

Practitioner Perspectives

Romania's Philanthropic and Governmental Responses to the Refugee Crisis in Ukraine

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Abstract: This paper addresses the role of Romanian NGOs, public institutions, and private organizations in responding to the Ukrainian refugee crisis that started in the winter of 2022. An unprecedented mobilization of forces and resources has served the needs of more than a million refugees. Formulated as a practitioner perspectives manuscript, we incorporate the three institutional perspectives and dive deeper into mayoral views on how the process unfolded. We present best practices and barriers to adequate service provision in a crisis management context.

Introduction

On February 24th, 2022, Russia invaded Ukraine resulting in massive displacement of people to neighboring European countries.

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Nearly seven months after the war started, the UNHCR estimates that over 7 million Ukrainian people were seeking refuge across Europe. More than 4 million have registered for legal temporary protection status or similar national protection schemes in Europe (UNHCR, 2022)⁹.

Given the millions of people forced to flee their homes due to the Russian invasion, the war in Ukraine has been described as “Europe’s largest refugee crisis this century” (UNHCR, 2022). In addition to the unprecedented influx of refugees, the war in Ukraine has resulted in massive damage to the country’s infrastructure and civilian properties and countless lives being lost. The ramifications of the war in Ukraine are dire and are expected to worsen as the war continues. Countries bordering Ukraine, including Hungary, Slovakia, Poland, the Republic of Moldova, and Romania, have seen the most significant influx of refugees. However, most European Union countries have carried out humanitarian efforts.

Historically, Romania’s migratory context was influenced by three significant changes: in 1989, when the socialist regime collapsed; in 2002, when visa requirements for EU entry were lifted; and in 2007, when Romania joined the European Union. Currently, there are over 8 million Romanian living abroad, particularly in Italy, Spain, and Germany (Iulian, 2022). While there are optimistic views considering Eastern European countries as emerging or new destinations for global migratory flows (Skeldon, 2012), world-system theory researchers insist that, because of global structural inequalities, these countries are more likely to stay enclosed in their semi-peripheral condition (Horváth & Kiss, 2015).

⁹ For most up-to-date information, please see the UNHCR website at <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/ukraine>

As of September 11th, 2022, the UNHCR estimates that 1,169,027 people have crossed the border into Romania from Ukraine. More than 81,000 Ukrainian refugees currently reside in Romania, and approximately 65,000 have received legal temporary protection status, according to the UNHCR (2022). In Romania, multiple entities have carried out humanitarian efforts, including 1) NGOs, 2) central and local government/authorities, and 3) private organizations/agencies. These organizations quickly mobilized at the outset of the war, providing life-saving services, such as transportation, food, and shelter, at main border crossing points and long-term benefits for Ukrainian refugees who decided to remain in Romania after crossing the border. Below is a summary of their philanthropic response efforts to the Ukrainian refugee crisis. These accounts were supplemented by three semi-structured interviews conducted with mayors of Romanian municipalities bordering Ukraine.

The role of Romanian NGOs in managing the Ukrainian refugee crisis

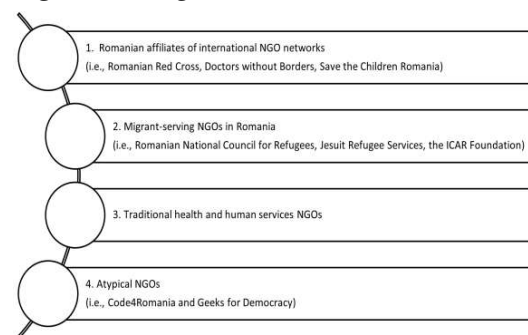
Romania's NGOs and voluntary sector have played an essential role in responding to the Ukrainian refugee crisis in terms of immediate humanitarian response at the borders, logistical response, and longer-term integration and resettlement of refugees. Migrants from Ukraine were met with an inspiring rush of individual volunteers and civil society actors when crossing into Romania on the country's northern and eastern borders. Here, we focus on the response of formal NGO actors.

Categories of NGOs

Four categories of NGOs have been evident on the philanthropic scene in Romania. The first category is Romanian affiliates of international

NGO networks, many of which have experience with crisis response in other country settings. These include organizations like the Romanian Red Cross, Doctors without Borders, Save the Children Romania, and organizations with an international presence. With the technical expertise of their international networks, these organizations marshaled ample resources to assist in the initial stages of the Russian invasion.

