

HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE FOR WAR REFUGEES FROM UKRAINE: A CASE STUDY OF THE PODKARPACKI BRANCH OF THE POLISH RED CROSS

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Abstract. *The phenomenon of refugees has been a consistent feature of human history for centuries, and in the era of globalization and widespread armed conflicts, it has gained increasing significance. This article examines the definition and status of refugees in the context of international law, with particular emphasis on the 1951 Geneva Convention and relevant domestic regulations. The role of non-governmental organizations (including the Polish Red Cross) and state structures in the refugee assistance process was also presented. The article presents an example of the actions taken by the Podkarpacki Branch of PCK in response to the influx of refugees from war-torn Ukraine in 2022. The authors examine the significance of international cooperation and a multi-level legal framework in safeguarding the basic rights and security of individuals forced to flee their homeland. Finally, the article presents conclusions regarding the necessity of long-term integration programs and sustainable humanitarian efforts.*

Keywords: refugeehood, international law, Polish Red Cross, humanitarian aid, armed conflict, integration

INTRODUCTION

The aim of this article is to present and analyze selected humanitarian actions undertaken by the Podkarpacki Branch of the Polish Red Cross (PCK) in support of war refugees from Ukraine. The article considers the historical, social, and legal (Nowak, 2022) context and provides an overview of the key forms of material and non-material support. The analysis was conducted based on available reports from international organizations (including UNHCR, EASO, WHO) (UNHCH, 2022), statistical data from local authorities, and interviews with volunteers and PCK employees. The conclusion discusses the main organizational and systemic challenges, while also pointing out potential directions for the future development of humanitarian initiatives in the Podkarpackie region (Górny, 2022).

The phenomenon of refugees has been a part of human history for centuries and remains one of the greatest challenges of the modern world. Refugees are individuals who have left their homelands due to political, religious, racial, or economic persecution. Refugees seek refuge in other countries where they can receive protection and assistance. One of the main challenges refugees face is the lack of acceptance and recognition from local communities. Refugees are often perceived as foreign, unfamiliar, and disconnected from the society they arrive in. Since the 20th century, we have observed key actions in international cooperation and the work of non-governmental organizations for refugees and migrants (Balicki & Trojanowska-Strzęboszewska, 2020). As the number of migrants and refugees increased in many countries during the 20th century, the establishment of a unified and effective system of international cooperation became essential (Marcinkowski, 2019). Many countries have taken collective actions to provide support for refugees and migrants, aiming to ensure they have a safe and dignified quality of life. These actions include measures aimed at ensuring better access to support, as well as efforts to address the underlying causes of the crisis. Not without reason, it was after World War II that the scale of violations

against human rights and freedoms was recognized. These actions have largely led to the recognition of the refugee issue in international legal documents and the domestic laws of individual countries, which has positively influenced the development of human rights related to this specific group of society. Over the years and through natural phenomena, this group has grown, creating increasingly larger refugee populations traveling around the world (Pak, 2022).

The definition of a refugee was established in the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and serves as the foundation of international refugee law. However, there are numerous definitions of a refugee across different legal instruments and political contexts (Kun-Buczko, 2007).

The 1951 Convention defines a refugee as a person who is outside their country of residence due to a well-founded fear of persecution on account of race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group. This definition also encompasses situations where a person is unable to, or unwilling to due to this fear, seek protection in their own country. However, in practice, individual countries may have their own definitions of a refugee, which may vary from the definition established in the Convention. Some countries broaden the definition of a refugee to include individuals fleeing violence related to armed conflicts or natural disasters, which are not directly linked to the reasons covered by the Convention. Other countries may adopt narrower definitions that are more closely tied to specific causes, such as political, religious, or ethnic persecution.

It is important to note that the definition of a refugee does not encompass individuals migrating for economic reasons. People who leave their countries in search of better living conditions are not recognized as refugees in a legal sense, although they may face similar difficulties and challenges.

Furthermore, various international and regional organizations have their own definitions of refugees, which may differ from the definition provided in the 1951 Convention. For example, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) adopts a broader definition that includes individuals fleeing general violence, armed conflicts, or deteriorating living conditions, even if they do not meet the criteria outlined in the 1951 Convention. UNHCR applies this broader definition to provide protection and assistance to all individuals in need, regardless of whether they meet the traditional criteria for refugee status (Stawicki, 2019).

The concept of a refugee is also dynamic and subject to change, depending on evolving global circumstances. For example, the term "war refugee" is used to refer to individuals who are forced to leave their homes due to armed conflict or war. War refugees face additional risks and needs related to violence, loss of property and loved ones, and are often more reliant on humanitarian assistance.

The purpose of this article is to demonstrate how international law, national law (using Poland as a case study), and the activities of non-governmental organizations interact in providing protection to refugees. Special attention has been given to the situation of war refugees from Ukraine, who have been arriving in Poland in large numbers since 2022, including in the Podkarpackie Voivodeship. From the outset, refugees have been provided with care and support. This article examines the actions of the Polish Red Cross (PCK), with particular emphasis on its Podkarpacki Branch, which was tasked with providing rapid humanitarian assistance in response to the Russian-Ukrainian conflict.

The introduction provides a general overview of the refugee issue and the origins of the most important international documents. The subsequent sections outline the following:

- Definition of a refugee in light of the 1951 Convention and other legal instruments,
- Polish law regarding refugees, including the Act of June 13, 2003, on Granting Protection to Foreigners in the Territory of the Republic of Poland,
- Role of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), including PCK and international organizations, along with their legal framework.
- Case Study: activities of the Podkarpacki Branch of PCK in the context of the mass influx of refugees from Ukraine,

- Conclusions regarding the challenges, perspectives, and necessary long-term actions in the field of refugee assistance.

