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Learning from refugee sponsorship: how to host refugees fleeing from Ukraine to Poland?

As over 5 million refugees have fled Ukraine, Aleksandra Grzymała-Kazłowska [@kazlowskaa](#), Renata Stefańska and Patrycja Ziółkowska [@ziolkowska_p](#) reflect on the potential of refugee sponsorship (RS), which is an effective way to admit and integrate newcomers, based on public-private partnership. RS, which originated in Canada, has recently been implemented in some European countries, including – on a small scale – Poland. Now, however, it seems that hundreds of thousands of people and organisations in the country are spontaneously undertaking RS-like activities.



Map 1. Refugee sponsorship programmes in Europe as of 24 February 2022

Dark blue – ongoing RS programmes

Light blue – RS programmes implemented in the past

Source: Own elaboration based on various sources



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Aleksandra Grzymała-Kazłowska, Renata Stefańska, Patrycja Ziólkowska

The full-scale war that started in Ukraine on 24th February 2022 has triggered vast numbers of refugees fleeing their country to other states. According to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), almost 5.5 million people fled Ukraine until 30th April, of whom most (almost 60%) crossed the border with Poland. The admission and support of such large numbers of refugees constitute an unprecedented challenge, which can only be tackled by the combined efforts of governmental institutions, local authorities and statutory services, non-governmental and church organisations, private sector and, what seems to be crucial, individuals.

The idea of such combined endeavours seems similar to the concept of **refugee sponsorship (RS)**, based on a public-private partnership in admitting refugees. RS relies on a collaboration between the state and private actors, including individuals and civil society organisations (e.g., faith-based) and so far, has been predominantly seen as a complementary pathway for the reception of refugees. The

state usually took responsibility for resettlement and legal admission, while private actors supported refugees in their reception and integration after arrival in the host country ([ERN 2017](#)). Thus, as [Tan](#) (2021: 1) points out, ‘the essence of the concept *is shared responsibility* between civil society and state for the admission and/or integration of refugees’.

While RS underscores the role of civil society, different types of RS can be distinguished, such as **community sponsorship** – based on the support provided by local communities (e.g., Australia, the UK), **facilitated family reunification** – for family members of refugees already living in a given country (e.g., Germany, Switzerland), **humanitarian corridors** – for especially vulnerable refugees, organised by faith-based organisations (e.g., France, Italy), and sometimes **university corridors** (e.g., Canada).

