine” has played a key role in the process of information management and provision of resources according to the needs reported.

4.2. Aid Centre “Szczecin for Ukraine” in memories of individuals involved in organisation of support and aid to beneficiaries

The analysis presented herein focuses on five areas that are crucial to identify the experiences of staff who developed and run the Centre: 1) initial weeks of the Centre’s functioning, starting on 9 March 2022, 2) interpersonal relations within the team, 3) difficult situations, 4) situations motivating work and 5) expectations regarding the future functioning of the Centre. In the case of the refugees, the analysis was narrowed down to recognising their opinions about the Centre’s functioning and expectations regarding its operations.

- First day of the Centre’s functioning

The Centre was launched on the 13th day of the Russian invasion. The first day proved how much a place like this was needed, where everyone could get comprehensive support. In their interviews, the Centre staff pointed out how unique that day was, due to the huge number of people who came to seek help:

Day one – huge surprise – because I had imagined that we would come on March the 9th and we would have time to prepare, train, talk as a team, and shape this Centre. For me, it was important that people who came here from different places were a team. We did not get such an opportunity because when I came here, much earlier, there was already a massive line of people outside;

so, it was a huge surprise that it all happened so fast, that the information had spread so quickly about this place where one could come and get help ... I think the fact that the Honorary Consul decided to work from here contributed to the effectiveness of this place [MK].

This day was an "agony;" everyone thought that this would be a quiet day – important guests, official opening, etc. but it turned out that there were plenty of people; so many people that we sent older children to the hall because we ran out of space here. We put mats in the hall so people could sit there with their children and wait for information and assistance, I cannot tell you how many people there were on the first day because I remember that I did not even have time to get some water. The director kept bringing me water in a cup because I couldn't even remember about it. I was alone then, and they kept bringing lots of humanitarian aid, it needed to be handed over and then I was responsible for the kids we had here; I can't even tell you how this day went – I only managed to drink some water once [AP].

Refugees from Ukraine recall this day from a different perspective. After several days of travelling, tired, scared and uncertain about what they faced, with all the traumatic experiences, they did not know what kind of help they could count on:

At the train station, we got some food and drinks; they guided us to a big hall by the swimming pool, where I spent over a week with my two children before a Polish family took me in. I stayed with them for 6 months. Everything was organised there; the kids got toys and sweets. In the morning, people from the Office told us what to do. We knew that the Centre would be open in a few days. I went there with my children in the morning. I remember there were lots of people. They stood in line at the information desk and to see the Consul. The workers put mats for us and brought us hot water so we could cook some porridge for the children. Everyone was so good to us [R1].

The Centre was launched before the adoption of legal regulations on aid for the citizens of Ukraine. The atmosphere of that first day and, at the same time, the scale of the project, can be illustrated by a fragment of an e-mail sent by the Centre's coordinator to the team members:

Ukrainians escaping from the war were looking for information regarding legalisation of their stay, obtaining formal custody over a child by guardians who were not parents (some children remain under the care of family members who did not leave Ukraine), employment opportunities, education (including differences in the Polish and Ukrainian systems), care facilities for small children, material support and medical aid. There were also questions about studying opportunities in Szczecin, using public transportation, currency exchange, document translation, or free photo services to get document photographs. There were tears, thanks and great uncertainty. Our concerns that part of the people who have a place to stay at the moment will soon have to search for new accommodation have been confirmed. Housing assistance is the most urgent need. We also know that we need to adjust the Centre's formula to the diagnosed needs and legal environment which are still under construction [MK].

- Next few days of the Centre's functioning

The Centre's team members emphasised that the next days also witnessed an enormous number of people and problems to be solved:

Lots of people, a wave of people waiting in front of the building and inside; this was during the pandemic, and we were all wearing masks. There were whole families, many children and seniors – a terrifying view. They were all standing there, sad, crying, and shocked, in this single building with big rooms, big tables and lines of people – one to collect the financial benefit for Ukrainian citizens, another to get other information e.g. about doctors (as many individuals needed medical assistance). We were expected to have information we actually did not have; we were all learning, and each of us had some knowledge but each was from a different field. We were given great responsibility and could feel that we were much needed. What helped us was the great engagement of the office staff [MKo].

I remember that every day, the hallway in the Centre and the entrance were just a wave of people. I am not able to estimate how many there were every day to receive information they needed for that moment such as where they could stay, how they could take care of their children, and what kind of benefits were available [AK].