Figure 1: Categories of NGOs



The second category of NGOs active in the Ukrainian refugee crisis is the small number of migrant-serving NGOs in Romania. These include the Romanian National Council for Refugees, Jesuit Refugee Services, the ICAR Foundation, and similar organizations. This small group of organizations has a specific mission of serving migrants and refugees and has pre-existing skills in the field of migrant services. The third, and by far the largest category of NGOs assisting migrants from Ukraine, are traditional health and human services NGOs. They normally serve Romanian citizens but pivoted following the Russian invasion of Ukraine to help incoming Ukrainian refugees. These NGOs had no prior experience working in the fields of humanitarian aid or migrant services. The fourth and last category of NGOs responding to the Ukrainian refugee crisis is atypical. NGOs have entered the humanitarian sphere

because of a desire to help refugees (Flanigan, 2022). These include NGOs like Code4Romania and Geeks for Democracy, organizations of volunteers with skills in computer technology. Chart 1 summarizes these four NGO categories.

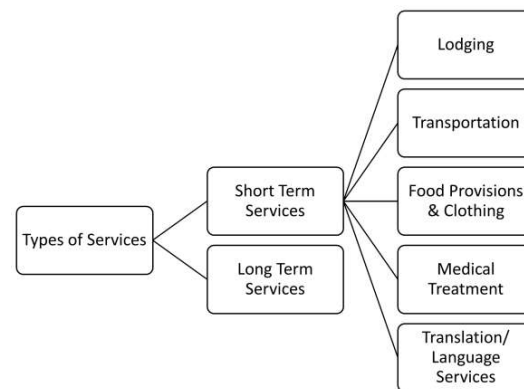
Types of Services

NGOs provide a wide variety of services in two major phases. Immediately following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, many Romanian affiliates of international NGOs, Romanian migrant-serving NGOs, and traditional Romanian health and social services NGOs went to Romania's two borders with Ukraine: one along Romania's north between Hungary and Moldova and the other in Romania's east between the southernmost point of Moldova and Romania's Black Sea coast. Here, they coordinated with local and national government authorities in organizing lodging, transportation, food, and medical treatment for the over one million people who eventually crossed the border (UNHCR, 2022).

Given that Romania has served mainly as a country of transit for Ukrainian migrants heading further west (UNHCR, 2022), atypical NGOs like Code4Romania and Geeks for Democracy became essential as they organized multilingual call centers and train station signs that translated destinations to the Cyrillic alphabet since Romanian is linguistically quite distant from Russian or Ukrainian. During this stage, NGOs provided essential services to organize homestays or hotel stays, arrange bus transportation, procure food and clothing, and find bilingual Romanian-Russian volunteers such as Moldovan students (Flanigan, 2022). As the Russian war in Ukraine has endured, short-term efforts have shifted to longer-term strategies, even as Romanian NGOs perceive that outside interest and funding are fading. Romanian health and human services NGOs

provide the bulk of longer-term programming for Ukrainian migrants, usually without experience working with migrant populations. Chart 2 provides an overview of the types of services provided by NGOs during the Ukrainian refugee crisis.

Figure 2: Types of Services Provided by NGOs



Implications for the Voluntary Sector

There are mixed implications of the Ukrainian refugee crisis for the voluntary sector in Romania. The Romanian NGO sector, especially the health and human services sector, is overwhelmed with new service recipients eager to help but need better resources to serve. Romanian NGO leaders report that international donors are already withdrawing grants and support, and budgets are starting to tighten. NGO leaders also say that the Romanian public is growing less patient with the Ukrainian refugee crisis, sometimes asking why such generous benefits are not provided to Romanian citizens. Without accompanying resources and political ambiguity in the community, these new service needs cause some caution (Flanigan, 2022).

However, NGO leaders also speak about the early days of the Ukrainian crisis with pride,

amazed at all they accomplished. In the face of an unprecedented humanitarian crisis, they rose to the challenge and managed to help over a million people. National and local governments widely respect the voluntary sector, and by all accounts, the crisis could not have been executed without civil society. Efforts are underway at the highest levels of government to integrate the NGO sector into a national framework for future emergencies so future cooperation is more automatic and streamlined. These implications and lessons favor the sector and Romania (Flanigan, 2022).

