

"The contrast between the two borders could not be greater". Activists' account of the Belarus-Ukraine border

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This week will mark 100 days since the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Since then, more than 3.5 million refugees have entered Poland, of whom around 1.3 million have stayed in the country. Kalina Czwarnóg's report from the Rescue Foundation summarises the first months since the outbreak of war in Ukraine from the perspective of volunteers - and compares the actions of the state and services towards refugees and migrants who crossed the border into Belarus.

First week, first shock

Very soon it became clear that nobody knew anything. Although it had been virtually certain for weeks that war was just a matter of time, neither the government nor the local authorities had any plans ready for the sudden arrival of so many refugees in Poland. Conflicting information was reaching us from the border itself, so it was hard to get an idea of the actual situation and needs. We decided that our Board Member Agata Kołodziej, who was just finishing her shift on the Polish-Belarusian border, instead of going to Warsaw, would go south along Poland's eastern border, to assess the situation on the Polish-Ukrainian border with her own eyes. She was accompanied by lawyer Tadeusz Kołodziej and MEP Frank Sterczewski.

The contrast between the two borders could not be greater. Although the invasion had only started three days earlier, our colleagues were already sending us pictures of heaps of clothes on the ground, brought by someone for the refugees in good faith. Very quickly, ordinary citizens organised the distribution of food and water. The first people willing to pick someone up from the border and take them into the country were already arriving.

Agata and Tadeusz reported: "There is no central coordination. No government representatives. At each crossing, the situation looks different, however someone or other locally decides, or however people organise themselves. The risk of human trafficking is enormous. Nobody registers who takes whom and where. And this despite the fact that most people crossing the border are young women and children. A woman exhausted from standing in a queue for several days can easily lose her child in the crowd. Or easily trust a stranger with a free seat in a warm car.

It was not long before a decision was made to open safe spaces for children at reception points near the border. The first would open as early as 12 March.

February 28, a phone call from K.B., a journalist familiar with the Polish-Belarusian border. "Kalina, do something, here in Medyka there are hundreds of black people. They are standing in the cold, weak on their feet, falling asleep standing up. No one is helping them, no one is letting them into the coaches or taking them to their cars. Someone is about to die here!"

Later that day we organised our first bus. In the meantime we contacted the Warsaw Biennale, who had already indicated that they had a large space in the centre of Warsaw, which they would be willing to make available to us for activities carried out by people with migration experience. They probably wanted a freeshop (distribution centre for refugees) or a workshop space, but when we briefly describe the situation and tell them that we need somewhere to put a few dozen people, help them get warm and feed them, they respond with openness. They call their friends in the neighbouring pubs and organise free meals. Actors and actresses organise mattresses and bedding. The bus with 53 people arrives at the Biennale in the morning of 1 March.

Since then, the Biennale has already accommodated almost 300 people, 4 dogs and 2 cats. All kinds of people find shelter there - those brought by our transports from the border, but also those who are chased out of the train stations by city volunteers (people without Ukrainian passports were told to go to their embassy - even if the person in question was a refugee, or the nearest representation of their country was in Berlin), Roma, Ukrainian and bicultural families. The reception desk at Biennale Warsaw is still in operation, opening every week for 4 days (Tuesday-Saturday).

I was also on the Polish-Ukrainian border - I went to Korczowa to pick up people from Central Asia. Already Tadeusz and Agata told of their shock at the sight of smiling, polite border guards carrying children across the border in their arms, helping with their luggage. Until then, the guards we had met since August 2021 had pointed guns at the children, loaded them onto trucks and pushed them back across the wires of the Polish-Belarusian border. Syrian children were fleeing a war involving Putin's troops just like Ukrainian children.

After 8 months in Podlasie, I could not stop the reflexive tension in my whole body at the sight of Territorial Defence Force (WOT) uniforms in Korczowa. The same branch of Poland's armed forces that drags activists or journalists out of their cars, makes brutal detentions several hundred kilometres north [on the Polish-Belarus border], here [on the Polish-Ukraine border] transports boxes of water for refugees, and asks how it can help.

Private medical clinics are announcing that they will treat refugees from Ukraine for free. The public railway company PKP is also offering free travel for them. Warsaw's public transport announces that all rides are free for Ukrainians.

People in the Polish and Belarusian forests ask us "Why can't you help us in the same way? How are we different? Our houses were also destroyed by bombs, our children are not safe where we come from'. Refugees who managed to get out of the hell of the Podlasie border region, Afghans evacuated to Poland in the summer, and Chechens who have been here for years ask: "How can we join in the aid? We know what it is like to have to flee and leave everything behind. We sympathise with Ukraine'.

After three weeks of war, Poland already had one million people who had fled the war from Ukraine. "We will help everyone, you can count on us," says the government. Last August, when we stood in a field in Usnarz Górny demanding refugee for 32 people who had fled the Taliban in Afghanistan, the same government said, "Today we will let 32 people in, tomorrow 300 will come, the day after tomorrow 3 000, then 30 000 and then 300 000. Poland cannot afford this'. So we must have made some miraculous economic leap over a period of eight months, when suddenly so many of the things we spent years demanding on behalf of refugees are now readily available to millions of people from Ukraine.

The third shock is missing - civil society is doing well

In the following weeks of the war, the joke that Poland is one big NGO became popular. The

Resource Group is formed, which eventually joins the Ocalenie Foundation. During the 35 days of operation at Warsaw's Western Railway Station, 5 530 people are housed in private flats. At the Central Station a grassroots volunteer initiative, the Centre Group, is formed and manages support at the station better than any authority. Ocalenie Foundation trains and sends volunteers to work in safe spaces for children: to Hrubieszów, Przemyśl, Zamość, Łodyna, Dorohusk and Korczowa. We are hiring on a massive scale: volunteer coordinators, specialists to organise Polish language courses and day centres for children in Mazovia, Ukrainian-speaking mentors in Help Centres for Foreigners in Warsaw, Łomża and Łódź. We know that once the first burst of aid enthusiasm subsides, it will be the NGOs that will bear the main burden of helping and supporting the integration of people who have decided to flee to Poland. There are no surprises here - it has always been like that, only the scale has changed.

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P.S.

Wiadomości

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