There were moments when the line of refugees was almost two blocks long, and it must be clearly said that these women who came straight from the train station – they did not have anything, no toiletries, and the ladies from the ground floor took care of everything [HK].

The beginnings were physically hard because it was 8–9 hours a day without a break, with great crowds of people in post-COVID times, with masks on, in a small room [KK].

The first days of the Centre's operation involved an additional emotional load, especially for the Ukrainian team members:

Those first days were terrible ... you don't know what to do, you live here, your family is out there, you watch the news and you come here in such physical condition ... I was worrying about my parents – I did not know how they were doing, and you come here and it is hard, children cry, mothers cry, lines, parents washing their kids in restrooms. They were coming straight from the train station after hours of travelling, and they were hungry. Here someone asked for nappies ... there, someone was screaming, people were crying [VB].

I did not know how to deal with it – it was not a movie, it was really happening ... At the very beginning, there were only two of us, Ukrainians. We were needed everywhere. At first, Poles found it hard to communicate but maybe a few weeks later, everyone learned to communicate. When our women heard the Ukrainian language, after crossing the border and all the nightmares they witnessed there, I don't know why but they immediately started crying, even as they heard simple "Good morning!" in Ukrainian, they began to cry "You're one of us" [AP].

One of the respondents who benefitted from the support in that period also mentions the massive number of people:

At first, there were plenty of people; they were crying but now also there are many people. It was very hard. I needed psychological support myself and I got it here. I am part of the support group [R4].

Refugees who came to Poland both in 2022 and 2023 appreciate the commitment of the Centre's staff:

No one ever refused to help; the ladies explained everything slowly, step by step. They helped us to fill in the applications; we were given food products – good quality products [R6].

We received a lot of good here, high-quality assistance. I did not expect that [R6].

I found out about the Centre in the City Hall when I applied for a PESEL number. The staff was great, and everyone knew what to do. They showed me understanding and respect, in simply human terms. I began to learn Polish [R3].

I visited the Centre several times. I needed legal and job-matching assistance [R5].

- Human resource management

In the initial period, the Centre was operated by a team consisting of workers from the Department of Social Affairs, the Family Aid Centre, and the District Employment Office and supported by other City Hall departments. Since the beginning, the Honorary Consul of Ukraine provided his support while the maintenance was provided by the Social Cooperative “Meritum.” The Children’s Day Club was and is still run by the Children’s Friends Association. The growing scale of challenges requires flexible responses. The scale of *ad hoc* issues and reported needs required constant adaptation of the Centre’s structure to the changing circumstances. With time, the number of team members and interpreters increased and the Centre also provided some cultural, sports and recreational opportunities. The key to such a large undertaking was building a team of members with experience in different fields, who shared a strong passion to help others. For the Centre coordinator,

it was a classic form of learning in action because we were learning from those who came here, who they are, what are their needs, and their struggles. At the same time, we collected information about the resources available in the city and we did it completely off the official path ... For me, the most important

was to build up legal expertise, as the regulations kept changing overnight, and then information about the social, cultural, and sports offer. This required cooperation with the Department of Social Affairs, the Department of Culture, the Sports Department and the Education Department [MK].

A similar mention was made by the Honorary Consul of Ukraine:

The whole thing was learning on the fly or rather on the battlefield because there was no place or time; we all had to act directly and this created, and still does, the sense of understanding [HK].

The necessity of daily learning was emphasised by the team members too, who remembered as they waited for daily reports to exchange experiences and new information:

I remember those morning meetings, those reports – we all came and said: ‘Right, there’s something new’ and we exchanged knowledge, we printed it all out. Everyone was looking for something, some piece of information outside our working hours ... we did it together – a Pole and a Ukrainian [OL].

The improvement of the assistance process through learning, not only in the Centre but in all the aid activities introduced by the local authorities, was emphasised also by the Deputy Director of the Department of Social Affairs:

I realised that we are able to respond very fast and develop an adequate crisis intervention model but it also showed me that even if we plan this process in a certain way, it must be reviewed daily to see if this idea is good or if something needs to be changed because of the weather, availability, the number of people, their situation, and the trauma they had experienced required us to reach out more. And this is how it was ... we verified the solutions introduced [AK].

Every person engaged in creating the Centre recounted the importance of the team and cooperation in the process of organising the support.

