

Private Hosting of Refugees from Ukraine in Polish Homes. Everyday Humanitarianism and Encounters across Difference

After the 24th of February 2022, Poland became the destination for the greatest number of war refugees from Ukraine. Civil society – preceding the state and international organisations – offered them huge support. This included not only donating money, supplying food and clothing, and volunteering at reception points, but also providing shelter in private flats and houses. It is estimated that hundreds of thousands of Ukrainian refugees were hosted by the ordinary residents of Poland who often had no activist background or experience in dealing with refugees or migrants. This spontaneous, improvised hosting was surprising, given the previous, rather unwelcoming attitude of Polish society towards refugees, which was the result of anti-refugee discourse developed since the 2015 ‘crisis’ in Europe. While volunteering at train stations, collective accommodation centres, and other assistance spots took place in public spheres and was thus visible and documented, we know very little of what was happening in the private spaces of homes that became shelters for refugees from Ukraine, especially outside big cities – in towns and villages.

The project aims to take an insight into the reasons, dynamics, and outcomes of this “everyday humanitarianism” which emerged in the private homes of ordinary people. Who was hosted and by whom? Can we talk about selective empathy here? What was the role of gender, race, ethnicity, and religion in constructing the figure of “an ideal victim”? Why did people host refugees? How did they deal with the contrasting discourses about refugees as a threat and about a welcoming culture? And what did actually hosting mean? Was it only about providing accommodation? Or did it involve other forms of support – assisting during the visits to the doctor’s, making appointments in the offices, enrolling a child in a kindergarten or school? Were there misunderstandings or conflicts, and, if so, about which aspects (e.g. culinary habits, ways of bringing up children) and how they were managed? Did the hosts feel compassion burnout at some point and the guests felt being treated paternalistically?

These dynamics of everyday encounters across national, cultural, and socio-economic differences lead to broader questions about the role of the state, local authorities, churches, NGOs, and other institutions in the private hosting of refugees. Were hosts supported or left alone? Or whether the support they received came from their own communities and social networks? And finally, what outcomes did this experience have for both hosts and hosted refugees from the time perspective? Did it evolve into meaningful and lasting relationships? Did it help in refugees’ integration into the host society?

Answering these questions is even more important in the context of the ongoing discussion about the possibilities offered by the idea of refugee sponsorship as an alternative form of refugee reception beyond collective housing which proved to be an ineffective way of refugees’ integration. Refugee sponsorship is a situation when an individual, a family, or a community (e.g. a religious organisation) from the receiving society hosts a refugee or a refugee family for a particular period of time (from a few months to even two years) on the basis of a sponsorship agreement which defines the responsibilities of hosts, guests, and the state. Such sponsorship, which involves everyday support and mentoring, is aimed at refugees’ self-reliance.

Initiated in the late 1970s in Canada, refugee sponsorship has only recently been implemented in Europe, particularly with regard to the resettlement of Syrian refugees after 2015. As a result, research on refugee sponsorship in the European context is relatively new, and often takes the form of brief policy reports. Given that, currently, the European Union foresees the development of a European model of refugee sponsorship and the UNHCR called upon states to create private or community sponsorship programmes, an in-depth, ethnographic research of the phenomenon of bottom-up, improvised, large-scale private hosting of refugees that took place in Poland after the 24th of February 2022 can offer us an insight into the advantages and limitations of this form of refugee reception.

The data for the project will be collected in the course of extensive, 32-month ethnographic field research conducted in six localities – two cities, two towns, and two villages – in Western Poland that previously had almost no exposure to refugees. Three groups of research participants will be included in the project: hosts, hosted refugees, and representatives of local authorities, institutions, and non-governmental organisations that facilitated (or did not) hosting of refugees in private homes.