The primary objective is to present and analyze selected humanitarian actions undertaken by the Podkarpacki Branch of the Polish Red Cross (PCK) in support of war refugees from Ukraine. The article considers the historical, social, and legal context and provides an overview of the key forms of material and non-material support (Nowak, 2022). The analysis was conducted based on available reports from international organizations (including UNHCR, EASO, WHO) (UNHCR, 2022), statistical data from local authorities, and interviews with volunteers and PCK employees. The conclusion discusses the main organizational and systemic challenges, while also pointing out potential directions for the future development of humanitarian initiatives in the Podkarpackie region (Górny, 2022)

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The aim of the study was to investigate and analyze:

- How national and international laws influence the actions of aid organizations (including PCK) in crisis situations.
- What specific forms of support (e.g., food, medical care, psychological assistance) were provided to war refugees from Ukraine, and how was the coordination of these activities carried out?
- What logistical and organizational challenges emerged during the mass influx of refugees, and how did PCK and other entities address them?

To answer these questions, an approach combining qualitative methods with analytical and comparative techniques has been developed. Both secondary data (desk research) and primary data collected during the study (including field interviews with representatives of PCK) were used.

Given the rapidly evolving situation at the Polish-Ukrainian border and the limited number of scientific studies specifically focusing on the activities of the Podkarpacki Branch of PCK, this study is exploratory in nature. It aims to describe specific solutions and practices implemented in response to a sudden humanitarian crisis.

The case study of the Podkarpacki Branch of PCK facilitates a deeper analysis of the role and operations of aid organizations in the context of armed conflict. This branch was chosen due to the following reasons (Boyatzis, 1998):

- The proximity to the Ukrainian border required the Branch to operate within the most intense migration flow.

- The exceptional nature of the circumstances (a rapid mass influx of refugees).
- A wealth of source materials (reports, internal documents, and volunteers' reports).

The analysis of existing sources included legal and administrative documents, such as:

- Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (1951) and the 1967 Protocol.
- Act of June 13, 2003, on Granting Protection to Foreigners in the Territory of the Republic of Poland.
- EU directives regarding the conditions for the reception of refugees.

The aim was to identify the fundamental norms and standards that an organization providing assistance to refugees should adhere to.

- Internal documentation of PCK (activity reports from reception points, minutes of coordination meetings, and reports on the utilization of financial and material resources).

As a result, a comprehensive understanding of actual practices and logistical challenges was gained. The analysis of this data enabled a comparison of the activities of PCK with those of other organizations and helped to identify the scale of the crisis and the needs of refugees. To gain insight into the practices of the Podkarpacki Branch of PCK, a series of semi-structured interviews were conducted with: representatives of PCK (full-time employees and key volunteers), local government officials (crisis management departments, social assistance centers), and refugees (in selected cases, to gather information about the experiences of aid recipients) (Spradley, 1980).

The interviews were recorded and anonymized in accordance with ethical guidelines. Subsequently, a content analysis was conducted, identifying recurring thematic categories (e.g., logistics, human resources, integration with the local system).

Participant observation was applied to a limited extent at reception points and assistance centers. Several researcher-volunteers had access to the ongoing activities of PCK, engaging in assistance tasks and compiling field notes. This method facilitated a direct understanding of the procedures and interactions among volunteers, refugees, and other entities.

The descriptive method was used to conduct the data analysis (it was applied to outline the context and present the main facts regarding the scale and types of assistance organized by PCK). Additionally, the comparative analysis method was employed (comparing the forms of support provided by PCK with the activities of governmental institutions, aiming to identify similarities and differences in operational models. Documents and statistics were utilized to verify the consistency of declared objectives with actual outcomes, such as the number of benefits provided or meals distributed).

Qualitative data from interview transcriptions and observation notes were coded using a qualitative data analysis program, which facilitated the creation of categories (themes) such as “logistics and transportation”, “medical needs”, “volunteer coordination”, and “relations with local authorities”. Based on these categories, the main issues and strategies for addressing the encountered difficulties were identified.

The research revealed certain limitations that influenced the study:

- The dynamics of the conflict – data was collected in the context of a rapidly changing situation at the border. Certain solutions, although effective at the time, may have become obsolete in the subsequent weeks.

- Access to full documentation – certain materials (particularly internal protocols and PCK reports) may have been subject to disclosure restrictions, which hindered a comprehensive assessment of all actions.

- Lack of representativeness of refugees' opinions – only a selected group consented to interviews. To obtain a more comprehensive perspective, it would be necessary to conduct a systematic survey among a considerably larger number of aid beneficiaries.

- Possible subjective perception – participant observation may introduce the researcher's involvement in PCK activities, potentially influencing the interpretation of the results.

The methods employed—document analysis, semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and comparative analysis—enabled a comprehensive understanding of the complexity of humanitarian aid in response to the mass influx of war refugees. As a result, it became possible to identify key elements, such as volunteer organization, cooperation with local authorities, and coordination principles with other entities, including NGOs and international institutions. Despite the aforementioned limitations, the research methods employed provide a solid foundation for drawing conclusions regarding the effectiveness and shortcomings of the interventions undertaken by the Podkarpacki Branch of PCK in response to the refugee crisis.

The primary source material was derived from

1. Analysis of legal acts

- oA review of the key documents regulating the status of refugees has been conducted (including, among others, the Geneva Convention of 1951, The Hague Convention, the Act of June 13, 2003, and European Union Directives.

- oAttention has been drawn to the practical implications of the regulations, particularly in the context of the ongoing armed conflict in Ukraine.

2. Literature review and analysis of reports from humanitarian organizations.

- oA query of the latest reports and studies was conducted, including, among others, those from UNHCR, IOM, the Polish Red Cross, as well as press sources and local government reports.

3. Different perspectives were examined, ranging from strictly humanitarian actions to legislative and administrative issues.