We were a team, we had created it. Staff members were delegated from different places but everyone was motivated by a desire to bring help. And it worked [MKo].

I believe that teamwork can do miracles. If there is a team, everything is possible, all that is needed is the will to work together, something I had missed while working in the social assistance sector [MKo].

It is unique that regardless of profession, we entered a new reality here. An official from the culture department became a real estate agent. And they did it without any knowledge in this area and not knowing the language – and it worked somehow [MK].

This huge group of people who had not known one another formed a team two days later – officials from different departments, staff members from the Family Aid Centre, and girls from Ukraine employed by the Social Cooperative “Meritum.” We all began to work together very fast and this determined the success of the entire operation because we have been working together since then [MKo].

Nobody complained, everyone helped without any guidelines – I must point that out – there were no guidelines prepared by the state ... local governments should have been prepared in advance [HK].

People who had been strangers to one another, from different departments, and institutions – we did not know one another, and we dealt with different issues on a daily basis. Everyone did everything; we were not assigned to specific tasks and everyone tried to answer every question [MKo].

I was positively surprised that at the very beginning, people from completely different environments found their place and they all wanted to help; they took on responsibilities they did not have on a daily basis. When a transport from Denmark came, refugees reloaded the truck and organised the aid so we could work ... my entire volunteer activity, the whole work in what we called Hades, was with Ukrainians and there were no language barriers. At first, our hands were aching from communicating but everyone wanted to help, and there was no problem [KZT].

Teamwork also involved mutual support:

It was encouraging to see staff members supporting one another. As the girls recalled, there were no divisions as to where one sat. Identification with this place was another phenomenon – all in all, we all came from different departments and different institutions [MK].

The importance of communication was emphasised:

As for work and cooperation with people working on the ground floor, from different departments of the City Hall, the level of understanding was so good because it was all about people and what's important; there were no regulations, no agreements [HK].

It was pointed out that people who volunteered to work at the Centre were mission-driven:

People who joined us were incredibly mission-driven ... and it was important because it was impossible to develop specific, official job descriptions; the scope of responsibilities depended on what the day had brought and people had to respond accordingly ... There was a moment when a new worker from the Office for Civil Dialogue came. He got a few page-long instructions, a phone and a short comment, and he began to work and deal with this situation without even knowing the language [MK].

Three girls from Ukraine came in the morning and stayed till the end of the day and helped – refugees as volunteers. They began to organise the material aid: hangers, shelves, everything in order, and they stayed – they were first employed by the Polish Centre for International Aid (Polskie Centrum Pomocy Międzynarodowej, PCPM) and now, as public workers [KZT].

- Difficult situations

The Centre's work involved direct interaction with persons in dramatic life situations, which obviously impacted the team members. The majority of the respondents said that the most difficult part was the exposure to the suffering of people of different ages. It filled them with compassion and motivated them to help, regardless of the difficulties.

The hardest part was when I thought it was like in history books, this authentic suffering those people had come through ... a woman who had been raped, a child raped and their father had died ... or driving under shooting; this direct interaction with people who came here and had to find strength to find themselves in a foreign city. This was the most difficult thing for me [MK].

I remember an old lady, about 80 years old, dressed very modestly with textile bags ... she was sitting here, crying, violently supplanted from her village – for her, it was the end of the world, end of life, end of everything because she was in a place she did not know, the language she did not speak, knowing that everything she had worked for her whole life had been destroyed [MK].

A conversation with a 20-year-old girl who became a mother to her brother. Their parents stayed in Ukraine and she had to take care of her younger brother [MK].

And the stories they told – you listen to 10 such stories a day, and you come back home and you have to deal with it because tomorrow is going to be another day [AP].

An older woman needed help – she had nothing, no clothes, no blanket and we started looking for these things – we were responding to another need and the most important thing was to listen. There were so many women every day, and you could not comprehend how something like this could have happened, how anyone could have done that [AP].

A man, aged 90, found by volunteers in the train station, had a small empty plastic bag. I met plenty of people like him [KZT].

Understandably, individuals who needed help experienced strong emotions. This is illustrated by the words of a woman who came to Poland with her two children on 15 March 2022:

Many people came straight from the train station; they had nothing, and older women were crying. I often visited the Centre. I did not have the energy to talk to anyone. I was worrying about my husband who remained in Ukraine to fight

and I wanted to protect our children. I did not cry when I was with them, only in the night. I had to find a job; so, I was bringing children to the day club. It was very helpful [R2].

