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*Summary Report
of the International Academic
Conference on ‘Mass Refugees from Ukraine
in the Aftermath of the Russian Aggression.
The Polish and Lithuanian Reception Models’*

Abstract: The article is a report on the conference “Mass Refugees from Ukraine in the Aftermath of the Russian Aggression. The Polish and Lithuanian Reception Models,” held on February 5, 2024 at Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University in Warsaw, Poland. The author discusses the themes taken up in the presentations given by the conference participants. She concludes that the conference proved to be an important platform for sharing experiences in assistance provision to those in need, and for presenting the challenges associated with the presence of war refugees in Poland two years after the outbreak of the armed conflict in Ukraine.

Keywords: war, Ukraine, refugees, Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University i Warsaw

On 5 February 2024, an international academic conference on ‘Mass refugees from Ukraine after the Russian aggression. The Polish and Lithuanian reception models’ took place at the Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University in Warsaw. The aim of this event was to find an answer to the question: why did the mass influx of refugees from Ukraine after 24 February 2022 not cause a refugee crisis in Poland and Lithuania? The event was organized by the Faculty of Social and Economic Sciences of UKSW under the patronage of Archbishop Stanisław Gądecki, Metropolitan of Poznań, President of the Polish Bishops’ Conference. Among the invited guests were not only eminent academics, but also experts who shared their extensive experience of helping refugees from Ukraine, including representatives from Caritas and the Hub Medevac in Jesionka.

The conference consisted of three plenary sessions, each of which concluded with a moderated discussion in which the audience could ask questions of individual speakers. The first plenary session focused on the role of the state and the Catholic Church in dealing with the refugee crisis caused by Russia's invasion of Ukraine, which began on 24 February 2022. The second plenary session focused on human rights in the context of war refugees from Ukraine. The third and final plenary session heard testimonies from those involved in providing humanitarian assistance to those fleeing the war in Ukraine.

On behalf of Rev. Prof. Ryszard Czekalski, Rector of UKSW, the conference was opened by Prof. Dr Anna Fidelus, Vice-Rector for Student Affairs and Education, who welcomed the guests, saying that "the University community, in fulfilling its mission of social responsibility and helping people in need, has been trying to provide material support to refugees since the beginning of the war", adding that "the University has also provided them with psychological and educational support and organized Polish language courses for them". The Vice-Rector concluded her speech by saying that the University "will continue to provide help and support to refugees". The keynote speech was given by Dr Michał Gierycz, Professor, Dean of the Faculty of Social and Economic Sciences at UKSW, who acknowledged that the conference was an important contribution to the debate on the Polish refugee reception model, which had been extended to include refugees from Ukraine, a country still at war with the Russian Federation. At the same time, the Dean of the Faculty of Social and Economic Sciences at the UKSW pointed out that the phenomenon of Poland receiving millions of refugees in a very short period of time, in a country that is institutionally and economically much weaker than the European powers, calls for deeper reflection. He also stressed that Poland had been able to deal "in a truly humane way" with the huge humanitarian crisis caused by the escalation of the armed conflict that began in February 2022.

Professor Michał Gierycz also pointed out that the attitude of Poles in the face of the Russian-Ukrainian war is an 'extraordinary social and national phenomenon' that goes far beyond issues related solely to the state's migration policy. However, he considered crucial the question of the importance of cooperation between the state and the Catholic Church in the face of the migration crisis caused by Russian aggression against Ukraine. He emphasized that it was not only a question of providing "a roof over the heads" of the victims of war, but also of the Church's role in the "ethical education of citizens" and in identifying how

to help those fleeing war wisely. According to Dean Gierycz, it is also important to reflect on the significance of Christian cultural foundations and their role in the awakening of so-called civil society – especially during the aforementioned crisis.