4. Case study

oThe actions of the Podkarpacki Branch of the Polish Red Cross in response to the refugee crisis of 2022 have been described in detail.

oOrganizational and logistical challenges have been identified, along with the primary types of support provided by PCK, including reception points, medical assistance, food distribution, temporary accommodation, and psychological support.

5. Field interviews

oThe section on the outcomes of cooperation with local institutions draws on available information from interviews with volunteers and staff of PCK, as well as data provided by local government units in the Podkarpackie Voivodeship (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

As a result of applying the aforementioned methods, a comprehensive understanding of the situation was obtained, integrating legal, administrative, organizational, and human aspects.

RESULTS

The Issue of Refugees in Polish Law

In the context of war refugees, there are also specific instruments and legal acts designed to ensure protection and assistance for those particularly in need. One such instrument is The Hague Convention of 1951, which addresses the protection of civilians during wartime and has been ratified by many states. This convention provides the legal foundation for granting protection and assistance to war refugees (Balicki & Trojanowska-Strzęboszewska, 2020).

In the case of Poland, there is a legal framework and legislation that govern issues related to refugees, including war refugees. An example of such a legal act is the Act of 13 June 2003 on Granting Protection to Foreigners on the Territory of the Republic of Poland (Act of June 13, 2003). This law establishes procedures for recognizing and granting protection to refugees, including war refugees.

According to the aforementioned law, a war refugee is defined as an individual present on the territory of Poland who meets the criteria outlined in The Hague Convention of 1951 and is at risk of persecution or violence related to armed conflict. A war refugee is entitled to protection and assistance under this law, which grants them refugee status and access to fundamental rights and services.

Furthermore, in Poland, there is an institutional framework responsible for managing the affairs of war refugees. The main institution responsible for refugee affairs in Poland is the Office for Foreigners (UDSC), which handles procedures related to recognizing refugee status and providing assistance to these individuals. The UDSC also collaborates with other institutions, non-governmental organizations, and international organizations to ensure effective protection and support for war refugees.

The Republic of Poland, as a signatory to various international agreements and conventions, is obligated to respect and implement the provisions of international refugee law. The key document in this field is the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol, which provide the foundation for the protection of refugees at the international level. Poland has ratified these documents and is obligated to comply with them.

Poland, as a member of the European Union, is also bound by EU law regarding the protection of refugees. The European Union Directive 2011/95/EU on standards for the qualification of third-country nationals or stateless persons as refugees regulates the rights and obligations of member states towards refugees. Poland is obligated to adhere to this directive and ensure appropriate standards of reception conditions for refugees (Pac, 2022).

The Republic of Poland has its own legal acts that regulate issues related to refugees and their protection. The key document is the Act of June 13, 2003, on Granting Protection to Foreigners on the

Territory of the Republic of Poland. This law provides the legal and organizational framework for procedures related to the reception and granting of protection to individuals seeking refugee status. It also defines the rights and obligations of refugees, as well as the procedures related to their social integration.

Under this law, a refugee is defined as an individual who is staying on the territory of Poland and applies for refugee status in accordance with international standards of refugee protection. The procedures for granting refugee status are clearly defined, including the examination of the application, conducting an interview, assessing the risk, and issuing a decision on whether to grant or deny refugee status (Klaus et al., 2022).

The law also grants refugees rights, including protection against deportation, access to education, medical care, employment, and accommodation. Refugees also have the right to access legal procedures in the event of a refusal to grant refugee status or extend protection.

Furthermore, the Republic of Poland is a signatory to the European Convention on Human Rights and is subject to the jurisdiction of the European Court of Human Rights. This means that refugees have the right to file complaints with this tribunal in the event of a violation of their rights, including the right to an independent court, protection from torture, inhuman or degrading treatment, and the right to family life.

One of the key aspects of the legal system regarding refugees in Poland is the procedure for examining applications for refugee status. The law specifies the detailed steps, which include the submission of the application, conducting an interview, assessing the risk, and issuing a decision on whether to grant or deny refugee status. This procedure aims to ensure a fair and just consideration of applications and protection against deportation in cases where the life or freedom of the refugee is at risk in their country of origin (Balicki & Trojanowska-Strzęboszewska, 2020).

Poland, as a country that accepts refugees, should also collaborate with other states and international organizations to coordinate actions, exchange information, and share best practices in refugee protection. Within the European Union, there are mechanisms of solidarity and cooperation that can support member states in dealing with challenges related to refugees.

Role of Non-Governmental Organizations in Refugee Assistance

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) play a crucial role in providing support and protection to refugees around the world. Their activities focus on various areas, such as humanitarian aid, human rights protection, ensuring access to basic services, and supporting social integration. In the context of refugees, non-governmental organizations undertake a wide range of activities to address their needs and contribute to improving their situation.

It is also important to mention the legal conditions governing the activities of non-governmental organizations, which operate in accordance with international humanitarian law and national legal regulations. Under international law, non-governmental organizations rely on the principles of international humanitarian law and human rights law, which safeguard the rights of refugees and define the obligations of states towards them. International and regional legal instruments, such as the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and the 1967 Protocol, serve as the basis for the actions of non-governmental organizations in the field of refugee protection.

In the national context, non-governmental organizations operate under the Association Act, the Foundation Act, and other legal regulations governing their activities. These regulations cover the registration, statutes, financial management, activity monitoring, and other aspects related to the operation of non-governmental organizations (Stawicki, 2019).

Numerous non-governmental organizations operate worldwide to provide refugees with humanitarian assistance, protection of rights, social support, and integration. Below are a few examples of such organizations:

- International Organization for Migration (IOM) is an intergovernmental organization that focuses on migration management, including the protection and support of refugees. IOM operates internationally and collaborates with member states, non-governmental organizations, and other entities to ensure effective protection and support for migrants and refugees. IOM engages in humanitarian activities, such as providing food assistance, drinking water, medicine, and other basic necessities. The organization also runs programs for reintegration and social integration, supporting refugees in the process of adapting to new environments.