Situations like these had an emotional impact on those who provided support, as they themselves indicated:

The emotional factor did its job; we often left this place with tears in our eyes and it was hard to control and adapt to it. Nevertheless, formal adaptation was the most difficult: I mean, we were like children in the fog, who had to find the right solution. We got information that we had to issue certificates, but we did not know how to do it and we did not know what we were doing, and it was only because of our previous experience that we were able to act reasonably and, step by step, we developed the procedure [KK].

Because we all work serving people, we have predispositions to it. We identified with the problems of the people we were helping. Just the number of people needing support – about 150 individuals daily – benefits, information, job, food, health care guidance, clothing, everything. These people sometimes came with one bag, they did not have anything. They did not have documents – and here, the role of the Honorary Consul of Ukraine was priceless [MKo].

Apart from information about securing their existential needs, refugees from Ukraine needed emotional support expressed through listening and accepting different emotions.

I listened – they shared their whole pain with me, they showed me photos of their homes bombed; when they were able to speak, they shared what had happened to them or what had they witnessed ... we know war from movies and books. Society will not always understand those who escape, and when you meet people with dead eyes ... I do not want to see this again, it was just so hard [KZT].

The need for psychological support was enormous. We have two Ukrainian psychologists and one speech therapist. They worked from 7:30 am for over a dozen hours, they talked to 12–15 individuals a day, providing therapeutic

support – it seems impossible, they were exhausted... at some point, they needed support themselves, even more so since they are from the country where war is raging [MKo].

Another important thematic area related to difficult situations comprised legal and organisational issues. What is more important, most team members emphasised their leaders' decisiveness in terms of process improvement, expressed in *ad hoc* solving of emerging problems, using local resources:

There were no legal provisions; the Act did not solve all the problems. People had no money, for example, to buy medicines; the support from the municipal units and the private sector helped us resolve many problems [MKo].

And there were also small children because mothers had to go and deal with other matters – I had one baby on one arm, another baby on the other ... you hold them and you run downstairs to pick up some package [VB].

- Motivation to act

The content analysis of the interviews with the Centre's team members revealed that their engagement and willingness to do more and work longer than expected were accompanied by a strong sense of agency connected with the effectiveness of the comprehensive support provided at the Centre:

As we observe where we are a year later, we can see that people who received support are doing well. They know that the Centre is here, and they can always come and use any form of support. It is encouraging, despite the tragedy of this situation [MKo].

When we managed to overcome the first wave of this crisis – I would not call it chaos because, paradoxically, I admired all of us that with such a great number of people, it was an established process, and we were not lost in it. I feel that every person who showed up in our city found answers to their questions [AK].

We were an information hub, a signpost to everyone; we felt needed [MKo].

That we were not helpless – that was encouraging. There is suffering but there is also response. Helplessness is the worst – when you cannot do anything, it is particularly hard [MK].

That was it. Being here, I have the sense of agency, that it is something we can be proud of – the opportunities we give, the tools we have. We are really doing a good job because every Ukrainian citizen receives comprehensive support [MKo].

What motivated me? First, children. When they came here, they were afraid to leave their mom but half an hour later, the fear was gone. Children came here after all those air raids and bombs, wounded, with physical and psychical trauma, I will not even say here what emotional condition they were in. And here, they began to play and it became warm and peaceful; and then you understand that you have to do it because you are Ukrainian. And this is my duty and I am doing what I am supposed to do, and I have to be here [AP].

I am convinced that every person who came to us was cared for and had their problems solved. No one has left this place without receiving support and help – I am not aware of such a situation. And this is just amazing, we helped every single person one way or the other; everyone who left had been cared for. In normal times, it would not work [MKo].

The attitude of Ukrainian refugees was another motivating factor pointed out by the Centre staff:

I was impressed the most when I saw that the people who came, Ukrainian citizens, were very patient; it was evident that they felt safe, that they could trust us, that what we did was good for them and they did not want to find another, better place to get support and aid [AK].

Another motivation was that after a while, a mother comes back to thank us, a child has changed and wants to come to us, and they come smiling. We have so many drawings and even children who left for other countries always write to us – yesterday, we got a photo from Canada [VB].

