

As a neighbouring country of Ukraine, Poland is one of the countries that is most affected by the war and the resulting humanitarian crisis. In this article, Marcin Tylman from the Foundation for Activation and Integration (FAI) describes the initial reaction to the influx of refugees from a personal and an NGO perspective and gives insight into the work that the FAI, among other NGOs, has done to support people fleeing from Ukraine.

WE'RE WITH YOU!



By **Marcin Tylman**, Foundation for Activation and Integration


On February 24, Russian troops attacked Ukraine. That was the start of the largest humanitarian crisis in Europe since the end of World War II. Seeking help, more than two million refugees have found their way to Poland. Watching the news from the border, we were all wiping our eyes with shock. We were witnessing the misery, despair and uncertainty of hundreds of thousands of women and children. However, over time, our initial shock turned into pride for the people and organisations that provided emergency relief at the border. In the days after the invasion, people in those parts of the country where the refugees ended up joined the support chain. At the beginning of March, people working in the Foundation for Activation and Integration (FAI) decided to prepare and implement an aid programme for refugees. The Foundation operates locally, in a small town in the north of Poland but offered its help as it is in contact with large national NGOs.

HOUSING SUPPORT EXPERIENCES

FAI has been a member of the Polish National Federation for Solving the Problem of Homelessness for many years. They specialise in the preparation and implementation of housing support for disadvantaged groups at risk of social exclusion. Previously, the Foundation carried out projects in the area of assisted housing for people in the homelessness crisis, especially people with disabilities. For two years, it has been implementing its own Housing Training Programme for young adults leaving the foster care system, an independent programme, protecting against the phenomenon of youth homelessness. Furthermore, in the years 2018-2019, FAI co-created the mixed-community programme "We live together at Nowa 11 Street". It was a social experiment focused on creating a community of residents with a diverse age and social structure.

LIVE AMONG US

Previous experience and the conviction that the most needed form of support for war refugees is providing long-term, comprehensive housing support with individualised social services have resulted in taking action. Within seven days from the invasion, experts from the FAI together with volunteers prepared five housing units, two of which were adapted from previously uninhabitable premises. The remaining three apartments were provided to the Foundation by private persons. Experts concluded that it was crucial to make the accommodation available free of charge for at least 90 days. Furthermore, they decided that it was important to match the size of the apartments to the needs and size of the refugee family and to give each family their individual space. The Foundation advised against solutions consisting in accepting refugees in a shared space for a period longer than 7 days. Residential premises were equipped with the necessary furniture and household appliances. Everything was obtained through donations from the residents of Nowe and from local entrepreneurs. On March 5, the premises were ready for our beneficiaries. Women with children reached our city through various communication channels: some came because their family members work in local factories, others were located by the state authorities. FAI established contact with Warsaw NGOs that provided support at railway stations and served as reception points. As a result of this cooperation, we collected the first seven people from the reception point on March 6, then another two people and another three people. In total, about 29 families (women with children) arrived at the city and municipality of Nowe. Statistically, refugees from Ukraine made up 1% of the population of the Nowe municipality (about 100 people) in late March and early April.



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SVIETŁANA, MARINA, NATASHA AND OTHERS

I wondered what the phenomenon of ordinary Polish people helping others was all about. I watched TV reports, the exodus of people, the chaos at the borders, the railway stations and ordinary people who in a thousand ways provided simple help. I understood their actions when, together with a colleague from the Foundation, we were picking up the first people from the reception point in Warsaw. What we saw in the eyes of those people was something we had never encountered working in support. Despair, uncertainty, fear, grief, pain and extreme fatigue. I remember when we arrived in our small town with the first people on the night of March 6. The sight of these exhausted women with sleeping children caused our co-workers and volunteers to cry as they waited for guests in the apartments. As the days went by, with daily reports, we all began to get used to the new situation. Subsequent events in war-torn Ukraine were shared together: the massacre in Bucha and Irpin where Natasha and Halynka are from, rockets falling on Dnipro where Marina and Svieta lived. The fall of Mariupol. With time you get used to it and, as one of our service recipients used to say, “what can you do, you have to live on”.

EVERYDAY LIFE

After the first two to three weeks after arrival followed a period of adaptation to the new reality, socially and economically. People started establishing relationships and accepting the fact of having to live in a foreign country. It was time to make the first decisions on how to find oneself in the new reality. The programme of supported housing with social services planned and implemented by the Foundation for Activation and Integration seems to have fulfilled its task to a large extent because, firstly, families have been living in natural home conditions – each of the families occupies their own housing unit

that is well adapted to the individual needs of the family. Secondly, the available basket of social services was accepted by our guests. Thirdly, social and interpersonal relations have been established. The language barrier will be a serious communication problem. Eighty percent of refugees who came to our community spoke only Russian (these are people from the north and east of Ukraine). Meanwhile, it turned out that a significant part of Polish society, especially older people, communicates to some extent in Russian - a legacy of the times when the Russian language was an obligatory subject in local schools. On the other hand, the language adaptation of our guests is surprising. For example, one of the Ukrainians who was hired at our Foundation now speaks Polish fluently after only three months. After completing the necessary formalities for registration in the Polish system, we helped all those who wanted to take up a professional activity: we recommended professional internships, which, considering language barriers and uncertainty about the length of stay, seemed to be a good solution. This idea was accepted and implemented by the District Labour Office (local employment institution). The Foundation also organised Polish language classes, including classes for children and youth to participate in educational activities. It has involved refugees in every educational, sports and cultural activity carried out so far. The key for FAI experts is social inclusion (empowerment), which has a special meaning in this situation.

MONEY

It needs to be made clear that the socially created movement to help refugees, which over the days of the crisis has become a social support system, was and is to a large extent implemented by NGOs. Interestingly, most Polish organisations, including the Foundation

for Activation and Integration, had no experience in humanitarian aid. For the first 15 to 20 days after the beginning of the conflict, the government basically did not take any significant initiatives. The level of involvement of local governments varied. Therefore, the main burden of aid was taken on by NGOs, including our organisation. In addition to housing preparation, material collections were needed (and still are), as well as the provision of money. The FAI implemented a financial support programme in which citizens declared voluntary (but fixed) targeted contributions contracted for the next three months. In this way, we have secured a reliable amount of revenue, which we have fully allocated (and continue to spend) on the payment of cash benefits to our guests. We managed to raise an amount of about six to seven thousand euros. It is worth mentioning that we have also received donations from Germany and the USA. The stay of refugees in Poland is currently supported by the government, which has implemented a 120-day programme to support Polish hosts who have taken refugees under their roof. However, the programme ends in June 2022. Therefore, the FAI started a dialogue with OXFAM. The subject of our cooperation is to obtain financial assistance that will secure the key service of all refugees whose income does not allow to pay rent or utilities in rented apartments for the period until the end of 2022. Additionally, we see the need for assistance in financing specialised medical services. This task seems to be particularly important and, at the same time, difficult due to the already visible effects of the energy crisis: we are currently recording unprecedented increases in energy and heating prices. We all observe the situation in Ukraine, share concerns with our guests, and support them in their daily struggles with reality. We advise, support and help. The unexpected situation has taught us that nothing is permanent, that we must always be ready for changes and for new situations in which we “helpers” need to organise ourselves as quickly as possible.