- UNHCR - the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, is the primary agency responsible for the protection and support of refugees worldwide. UNHCR operates under a mandate from the UN General Assembly and is responsible for coordinating actions to protect refugees, provide shelter, medical care, education, and other basic needs. The agency also undertakes activities to address the long-term challenges of refugees, such as repatriation, resettlement, and social integration.

- Red Cross and Red Crescent - The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement is one of the most important humanitarian organizations in the world, working to assist victims of armed conflicts and natural disasters, including refugees. These organizations provide medical support, access to drinking water and sanitation, distribute humanitarian aid, and engage in activities to protect the human rights of refugees.

- Amnesty International - is a non-governmental organization that works to protect human rights globally. The organization takes action to ensure protection for refugees, including monitoring conditions in refugee camps, supporting social integration processes, and pursuing justice for those responsible for violating refugee rights.

- Human Rights Watch - is an international organization that monitors and reports on human rights violations globally. The organization investigates the conditions of refugees and provides information on the violations of their rights. It works to ensure accountability for human rights violations and promote the protection of refugees (Kuchciński et al., 2023).

Polish Red Cross (PCK) - is one of the most important humanitarian organizations in Poland, working to protect health, provide humanitarian aid, and support those in need. The organization was founded in 1919 and has since played a significant role in providing medical assistance, conducting rescue operations, offering health education, and supporting those affected by conflicts, disasters, and other crises. PCK is an integral part of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement.

Both organizations trace their roots to the work of Henry Dunant, who founded the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement in the 19th century. My main goal is to protect human health and life, provide medical assistance, support victims of armed conflicts and natural disasters, and promote humanitarian values and respect for human rights (Polish Red Cross, 1984).

The National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies have similar objectives and activities, including the provision of humanitarian assistance, implementation of health programs, education, support for those in need, and the promotion of humanitarian values. These organizations also engage in rescue operations during crises such as armed conflicts, natural disasters, or pandemics.

The Polish Red Cross operates nationwide, with local branches and structures across various regions. The organization runs numerous programs and activities, such as providing first aid, organizing blood donations, offering medical rescue training, assisting the elderly and disabled, supporting homeless people, and working on the integration of refugees. PCK also collaborates with other institutions, such as emergency services, hospitals, government offices, and other social organizations, to ensure effective assistance and coordination during crisis situations.

Globally, the Red Cross and Red Crescent organizations operate across diverse regions and countries. Each national association has its own structures and programs tailored to the specific needs of the country and the situation. Differences may arise due to geographical, socio-cultural, economic, and political conditions.

The assistance provided by national Red Cross and Red Crescent societies is adapted to local needs and challenges. These actions may include providing medical assistance, conducting health programs, offering social support and education, building sanitary and hygienic infrastructure, as well as activities aimed at protecting human rights and dignity. These organizations often collaborate at both the national and international levels to provide mutual support, exchange experiences, and coordinate humanitarian assistance efforts (Kun-Buczko, 2007).

An example of international legal instruments is the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol. This convention defines who can be recognized as a refugee and outlines the rights and protections they should receive. Many countries, including Poland, are parties to this Convention and are obligated to comply with its provisions.

In Poland, refugees are also protected by national laws, such as the Act on Granting Protection to Foreigners on the Territory of the Republic of Poland. Like many other countries, Poland has a legal and administrative support system for refugees. The Act on Granting Protection to Foreigners on the Territory of the Republic of Poland outlines the procedures and conditions for granting protection to refugees in Poland. This law aligns Polish regulations with international standards and includes provisions regarding the reception and assistance of refugees.

Under these regulations, refugees have the right to apply for protection in Poland and to submit applications for refugee status or other forms of protection. The procedures involve assessing the individual's situation, their protection needs, and compliance with international standards regarding refugees. Decisions regarding protection are made by the relevant institution in Poland, typically the Office for Foreigners.

As the national Red Cross association, the Polish Red Cross plays a significant role in the process of integrating refugees in Poland. The organization offers a wide range of support, including medical, psychological, and social services, assistance in finding housing, language learning support, and various social programs aimed at integrating and supporting refugees in Polish society.

The Polish Red Cross also collaborates with other non-governmental organizations, government institutions, international bodies, and local communities to provide comprehensive assistance and support to refugees. Together, they undertake actions aimed at improving living conditions, fostering social and economic integration, and promoting respect for human rights and human dignity (Gliński, 2006).

On the international stage, these organizations engage in refugee-related activities through cooperation with the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (Federation). The aforementioned international organizations coordinate and support the activities of national Red Cross and Red Crescent societies, offering financial, technical, and logistical assistance.

The Polish Red Cross (PCK) is one of the most important organizations providing humanitarian aid and health protection in Poland. As an independent social organization, PCK engages in a wide range of activities, including providing assistance in extraordinary situations and supporting local communities, with a focus on helping refugees. This subsection presents the structure and characteristics of PCK, including a description of the individual branches operating in Poland and their scope of responsibilities.

The Polish Red Cross has a decentralized structure, organized according to territorial divisions. The organization operates at the national, regional, and local levels, ensuring effective coordination across all tiers. The key units in the structure of PCK are as follows (Polish Red Cross, 2024):

- Main Board: It is the highest decision-making body of PCK, responsible for developing strategies, making decisions, and coordinating the organization's activities. The Main Board consists of the president, vice presidents, and board members, each responsible for different areas of activity.

- District Branches of PCK: Poland is divided into 16 districts, each with its own branch of PCK. District Local Branches of PCK: Local branches of PCK operate in cities and municipalities across the country. They are responsible for implementing programs and activities for local communities, including

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providing support to refugees. Local branches are closely connected to their communities and are actively involved in addressing health and humanitarian issues.