The atmosphere of collaboration in the team was also an important motivator:

I was encouraged by the level of cooperation, empathy and understanding – it was something that empowered us and drives us today and will drive us in the next years because I do not believe the war will end soon [HK].

There were many things that no one could foresee, it had to be organised on the go. Thanks to attitude, security and organisation, we could invite the Consul General from Gdańsk and serve refugees, not only those who came to Szczecin but also those who stayed in Świnoujście, Koszalin and Kołobrzeg [HK].

The analysis of the interviews reveals the motivating role of values that showed up in the support process, such as the sense of community, solidarity and empathy:

For us, it was a moment of solidarity movement ... I am certain, it was the common experience of all city residents and that we passed this test with excellence. First, every now and again, families came and they found accommodation with Polish families. But even those who did not have such ability brought gifts, and material help and that was encouraging – that we could say we were a community, that it matters and it is not just an empty provision in the Act but we actually are a local community which can organise itself spontaneously [MK].

What is important and what I remember from this first week and I always emphasise, are phone calls from NGOs asking: “How can we help?” ... this authentic, spontaneous response – no one told what they needed but what they had and how they could get involved. Later, it was just an attempt to organise this process, that is, what can we do as the administration and within some legal framework [MK].

It was amazing that in one moment, we could get a response from our staff from different departments; they were ready to be on duty in the tents and it was not a problem. Or when the Department of Crisis Management and People's Protection was looking for volunteers to group accommodation points, ready

to work from early morning hours till late in the night – it did not matter that it was cold. Everybody knew that his or hers was the right thing to do [AK].

Aid was referred to in terms of moral duty, human dignity and humanity:

Every one of us in the Centre, every team member, took on every role. Some people we had to comfort ourselves, and calm them down because they were different, with extreme emotions and we needed to support them; it was the humane thing to do. It was on the edge of psychological support but we had no choice [MKo].

I remember those days as the time of intense emotions but also with an urge, that we could not stop and do nothing. Every new situation, every new problem was a motivator to search for solutions and we did it together. We felt we were a community. It was our moral duty [AK].

The experience of helping others led some staff members and Ukrainian refugees to reflect upon the key values in life, view other human beings as a value, appreciate family and friendship and the need to follow the values in life:

The world is unpredictable. It really moved me when the war broke out; until then, I had been convinced that I lived in a safe world because my generation, and my children's generation, were not affected by these issues, they were out of reach, and they did not affect us. I understood that the world is unpredictable and that people are the greatest value, even though it is people who do this to other people. So, I learned that if we follow the values in our life, we receive support, we will not be rejected [AK].

I had never been to Poland before. I saw that people are very kind here. When we came – me, my daughter and my granddaughter – Poles took us in. Together, we celebrated Christmas, both Catholic and Orthodox, New Year ... They are precious people, better friends than many of my fellows [R5].

It is what it is. I lost everything. My house is gone but my family is alive. This is what matters. Family and relationships with friends are the most important. I miss them [R5].

Thank you for all the good I received here. Good comes back and good will overcome all this evil [R2].

Individuals who benefited from various forms of aid offered at the Centre spoke about the good, respect, kindness and empathy shown by those who provided support. Changes that can take place in thinking about self and the world in traumatic circumstances, may include change in one's previous beliefs. One of the interviewed refugees emphasised that the help he had received and the people he had met in Poland made him change his attitude towards Poles:

I grew up in a different system. Russian propaganda did its job. Nobody spoke well about Poles. I did not want to come here. To leave everything at my age ... my daughter went alone with the grandchildren. I did not believe when she told me it was not true, that Poles were different than I thought, that she was welcomed better than a family and treated as a friend. But it is good here and my thinking has changed. My granddaughter was welcomed so well in the school ... Something changed in my mind – against the Russian propaganda. I have met many good people [R6].

- The Centre's functioning in the future

The last thematic area covered in the interviews concerned the future functioning of the Centre. When considering the future, the respondents admitted that the war had lasted too long but they also mentioned that, unfortunately, it would not end soon.

Future – this war will not end soon; we will have refugees all the time and society will be poorer; so, they do not have enough to share [KZT].

Similar concerns were expressed by the Ukrainian respondents who showed different attitudes. The following statement illustrates a constructive attitude:

I am not sure this war will end soon; that is why one needs to look into the future. Do not give up and have faith [R5].