As an introduction to the theme of the conference, Maciej Duszczyk, PhD (hab.), Professor at the University of Warsaw, Undersecretary of State at the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Administration, delivered a lecture entitled ‘How to Tell the Story of the Reception of Ukrainian Refugees?’ At the beginning of his speech, the Undersecretary of State in the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Administration rightly noted that “helping refugees is a marathon, not a sprint”. This means that helping war victims should be seen as a long-term process that requires considerable effort. The way in which Poland was involved in helping refugees fleeing war was, in the speaker’s view, a truly remarkable phenomenon. Professor Maciej Duszczyk also pointed out that there are currently around 2 million Ukrainians on Polish territory, and therefore drew attention not only to the need to prepare a solid law on assistance to refugees, but also to the challenges Poland will face in the near future. Among these, he mentioned the need to develop an education system for 170,000 Ukrainian children and to address discrepancies in the perception of certain historical events by Poles and Ukrainians.

The first plenary session entitled *Refugees: The Role of the State, the Role of the Church* featured three lecturers. The first to speak was Paweł Szefernaker, in 2022–2023 Government Plenipotentiary for War Refugees from Ukraine, who in his presentation recalled his memories of the early days of the Russian–Ukrainian war and his experience of organizing assistance for refugees arriving in Poland. However, he paid particular attention to the fact that in February 2022 no one could predict how this full-scale armed conflict would unfold and what impact it would have on Poland and Europe as a whole. According to the speaker, it was particularly difficult to predict the actual needs of refugees crossing the Polish border. Paweł Szefernaker went on to give numerous examples of assistance to refugees from Ukraine and the organizational difficulties Poland had to face. The speaker concluded by emphasizing that “as a nation and as a state, we have nevertheless passed the test in terms of this assistance”.

This was followed by a presentation by Archbishop Stanisław Gądecki entitled ‘Cooperation Between the State and the Church in Organizing Aid for Refugees from Ukraine’. The President of the Polish Bishops’ Conference drew particular

attention to the fact that the Catholic Church in Poland, driven by its Catholic faith and solidarity with the victims of war, has prepared many places to receive refugees, including holiday hotels, Caritas centres, theological seminaries, monasteries, parishes, or the homes of some bishops. Nevertheless, he acknowledged that the large-scale reception of refugees by Polish families in their private homes could be considered an extraordinary phenomenon. As the President of the Polish Episcopate rightly pointed out, “solidarity was shown by all Poles, regardless of their faith or political views”, while stressing that “it was a simple impulse of the heart, so deeply rooted in Polish culture”.

At the end of the first plenary session, a special guest spoke – Mgr. Matteo Cardinal Zuppi, President of the Italian Bishops’ Conference and Pope Francis’ special envoy to Ukraine. Cardinal Zuppi noted that interest in Ukraine and the armed conflict is currently waning, “as if the world is in some way already tired of death and has begun to observe the war from afar because it has gone on for too long”. For this reason, according to the Italian hierarchy, this getting used to the war, which has been going on for two years now and is causing more and more suffering, should be a matter of particular concern at the present time. Cardinal Zuppi also recalled the teaching of Pope Francis, who “encourages us to look into the eyes of the victims, to call them by name and to understand their personal stories, in order to understand that war is a terrible tragedy and a senseless slaughter”. Speaking about the humanitarian mission of the Holy See, Cardinal Zuppi explained that Pope Francis “seeks to create every opportunity to see, listen and promote everything that can lead to a resolution of the conflict”. Furthermore, the President of the Italian Bishops’ Conference explained that the work of dialogue on the part of the Holy See is being carried out away from the public spotlight and in collaboration with the Secretariat of State and the nunciatures in Kyiv and Moscow. Cardinal Zuppi also pointed out that for Christians, “peace is not merely a wish, but the very reality of the Church, which grows – as a sign of peace – from the Eucharist and the Gospel”, affirming that “the Church and Christians believe in peace, and we are all called to be peacemakers, all the more so in the terrible storm of conflict”. At the same time, the President of the Italian Episcopate noted that “if the fruit of enmity is hatred, the fruit of solidarity is peace”. In order to build the peace that Christians and the Church believe in, the Italian clergyman believes that three areas must be addressed: the first is to welcome refugees and heal their wounds; the second is to build institutions and the architecture of peace; and the third is to pray for peace. In conclusion, Cardinal Zuppi recalled the great power of prayer, stressing that we are all “called to pray fervently and persistently for

peace in Ukraine, in the Holy Land and throughout the world”; at the same time, he appealed not to succumb to indifference and to show solidarity with those in need, in order to “create and strengthen a culture of peace among people”.