- **Field Units:** In addition to its branches, PCK also has field units that operate in specific towns or regions. They are designed to provide medical assistance, administer first aid, organize training, and carry out preventive activities.

PCK operates in accordance with international standards and the principles of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. The organization collaborates with state institutions, other non-governmental organizations, and international partners to effectively carry out its mission (Klaus et al., 2022).

An important aspect of PCK's work is the involvement of volunteers. Many citizens actively participate in the organization's activities, offering their skills, time, and commitment in service to local communities and refugees.

PCK branches are also responsible for promoting humanitarian values and disseminating knowledge about human rights, international humanitarian law, and the organization's principles. By organizing informational campaigns, training sessions, and workshops, PCK branches help raise public awareness on health protection, humanitarian aid, and humanitarian values.

PCK branches also collaborate with other institutions and organizations at both the national and international levels. As part of its cooperation with the government, medical services, non-governmental organizations, and other entities, PCK participates in planning and coordinating actions during crises and providing humanitarian assistance.

Specialized sections, focusing on specific areas of activity, are also a key element of the PCK structure. Sample sections include:

The Podkarpacki Branch of PCK operates throughout the entire Podkarpackie Voivodeship, covering districts and municipalities of various sizes and types. The organizational structure includes a branch management responsible for the overall supervision of activities, as well as numerous field units that implement specific projects and programs within their respective districts.

The Podkarpacki Branch of PCK also runs numerous projects and programs aimed at raising public awareness of humanitarian issues and humanitarian values. It organizes conferences, training sessions, workshops, and promotional events aimed at both the local community and institutions, as well as cooperating partners. It strives to promote knowledge and foster a culture of solidarity and empathy within society.

Activities of the Podkarpacki Branch of PCK in Support of War Refugees

As part of its organizational structure, the Podkarpacki Branch of PCK also includes specialized sections focused on specific areas of activity. These may include first aid, care for the elderly, psychological support, and social integration. These sections aim to direct their activities towards addressing the specific needs and challenges of the local community.

The Podkarpacki Branch of PCK operates mainly due to the dedication of its volunteers, who play a key role in fulfilling the organization's mission. Volunteers are trained in first aid, medical care, crisis management, and other skills essential for providing assistance. Their activities involve providing material and emotional support, organizing charity events, participating in fundraising efforts, and assisting in the implementation of projects and programs.

The Podkarpacki Branch of PCK plays a key role in the local community, assisting those in need, promoting humanitarian values, and raising social awareness about humanitarian aid. Its activities encompass a wide range of actions aimed at providing material and medical assistance, social support, and promoting social integration. Collaboration with other institutions and the involvement of volunteers form the foundation of the branch's success.

The Podkarpacki Branch of the Polish Red Cross (PCK) carries out a variety of activities aimed at fulfilling the organization's mission and responding to current social needs. In its work, the Branch is guided by specific priorities set by the strategic goals of PCK and current social and humanitarian conditions. Below, I present detailed descriptions of the priority areas of activity of the Podkarpacki Branch of PCK:

1. Humanitarian aid and crisis response: PCK takes action to assist people affected by natural disasters, armed conflicts, migration, or other crisis situations. It organizes rescue operations, provides material and medical support, and offers shelter and psychological assistance.
2. Healthcare and first aid: PCK operates in the healthcare field, providing access to primary medical care, first aid services, and conducting first aid training. It organizes courses and training sessions for the local community and medical institutions.
3. Preventive and educational programs: PCK runs various preventive programs aimed at improving health and preventing diseases. It conducts educational campaigns on healthy lifestyles, hygiene, safety, and proper nutrition.
4. Social support and integration: The PCK branch engages in activities to support those in need, such as the elderly, disabled individuals, homeless people, and those at risk of social exclusion. It organizes activities aimed at improving the quality of life, promoting social integration, and strengthening social bonds.
5. Promoting humanitarian values and social education: PCK carries out activities that promote humanitarian values such as assistance, solidarity, empathy, and respect for human dignity. It organizes conferences, meetings, lectures, and conducts informational campaigns to raise public awareness about humanitarian aid.

The Podkarpackie Voivodeship, bordering the Lviv and Zakarpattia Oblasts, has become the primary “corridor” for refugees entering Poland (Podkarpackie Voivodeship Marshal's Office, 2022). The Podkarpacki Branch of PCK had to quickly adapt to rapidly changing conditions by setting up information points, emergency warehouses, and reception centers (Polish Red Cross, 2022). In the context of the growing humanitarian crisis, cooperation with local government institutions and non-governmental organizations has proven crucial (Bartnik & Koc, 2022).

On the very day of the outbreak of the war, caused by Russia's aggression against Ukraine on February 24, 2022, the Polish Red Cross District Branch in Przemyśl began providing assistance. An account was opened to receive donations, which were subsequently allocated for essential items such as food and medical supplies. The following graphic displays a dedicated post on one of the social media platforms, which accurately illustrates the date and the described situation:

On the very day of the outbreak of the war, members of the Polish Red Cross in Przemyśl were assigned the task of establishing two medical aid stations at the two largest border crossings near the city of Przemyśl. These were the border crossings in Korczowa and Medyka. Additionally, assistance points were established at three other crossings: in Krościenko near Ustrzyki Dolne, Budomierz near Lubaczów, and at the railway crossing in Przemyśl. These points operated 24/7, offering assistance to those in need. It is important to note that, of course, without the support of other branches of the Polish Red Cross, the coordination and operation of these points would not have been possible. After two days, on February 26, 2022, a help point was also established at the Humanitarian Aid Center in Przemyśl, located on Lwowska Street (the former Tesco shopping center).