I went to a support group with a psychologist and enrolled in language classes. I also attend the caregiver training in the Polish Red Cross. I am not giving up. I do not lose hope [R5].

A diametrically opposite attitude is revealed by a person in their eighties:

I came in August 2023 to my great grandchildren [crying]. Poles have welcomed me well [crying]. The Centre is a good place. The most important now is psychological support because I cannot cope on my own. I have lived through one war already. I thought it would be the last one. What's it for? I do not know if I can start all over again, at my age [R7].

As they reflected on the improvement of the Centre's operations according to the changing needs, the staff members pointed to the long-term negative psychological consequences experienced by those who lived through trauma and thus, the need to continue this form of support:

I don't think any Ukrainian will ever be emotionally stable because this is like a war stamp, it stays forever. Often, when mothers sit and the children are playing, and everything seems to be fine – 18 months since the war began – but then she reads some news and starts crying and we cry too because we have heard too many of these stories that are too much even for one person ... but we manage, one cannot cry in front of the children; so, we go out to the hall, calm down and come back and there is another mother telling us how she had been travelling for 20 days. They told us terrible things [AB].

It was emphasised that help is still needed and the forms of support should be modified depending on the needs:

Now, we take care of people who will not go to work because they are old, ill, or have a disability. The clothing warehouse is open every day because people keep coming all the time – the wave after the dam exploded was so great [KZT].

At the moment, the Centre is still needed because new Ukrainian citizens keep coming; there are not so many but, given the number of benefit applications,

about 20 individuals a day. It seems little but it is not. Every person needs to be taken care of from A to Z ... As long as the situation in Ukraine remains unchanged, the Centre in this formula will be needed and then we will face the challenge of integration [MKo].

Since April 2023, the Centre has offered therapeutic workshops for seniors. There is also a senior club. Due to the language barrier, these people are not open to participating in our senior clubs in Szczecin. Here, they come, meet and talk in their own language; they can complain and cry and there is a therapist who shows them a path to integration but also what can they do to simply feel better [MKo].

To keep what is at this level, specialise more, be sensitive and remember that it is not quantity but the quality of support that matters. And analyse more as to whom this support goes [HK].

All staff members participating in the study identified strongly with the Centre's activities, the team, the place and the mission to bring aid. They mainly mentioned the need for integration activities:

What is ahead is the integration work, something we did not do in the first period. Now, we should open to activities for Szczecin residents ... – they all need integration and inclusion activities. It is also training for us – the officials and there will be projects to reduce these problems [MK].

Now, we need integration. Maybe if the Centre could do it for Poles also, we could show them that we help the Poles too. Maybe this would help build integration because there are cultural differences [OL].

The quality of needs and expectations has changed ... My call is to use and implement integration, not assimilation [HK].

When asked about the activities the Centre should implement, the respondents from Ukraine mentioned an integration club, to which the Poles would come as well:

Poles and Ukrainians could have some tea together and talk. I write poems, maybe it would interest somebody [R6].

It is not easy to meet new people. People from Ukraine have no house or apartment; they have problems, and they are tired. It is understandable but I do not have the strength to listen to other people's problems. I can't help them and they cry ... I would like to get to know some Poles [R5].

5. Discussion

The analysis of the Centre's activity, from organisation of the new institution to the introduction of new services and development of the support system, shows the comprehensive character of aid provided in the Centre and the professionalisation of its forms according to the changing needs. The creation of the Centre required some custom/unconventional activities that involved staff from different City Hall departments, units and companies. Inviting the NGO sector to co-create the Centre was an important factor from the viewpoint of evaluating the scale of the project. The commitment of the staff members who engaged in activities beyond their job descriptions, often working long hours as volunteers, is worth notice and mention.

The analysis of the five areas crucial for identifying the experiences of the workers who developed and run the Centre revealed that the initial weeks of the Centre's functioning meant exceptional engagement of the staff members, who worked intensely, without breaks, and often for long hours. Comprehensive information and instrumental, emotional and spiritual support were provided, depending on the refugees' needs. It required developing new skills, accelerated learning on the go and flexible responses to challenging situations. The Centre's phenomenon, that is, the great commitment of the staff and their openness to searching for unconventional solutions to improve the situation of each refugee, can be explained by the voluntary character of the work of people who had not been directly involved in social care. It may be an expression of their predisposition or an inner urge, nay a passion, to bring help. In addition, in the rapidly changing legal environment, the activities undertaken, especially during the first few months of the Centre's functioning, combined formal, organised, targeted and result-oriented aid with informal, spontaneous

support. As observed by E. Trempała, 'Spontaneous help results from goodwill; it is determined by kindness and understanding of the needs of others, it is emotional and all activities have a moral aspect' (1998, p. 22). Of course, in the light of the foundations of social assistance, social work in particular, values and ethical issues are crucial. However, the critiques of the system point to too strict standards and requirements that do not facilitate the development of pro-social attitudes among social workers (Zbyrad, 2010).