The Governmental response to the crisis

Romania has established a transparent decision-making and coordination structure to allow agencies with different law enforcement and operational duties from all levels of government to plan, coordinate, and interact effectively on the ground in response to the refugee humanitarian crisis.

A high-level decision-making task force, under the coordination of the Prime Minister, has been set up since the first day of the conflict. Secondly, an operational task force called the “Commission of Ukraine” was set up to supervise the ministries involved in managing the flow of refugees in all areas of intervention. Thirdly, at the Prime Minister’s Chancellery level, the Strategic Coordination Group for Humanitarian Assistance, led by a State Adviser, was established to ensure the strategic humanitarian response framework and facilitate cooperation between agencies and partners at national, European, and international levels. Romania’s response to the refugee crisis is structured on two levels of intervention: (1) the first response: emergency assistance; and (2) the second response: protection (Romanian Government, 2022).

Central government responses

Phase 1: Emergency Assistance

The first response is the emergency intervention provided by the Romanian government for the newly arrived Ukrainian refugees. The Department for Emergency Situations led the operations to deploy resources and capacities at the main border crossing points. They provided humanitarian transportation, emergency shelter, food, and basic medical assistance. The efforts undertaken by the Department for Emergency Situations were complemented by intense legislative and administrative work at the level of various ministries within the Romanian government, which issued many legislative acts to meet the emergency needs of Ukrainian refugees.

Local authorities have also coordinated their efforts with government agencies, developing operational plans based on local needs assessments. The Romanian civil society energetically supported the public, international non-governmental organizations, UN agencies, and private actors.

Phase 2: Protection

The second response is a mechanism developed to ensure medium and long-term protection and inclusion measures for Ukrainian refugees who choose to live in Romania. The Romanian government has set up six working groups to develop standards for inclusion and protection in health, education, job insurance, housing, vulnerable people, children, and young people. Shortly, each working group will have developed sectoral action plans in collaboration with experts from their respective ministries, United Nations (U.N) agencies, and civil society representatives. The sectoral action plans will be integrated into a National Action Plan. The measures for inclusion and protection are to be

debated, and feedback will also be gathered from representatives of local authorities to ensure coordination and assistance. The Strategic Coordination Group of Humanitarian Assistance supervises the entire process within the Prime Minister's Chancellery.

Local government perspectives

Mayor interview analysis

To complete the overview of the main actors and measures involved in responding to the Ukrainian refugee crisis in Romania, in July 2022, we conducted three semi-structured interviews with mayors of Romanian municipalities bordering Ukraine. There was a total of 8 interview questions, which revolved around understanding how the crisis management process unfolded; how each municipality collaborated with other public institutions, NGOs, and private organizations involved in the crisis; what successes, challenges, and lessons emerged; and what resources were critical in crafting an efficient and equitable response. On average, each interview lasted 30 minutes. The interviews were conducted via Zoom in Romanian and transcribed into English. All three authors are proficient in Romanian, making the interview and transcription process feasible. The mayors were recruited through our personal networks and Romanian connections. Despite our best efforts, we could only recruit three mayors to participate in the interviews.

Since the war broke out, approximately 545,000 Ukrainian refugees have crossed the border through one of these three Romanian municipalities, of which 83 asked for refugee status; all others have transited the country (Personal Communication, July 2022). All three municipalities had a similar response concerning the immediate measures taken by the local administration. The border police and

patrol were first to respond by notifying City Hall, which immediately created a crisis task force to guide refugees and solve urgent problems. Religious organizations and NGOs soon mobilized to ensure essential services and help refugees, mainly women and children, transit to the country by car and rail. Providing waste management, lighting, heating, and electricity in locations that hosted refugees was critical. Volunteers were needed to ensure border presence 24/7. Other activities included translation services, setting up call centers, managing humanitarian transportation and donations, and food provision. Other public actors involved were military organizations, local and national police, county prefectures, county councils, the Inspectorates of Emergency Services (tasked with coordinating all operations), border police, immigration services, and child protection services. This network effectively ensured accommodation, food, transportation, and special emergency coordination. Solidarity was at the center of all administrative efforts. One interviewee highlighted the need for the central government to set clear procedures for receiving refugees. The problem of institutionalized children arose, and one mayor mentioned that many crossed the border and wanted to be united. Therefore, special assistance was offered in larger Romanian cities. All municipalities had to adapt and personalize their help depending on the specific population category that requested assistance. In this process, NGOs were consulted, and they were able to draft feasible proposals that had soon been implemented. The interviewees noted exemplary collaboration with NGOs and residents based on empathy:

“The relationships between NGOs and other organizations were based on empathy, caused by the desire to do good

for everyone crossing the border. There was never any conflict. We all wanted to do our best to find solutions. People needed electricity, heating, and a parking space – the city hall reacted almost instantly. After a month, we realized there were people stuck at the Ukrainian border, and we also transferred them many donations.” (Personal Communication, July 2022)

Church representatives, UNICEF, the Red Cross, World Vision, Save the Children, and international NGOs from Turkey, Greece, France, and Italy were all mentioned by the mayors in the context of agile mobilization and motivation to help the Ukrainian people. All three mayors said that private organizations covered services not offered by NGOs and other categories of actors, including donations from multinational companies and help setting up camps near the borders. In terms of lessons learned, the mayors noted that effort is manageable in war. While it's been a challenge for all mayors involved, often sacrificing local budget funds, time, and resources, they all managed to unite people and organizations and ensure collaboration through solidarity, teamwork, efficient coordination, and cooperation. Civil society's mobilization has been a pleasant surprise for many in a context where the central government's response might be slow.

The discussion of critical resources holds a unique role in this context. While the local administration ensured full access to basic public services, some municipalities are planning for the future. One example is a partnership with the “L. Spallanzani” National Institute for the Infectious Diseases, IRCCS, Rome, Italy, to prevent a potential future war-related outbreak. Future planning is being conducted to create additional social housing/

lodging spaces for refugees and the community. One town mentioned allocating funds from the central and European levels to cover refugee needs.

Overall, the interviews revealed the main mechanisms and procedures employed by the network of local public, private and nonprofit actors, resident volunteers, and international organizations. The discussions also shed light on the emotional aspect of managing displaced people and the empathy that was at the core of all activities:

“We all hope this war will be over and that peace to settle in. Even today, we hear the Ukrainian war sirens –extremely unpleasant. We somehow got used to hearing them day and night. You particularly hear the scary somber sound at night. All we can do is look forward and hope for this to end.” (Personal Communication, July 2022)

Private organizations' responses

Various private organizations have also carried out support efforts to assist Ukrainian refugees. Soon after Russia invaded Ukraine, Vola.ro, one of Romania's biggest online travel agencies, began offering free airfare and other means of transportation to Ukrainian refugees. In one week alone, the travel agency, with the help of their sponsors (e.g., Hello Holidays, Memento Bus, Aqua Carpatica, Circus Pub), was able to reunite 350 Ukrainian refugees with relatives residing in other European countries, including Poland, Germany, Italy, France, and Denmark¹⁰. A month after the war started, Rompetrol, the biggest Romanian oil and gas company, joined the Romanian Red Cross campaign “Humanity Has No Borders” and began donating fuel to support NGO volunteers and staff helping Ukrainian

¹⁰ <https://blog.vola.ro/help-for-ukraine/>

refugees. The company has also secured twenty-four sleeping accommodations in Moinești (Bacău County) and Medias (Sibiu County) for Ukrainian refugee mothers traveling with children¹¹.

On June 28th, 2022, the Commercial Bank of Romania donated over a hundred laptops to Ukrainian children living in Romania refugee camps in Sibiu and Iasi so that they could use them for school purposes¹². The Commercial Bank of Romania has also created a dedicated call line for Ukrainian refugees to assist with financial banking service-related questions. The bank has also implemented zero commission/ no transaction fees for Ukrainian refugees who wish to open new bank accounts in Romania or utilize the bank's ATM services as part of their humanitarian aid¹³. Free medical services, Covid-19 tests, and psycho-emotional assistance have been provided to Ukrainian refugees by Regina Maria Health Network, which is a private healthcare service in Romania. The medical services are offered at hospitals throughout Romania, including in Bucharest, Bacău, Brașov, Constanța, and Craiova, with Uber Romania offering free transportation to these in-network hospitals¹⁴. In partnership with the Romanian National Cyber Security Directorate (DNSC), Bitdefender, a Romanian cybersecurity company, has also provided humanitarian aid to Ukrainian refugees and their allies (e.g.,

NATO and EU countries) through free cybersecurity technology¹⁵.