In the first phase of the crisis, the primary goal of PCK was to meet the basic needs of refugees and provide support. The actions focused on:

- Distributing food and drinking water – at key reception points and along the border (Border Group, 2022)
- Medical and psychological assistance – in cooperation with local healthcare facilities and organizations specializing in psychological support for victims of armed conflicts.

- Creating reception points – where refugees could not only receive a warm meal, but also information about further travel, accommodation options, and legal procedures.

In addition to the above activities, volunteers and employees of the Polish Red Cross can be seen as intermediaries between institutions and individuals in need who cross borders. They also organized collections, which were then used at aid points and sent abroad to regions in greatest need of assistance. The Polish Red Cross collaborated with various entities such as universities, schools, and government and local government administration centers. One of the outcomes of such meetings and numerous discussions was the establishment of accommodation facilities where refugees could rest peacefully and safely overnight. At these locations, the PCK Rescue Group in Przemyśl operated, tasked with TRIAGING, that is, sorting those in need, providing assistance, and, if necessary, transferring them to medical facilities.

In the context of humanitarian aid, we must not forget about the World Central Kitchen organization. World Central Kitchen (WCK) is an international non-profit organization founded in 2010 by renowned chef José Andrés. Its main goal is to provide meals to people affected by natural disasters, humanitarian crises, or other emergency situations worldwide. WCK not only distributes food in emergency situations but also supports local communities in rebuilding by investing in sustainable food systems and culinary education (World Central Kitchen, 2023). The employees and volunteers of this organization arrived in Poland within 48 hours of the outbreak of the war in Ukraine. The food they prepared and provided to refugees was available at the border, reception points, and in large cities. In addition, warehouses were being built at the border to store food, which was also being sent to Ukraine. In the initial stages, it was delivered to Lviv and then distributed to the area's most in need, primarily in the eastern part of the country. The above foundation was able to organize up to 100,000 meals in a single day.

The humanitarian aid described highlights only selected areas and entities, as the scale we encountered was immense. Moreover, each crossing, and especially each country, differs from one another in many aspects.

The Humanitarian Aid Center in Przemyśl was launched on March 1, 2022. It is worth noting that it was opened just a week after the outbreak of the war in Ukraine. In such a short period, thanks to the cooperation of the city authorities, hundreds of volunteers, and donors, a place was created aimed at ensuring the basic needs of individuals. Each refugee arriving at the Humanitarian Aid Center in Przemyśl could receive a package with clean clothing and provisions. As time went on, the center's capacity grew, allowing it to provide more extensive support.

The body responsible for coordination and administration is the City of Przemyśl Municipality. At the beginning of its operations, the Humanitarian Aid Center was also supported by the Polish Red Cross, mentioned earlier in this paper, which undertook many tasks. One of these tasks was providing medical security through the establishment of a medical assistance point. Many refugees had to travel hundreds of kilometers under very difficult conditions and unfavorable temperatures to reach a safe place. Citizens of the country affected by the conflict, who sought shelter at the Humanitarian Aid Center in March 2022, suffered significant health damage, including numerous abrasions, fractures, and, due to the extremely low temperatures, frostbite. Later on, psychological assistance for refugees was also organized.

In July 2022, after four months of operation, the Polish Red Cross became the entity responsible for coordinating the entire center. It was only from that moment that detailed statistics and analyses began to be conducted. From the resulting calculations, it was possible to determine the exact number of people who benefited from the center's assistance. Since March 23, 2023, over 16,000 refugees have been registered at the facility. Unfortunately, the numbers between March and July 2022 are not publicly available, but it can be confidently assumed that the center may have assisted several hundred thousand refugees during the first few months of its operation.

The facility chosen to serve as the humanitarian center was not selected randomly. Its main advantage is primarily the short distance to the Polish-Ukrainian border. Next to the former commercial facility, there is also a large parking lot, which allowed refugees to be brought directly to the center and

buses to be stationed for transporting refugees to selected European cities, including Prague and Berlin. The building, which previously served as a shopping center, also has access to running water, electricity, and efficient heating. Within the facility, there is also a gastronomic zone that enables volunteers to efficiently serve meals. Additionally, it is worth noting that by February 28, 2023, a total of 56,500 meals were served in the form of breakfasts and dinner-lunches. In addition to these meals, there was also a buffet on-site offering essential food and beverages, such as coffee, tea, juices, instant soups, and formula milk. Equally important was access to toilets. The former shopping center has several separated areas inside, where stores were previously located. Thanks to the separated space, the center was divided into several zones: a reception point, a designated area for the youngest, and several warehouses for storing surplus dry provisions and hygiene products from donations.

DISCUSSION

The Podkarpackie Voivodeship, bordering directly with Ukraine, has acquired particular significance following the outbreak of the Russo-Ukrainian war in February 2022. Due to its strategic location, it has become a key “corridor” for individuals crossing the border in search of safety and shelter (Marshal's Office of the Podkarpackie Voivodeship, 2022). The effective provision of immediate assistance was therefore contingent on:

- Geographical proximity, as border crossings in Medyka, Korczowa, and Krościenko necessitated the rapid establishment of reception points.

- This study examines the ability of local administrations to cooperate with government entities, such as the Border Guard and the Podkarpackie Voivode, as well as with non-governmental organizations (NGOs), including the Polish Red Cross.

- The presence of good transport infrastructure near main roads leading to larger cities, such as Przemyśl and Rzeszów, facilitated the development of logistical support, including aid centers and donation warehouses.

The Polish Red Cross (PCK), as a member of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, possesses extensive experience in delivering aid to victims of conflicts and natural disasters². Podkarpacki Branch of PCK:

- It applied established procedures that had been developed over the years in response to other humanitarian crises (e.g., floods and migration crises in other parts of Europe).

- It swiftly mobilized local resources by fostering collaboration with local authorities, volunteers, and private sponsors.

- It coordinated efforts at the border level by establishing assistance and information points, as well as providing support in equipping collective accommodation facilities (e.g., in repurposed halls or shopping centers).