The analysis of the interpersonal relations within the team showed that human resource management was the key to the Centre's functioning. The respondents mentioned quick integration of the team, cooperation, joint work and mutual support. They appreciated the communication and commitment of all the staff members even at the initial stage, that is, voluntarily joining the Centre's team. The mission of the team was emphasised, and expressed in readiness to complete the non-standard tasks.

Such behaviours can be explained by C. D. Batson's empathy-altruism hypothesis, according to which aid-oriented activities are treated as signs of altruism motivated by empathy and compassion. They can be also explained by the concept of reciprocal altruism, which assumes the expectation of returning the favour (cf. Gerrig & Zimbardo, 2009).

The thematic analysis of the respondents' statements revealed that challenges were connected with organisational and, primarily, legal barriers. However, the most difficult were situations involving direct support to people with post-traumatic stress. Being confronted with the suffering of others, caused by war trauma, sadness and despair evoked different emotions among the team members, stimulating empathy and the desire to bring relief. Regardless of their assigned responsibilities, the team members provided emotional support, listened, comforted, and expressed compassion, what required the ability to deal with their own emotions. According to C. G. Rogers (1991), a condition determining the self-development of a person receiving help is an authentic, accepting and empathetic attitude of the helper.

An important factor that enabled providing responsible long-term support was the motivation to act, which consisted of the sense of agency, the refugees' attitude and the good atmosphere in the team. A motive that was often mentioned in the interviews was existentially meaningful values. The respondents appreciated such values as a sense of community, solidarity and empathy. Help was treated as a moral duty, a defence of human dignity and a confirmation

of one's own humanity. The refugees pointed to values like goodness, respect, kindness and empathy. According to J. Tischner, experiencing values is 'what is human in humans' (1994). K. Popielski (1994) states that values orient, enrich and create human existence in all its dimensions, enabling people to overcome themselves. The respondents also mentioned the value of hope. Tischner said that hope emerges from the meeting with despair when the foundations of human existence are endangered (1985). G. Marcel claims that hope grows in 'the situation of a trial' and is the response with which humans overcome the situation they are in (1984). Meeting with another human being who experiences tragedy has to change those directly engaged in helping. Such situations enrich one's experience, arouse emotions and can thus result in a change in individual, group and social dimensions. According to V. E. Frankl, the idea of help gives meaning to human life (1994). R. Bera observes that when one loses the meaning of values, one may come to feel that life is meaningless (2010). Both staff members and beneficiaries of the support pointed to the change in their attitude towards life, emphasised the role of values in dealing with difficult situations and appreciated such values as family, friendship and doing good in life.

The last thematic area analysed referred to the vision and expectations about the future functioning of the Centre. Some concerns about the development of the situation in Ukraine were voiced, together with conclusions that aid activities should be continued. At the same time, the respondents indicated the need to improve the quality of services and integrate. These reflections are consistent with the initial idea of the Centre, which assumed that the support process would involve intervention through systemic support, leading to the refugees' independence, to integration.

6. Conclusions

The support for Ukrainian citizens due to the Russian invasion was, to a large extent, a bottom-up social initiative. Especially in the initial period, the activity of NGOs and the engagement of Poles was the main element of the refugee aid system co-organised by the local authorities and the public administration (Grabowska & Pięta-Szawara, 2023). With the contribution of many local institutions, local authorities, the private sector and universities, the activities

implemented in the Aid Centre “Szczecin for Ukraine” facilitated the provision of social services to Ukrainian citizens, adequate to their needs and the changing reality. In the long-term perspective of the ongoing military conflict and regardless of the engagement and resources of the local governments, systemic solutions in the areas of the labour market, social assistance, housing, education and other areas of social policy will be necessary, including securing the funds to implement them. Integration, developing social sensitivity to values and building social capital based on social relations and individual trust become the key objectives.

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