During the second plenary session, entitled *Refugees and Human Rights*, the first speaker was Dr Monika Strzęboszewska–Trojanowska, Professor UKSW, who drew attention to the phenomenon of human trafficking, which is inextricably linked to every humanitarian crisis. Later, Renata Makuch, from the Caritas Poland Aid Centre for Migrants and Refugees, highlighted the most urgent needs of refugees from Ukraine and discussed the assistance provided to them by Caritas Poland. In turn, Arunas Kučinas from Caritas Lithuania introduced the audience to the attitude of Lithuanians towards refugees from Ukraine. He pointed out that Lithuanian society has shown compassion and solidarity in the face of the Ukrainian refugee crisis, often opening their homes to those in need. He also stressed that Lithuanian Caritas has initiated and coordinated the delivery of humanitarian aid to war refugees who fled Ukraine, working with government institutions, other NGOs and the Lithuanian Bishops’ Conference. As Arunas Kučinas pointed out, such cooperation is essential for the effective management of large-scale crises. The next panellist, Dr Urszula Góral from the Institute of Political Science and Administration, UKSW, addressed the issue of personal data protection and the right to privacy in humanitarian action.

The third and final plenary session, entitled *Testimonies*, featured contributions from people who had been involved in relief operations for refugees from Ukraine. The activities of the Medevac Hub in Jesionka were presented by Dariusz Drzał from the Polish Centre for International Aid. He recalled that the Medevac Hub, financed by EU funds, is part of the medical evacuation programme for Ukrainian patients launched by the European Union in March 2022. In Jesionka, near Rzeszów, Ukrainian patients are guaranteed access to 24-hour nursing care, vaccinations, screening or psychological support. As Dariusz Drzał noted, this is the only medical transit centre of its kind in Europe. Patients can wait there safely before being transferred to hospitals in EU member states. The Deputy Director of Caritas of the Archdiocese of Przemyśl, Fr. Dr Paweł Konieczny, then spoke about the work of this Catholic charity dedicated to refugees fleeing Ukraine and the humanitarian aid organized on a large scale in Ukraine. Professor Aleksandra Grzymała–Kazłowska from the University of Warsaw was the last speaker in this plenary session. In her presentation, she highlighted the experiences of individuals who have been directly involved in assisting war refugees from Ukraine.

The international academic conference concluded with a lecture entitled: 'From «Solidarity» to «Solidarity with Ukraine»' by Prof. Zbigniew Stawrowski, PhD, from UKSW. In his lecture, the speaker pointed out that this extraordinary hospitality of the Poles towards the refugees from Ukraine should be seen in the category of the so-called 'second miracle of solidarity'. He considered the first miracle to be the Solidarity movement of 1980–1981. Comparing the two events and looking for similarities between them, Professor Stawrowski noted that Poles, including the younger generation, proved to be spiritually and ethically prepared for the mass exile caused by Russia's aggression against Ukraine. The generosity and care shown by Poles, combined with selfless commitment, he stressed, were similar to the behaviour (albeit in a new setting) that was familiar from the events of 40 years ago. This proves that the ethos of solidarity is resonating anew in the face of the particular challenge of the Russo-Ukrainian war.

In conclusion, the academic conference sought to discuss and understand the difficult situation of refugees fleeing the Russian aggression. The event also proved to be an important platform for sharing experiences in assistance provision to those in need, and for presenting the challenges associated with the presence of war refugees in Poland two years after the outbreak of the armed conflict in Ukraine.

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