PCK volunteers played a key role, as their prior training in first aid and crisis management enabled them to operate in an organized manner, thereby minimizing the chaos often associated with mass population movements (Interview with a Volunteer from the Podkarpacki Branch of PCK, 2022).

Despite relatively efficient organization, the Podkarpacki Branch of PCK faced numerous challenges (Office for Foreigners, Statistics and analyzes on the refugee crisis, 2022):

- Managing a massive wave of refugees required handling diverse groups arriving within a short period, which demanded swift responses and logistical adaptability.

- A shortage of specialists—such as doctors, psychologists, and Ukrainian/Russian language translators—posed a significant challenge due to limited available resources;

- There is a need for long-term solutions—following the crisis phase (the initial weeks and months of the war), a demand emerged for stable forms of support, such as Polish language courses, and assistance with finding employment and housing.

- Risk of social burnout—while the significant engagement of local communities initially fostered integration, the prolonged financial and logistical strain could, in some cases, lead to increasing hostility toward refugees.

In the context of international standards, such as the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and the 1967 Protocol, the actions of the Podkarpacki Branch of PCK can be deemed effective and aligned with humanitarian principles (The 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, 1991). Within a short time, the following was achieved:

- Basic food needs and shelter,
- Medical and psychological support,
- Legal and administrative information, including guidance on asylum procedures,
- Support with transportation and the further relocation of refugees to other parts of Poland or other EU countries (Directive 2011/95/EU, 2021).

The analysis of the Podkarpacki Branch of the Polish Red Cross highlights that no single entity—whether governmental or a non-governmental organization—can independently address the challenges posed by a mass influx of refugees within a short timeframe⁶. The key to success proved to be a multi-sectoral model, in which:

1. The state and local administration provide the legal framework and infrastructure;
2. Humanitarian organizations (PCK, Caritas, and international NGOs) directly execute tasks in the field;
3. The private sector, including companies and sponsors, offers financial and material support, for instance, through donations and services;
4. Civil society engages in volunteering and provides resources (accommodation, transportation).

This scheme facilitates a more equitable distribution of responsibilities and costs, while also fostering social acceptance of aid efforts. Nevertheless, the conclusions derived from this discussion underscore the necessity of further development in infrastructure, human resources, and long-term strategies aimed at ensuring refugees not only receive temporary shelter but also have the opportunity for a dignified and stable life in their new circumstances⁷. The situation on Poland's eastern border remains fluid, necessitating continuous vigilance and preparedness for potential waves of refugees or other circumstances requiring humanitarian intervention. In this context, the Podkarpacki Branch of PCK, operating in extensive collaboration with authorities and other organizations, serves as a model example of an effective response to the migration crisis (Bankier.pl, 2023).

Currently, it can be observed that European Union countries (including Poland) have established common directives; however, in practice, a diverse approach to relocation and the acceptance of refugees is evident. A notable example is the situation on the Polish-Ukrainian border since 2022: the rapid mobilization of social and non-governmental assistance underscores the crucial role of citizen engagement and local institutions, alongside the efforts of central administration.

Conversely, the intensity of the conflict in Ukraine prompts the question of whether the existing legal frameworks and support mechanisms will prove adequate in the long term. The growing number of refugees places a significant strain on the healthcare system, education, and the job market. Both immediate and long-term solutions are essential to ensure that refugees not only survive but also lead a dignified life (Bilas, 2022).

It is also worth emphasizing the risk of “refugee crisis fatigue” of host communities. Without a consistent integration policy, xenophobic attitudes and social conflicts may escalate, which once again emphasizes the role of education, intercultural dialogue, and local and nationwide information campaigns (Patton, 2015).

An extensive support network for refugees, encompassing both international and national legal frameworks alongside a broad spectrum of activities by non-governmental organizations, represents the

culmination of years of efforts by the international community. The example of Poland, particularly the Podkarpacki Branch of the Polish Red Cross, which operates amidst a dramatic surge in the number of refugees from Ukraine, highlights the necessity of integrating formal mechanisms with grassroots initiatives and volunteer efforts.

In conclusion, it can be stated that the future of effective refugee protection will depend on maintaining a balance between:

1. A stable legal and financial framework,
2. Social openness and willingness to cooperate,
3. Long-term integration programs,
4. An efficient system of international coordination in the face of sudden armed conflicts or other crises.

These conclusions are significant not only for Poland but also for the broader international community, which continues to confront new migration and humanitarian challenges in the 21st century.

CONCLUSION

The main goal of an organization like the Red Cross is to assist and alleviate human suffering in the face of crisis situations by mobilizing the strength of volunteers and the generosity of donors. The failure to meet basic human needs, caused by the Russian Federation's attack on Ukraine in recent months, has forced humanitarian organizations, such as PCK, to significantly intensify their efforts. Otherwise, the consequences may escalate and reach the scale of a serious humanitarian crisis.

Russian terror in Ukraine has been ongoing for nearly 9 years. Since 2014, efforts have been made in Ukraine to ensure fundamental human needs, such as care and security. Despite the efforts being made, the situation in our eastern neighboring country continues to worsen. Violence, economic difficulties, and trauma are affecting an increasing number of residents in Ukraine due to the ongoing armed conflict (Bondarenko et al., 2023).

Since February 24, 2022, nearly 7.5 million people have fled their home country, and 7.1 million have been forced to leave their hometowns. In light of the enormous scale of the human tragedy, the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement has increased its assistance and cross-border cooperation to address the humanitarian needs of those affected. Movement partners support the Ukrainian Red Cross and national societies in neighboring countries by providing humanitarian aid, strengthening response capacities, and deploying delegates with the necessary technical expertise (International Committee of the Red Cross, 2023).