Barriers to effective service provision

NGOs attempt to incorporate Ukrainians into existing programming for Romanians, but language barriers interfere. NGOs recognize that migrants need specialized services, such as housing services, Romanian language support and training, and workforce training. Many refugees also require trauma counseling, but NGOs report a dearth of Russian or Ukrainian-speaking professionals who can offer this care. NGOs struggle with preparing children to attend local schools and preparing schools to integrate Ukrainian children, especially in smaller border communities.

Several Ukrainian children in Romania prefer to follow Ukrainian schools in their hometowns online, hoping to cross the border and take Ukrainian national exams. Some NGOs attempt to support these children in that pursuit. Ultimately, Romania is considerably less wealthy than most of its European Union (E.U) neighbors, having the second lowest GDP per capita after Bulgaria (International Monetary Fund, 2022). Additionally, it is much more accustomed to being a migrant-sending country than a migrant-hosting country (The World Bank, 2018), having the seventh-highest emigration rate in the EU¹⁶. Romanian NGOs are new to providing effective refugee and migrant services and attempt to do so competently with little preparation or resources (Flanigan, 2022). From a local administrative perspective, EU funding mechanisms moved slowly, mayors

¹¹ <https://www.rominserv.com/en/Rompetrol-donates-fuel-to-the-Romanian-National-Red-Cross-Society-as-support-for-the-Ukrainian-people>

¹² <https://www.bcr.ro/ro/presa/informatii-de-presa/2022/06/28/Ajutorul-catre-refugiatii-ucraineni-continua-BCR-a-donat-pest-100-de-laptopuri-catre-comunitatile-de-copii-refugiati-din-Ucraina>

¹³ <https://www.bcr.ro/ro/presa/informatii-de-presa/2022/03/02/BCRsprijina-refugiatii-din-Ucraina-suport-financiar-pentru-actiunile-umanitare-logistica-si-spatii-disponibile-pentru-autoritati-si-servicii-financiare-dedicate-cu-zero-costuri>

¹⁴ <https://www.reginamaria.ro/servicii-medicale-gratuite-pentru-cetatenii-ucraineni>

¹⁵ <https://www.bitdefender.com/ukraine/>

¹⁶ <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/210481530907970911/pdf/128064SCD-PUBLIC-P160439-RomaniaSCDBackgroundNoteMigration.pdf>

couldn't count on them, and their budgets were limited. One mayor mentioned that the administrative capacity was overwhelmed, while local service delivery was halted, and no funds were made available from the central government.

Conclusions

Solidarity is at the core of institutional perspectives on the Ukrainian refugee crisis. Romania has mobilized its resources and effectively managed the unique and timely needs of over a million refugees after the Russian invasion. While NGOs have played a critical role in the response, local governments have prioritized crisis response actions, despite a slow central government response and delayed or inexistent European funds. Atypical actors became essential as they provided additional services such as translation, transportation, food, and clothes. The whole effort has brought to light the importance and strength of civil society. Still, it has also exposed a series of barriers and resource constraints that must be urgently addressed in future similar crises.

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Appendix

Programs and Funds

1. “In A State of Well-being Program”: This program joined the national initiatives and launched the in-state call to help, through which it made available the equivalent of 350,000 euros from the annual budget for initiatives developed in support of migrants. They have provided medium grants for five other NGOs and rapid grants to ten NGOs.
2. The Romanian Social Development Fund: 330,000 euros to help NGOs that provide emergency services (food, accommodation, counseling, medical services) and interventions to prevent the trafficking of human beings in the context of the refugee crisis (The Romanian Social Development Fund, 2022).
3. UEFISCDI (Executive Agency for Higher Education, Research, Development, and Innovation): 100,000 euros from the Research Programme managed by the UEFISCDI to reach two partner universities to cover part of the daily costs of food and accommodation for refugees (Romania’s Ministry of Education, 2022).
4. EEA and Norway Grants: Donors from Iceland, Norway, and Lichtenstein; 2,000,000 euros to reach the Active Citizenship Fund Programme (EAA and Norway Grants, 2022).