On February 15, 2023, the Ukrainian national authorities requested support from the European Union Civil Protection Mechanism (UCPM) due to the large-scale development of the crisis and its significant impact on the civilian population. Since then, the European Commission's Emergency Response Coordination Centre (ERCC) has received several requests from Ukraine, neighboring countries, and international organizations. This resulted in the largest UCPM operation to date and one of the most logistically complex (Report of the Ukrainian Red Cross, 2023).

Since the start of the full-scale war, the Ukrainian Red Cross has sent over 8,800,656 food and hygiene kits to regions of Ukraine. Every day, employees and volunteers at the logistics centers receive, sort, assemble, and send hundreds of tons of supplies, including food, medicines, water, bedding, and other essential items, to regions.

Most importantly, extraordinary assistance provided through non-humanitarian channels and aimed at meeting humanitarian needs should align with humanitarian principles and norms, and be coordinated with existing mechanisms. All relevant entities, whether governmental, regional, or local, as well as local non-governmental organizations and volunteer groups, must act in a coordinated and complementary manner, strengthening joint efforts towards preparedness and increasing their knowledge of the working methods of the other party. It is worth mentioning that at the beginning of the war, we often witnessed the

Pac, W. (2024). Humanitarian assistance for war refugees from Ukraine: A case study of the Podkarpacki Branch of the Polish Red Cross. *Politics & Security*, 9(3), pp.35-52. Doi: 10.54658/ps.28153324.2024.9.3.pp.36-52

abuse and unlawful use of the Red Cross and Red Crescent logos, but fortunately, this problem has gradually started to diminish over time.

The Ukrainian Red Cross Society plays a key role in coordinating its activities among local branches, 14 other national associations operating in Ukraine, and many others, with the ICRC and IFRC providing financial and material support. Elements of the movement support those who have fled and those who have been directly or indirectly affected by military actions. This includes:

1. Providing financial assistance in cooperation with government ministries, enabling people to purchase the most essential items;
2. Providing psychosocial support;
3. Providing care and services to individuals in difficult situations in their homes, particularly those with limited mobility, including the elderly and people with disabilities.
4. Repairing damaged homes, healthcare facilities, and other essential infrastructure.
5. Delivering essential aid supplies such as food, hygiene kits, blankets, sleeping sets, generators, and fuel, which are particularly crucial during the challenging winter months.
6. Delivering medical equipment and medications to healthcare facilities.
7. Evacuation of civilians from areas affected by military actions and visiting prisoners of war and interned civilians (Central Statistical Office, 2023).

The past year has demonstrated the strength and resilience of people throughout Ukraine, but further support is still necessary. Even if the armed conflict were to end today, it will take years to repair the destructive effects on people, homes, and critical infrastructure.

Both the Polish and Ukrainian Red Cross also carry out preventive actions in anticipation of a potential sudden escalation of the conflict. PCK strives to proactively create reserves of food and basic hygiene supplies, ensuring that in the event of a sudden escalation of conflict, no one is left without assistance. So far, throughout Poland, we can find collection points for food and hygiene materials. In addition to the collection efforts, first aid training sessions are also being conducted both in Poland and Ukraine.

As the conflict dragged on, it became evident that many refugees would have to stay in Poland for an extended period of time. The Podkarpacki Branch of PCK thus began implementing activities aimed at facilitating adaptation and social integration, including:

- Providing accommodation – in cooperation with local authorities, parishes, private individuals, as well as by setting up collective accommodation points (Nowak, 2022).
- Educational and language support – organizing Polish language courses for children and adults, and providing assistance with integration into Polish schools and kindergartens (Górny, 2022).
- Career counseling – conducting workshops on writing CVs and cover letters, and providing assistance in establishing contacts with potential employers (Górny, 2022).

The Polish Red Cross operated on many levels. It has acted as a mediator multiple times in delivering humanitarian aid abroad and also coordinated operations at the Przemyśl Humanitarian Center for a certain period of time. Its employees and volunteers also provided assistance at the border itself, not only in Medyka but also in Korczowa and Krościenko. During the conflict, many compassionate individuals chose to take in refugees, assist with transportation to other parts of the country, or become volunteers themselves.

The number of war refugees from Ukraine seeking shelter in Poland continues to grow in the face of the ongoing armed conflict in Ukraine. The situation in the first days of the war required the Republic of Poland, as the closest neighbor, to take effective actions aimed at providing support to those directly affected by the war.

Thanks to the clear provisions of the 1951 Geneva Convention and its protocols, as well as national laws, refugees are able to receive legal protection. However, crisis situations, such as the sudden influx of refugees from Ukraine, expose limitations and shortcomings in the implementation of international law

and the relocation system. Due to their operational flexibility, NGOs, including the Polish Red Cross, play a crucial complementary role to state procedures. In exceptional situations, their experience in volunteer work and ability to quickly mobilize resources prove to be indispensable. In the context of border regions, such as Podkarpacie, it is essential to foster collaborative partnerships among all stakeholders, from local government offices to international humanitarian organizations. Success lies in the establishment of a well-organized network of reception points and the efficient management of logistical support for donations. Once immediate needs are met, the challenge of the long-term integration of refugees arises. This necessitates the implementation of educational programs, language training, and support in entering the job market. Special attention should be devoted to psychological support and assistance with cultural adaptation. Armed conflicts in various parts of the world, as well as natural disasters, indicate that the refugee support system should be constantly improved. Enhancing the role of non-governmental organizations and local communities may serve as a pivotal component of effective humanitarian assistance. The Podkarpacki Branch of the Polish Red Cross stands out as a significant entity that, in recent months, has been carrying out intensive efforts in support of war refugees, offering humanitarian and medical assistance.

Ukraine needs our help like never before. To ensure peace, we need to take many radical steps and support Ukraine not only militarily, but on multiple fronts. Now, the fate of Ukraine is at stake, and perhaps later that of all of Europe.

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