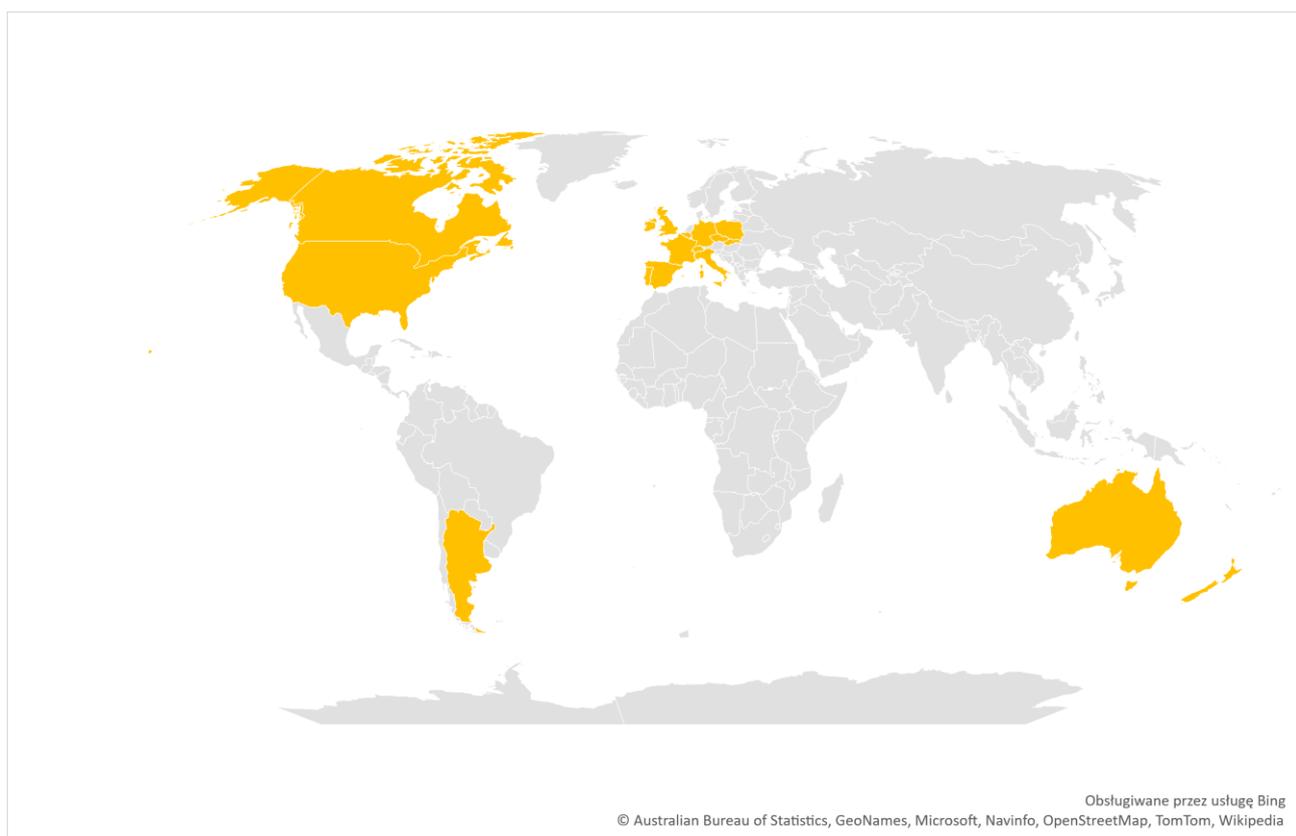
The origin and idea of refugee sponsorship

The RS framework originated in Canada in the 1970s to support Indochinese refugees and has

been recently adopted by other countries (see Map 2). In Europe, an interest in this form of refugee assistance mainly followed the so-called refugee crisis in 2015, which resulted in pilot RS programmes in several Western European countries: Belgium, Germany, France, Ireland, Italy, Portugal, Spain, Switzerland and the United Kingdom. Short pilot programmes also took place in three Central and Eastern European countries: Poland, Slovakia and the Czech Republic; all of them concerned the resettlement of Christian refugees ([EC 2018b](#)).

Although RS is not widespread globally, its value has recently been recognised. The [Global](#)

[Compact on Refugees](#) approved by the United Nations in 2018 lists community and private sponsorship as complementary pathways for the admission of refugees. One of the recommendations in the study prepared for the European Commission on the feasibility and added value of RS ([EC 2018b](#)) was that EU institutions should focus on ‘soft’ policy, i.e., on encouraging and granting support (e.g., in the form of funds) for the implementation of RS programmes, rather than on creating respective legislation, to allow existing and future initiatives to remain diverse and flexible. In 2018, the European Commission issued a communication ([EC 2018a](#)), in which it committed to support the establishing or



Map 2. Past and ongoing refugee sponsorship programmes around the world as of 24 February 2022

Source: Own elaboration based on various sources

expanding of private sponsorship schemes in EU member states, and thus strengthen the involvement of local communities in the integration of refugees. In 2019 and 2020, it allocated special funding for this purpose within the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund. Moreover, the 2020 [New Pact on Migration and Asylum](#) envisaged the development of a European model of community sponsorship. Some tools have been prepared, such as the [Global Refugee Sponsorship Initiative Guidebook](#), which provides governmental officials, civil society organisations and community members with guidelines on how to start developing a bespoke sponsorship programme in a given country. For example, it helps to consider who will be eligible to be a sponsor, what will be their relationship to the government, and how they will be screened, prepared and supported.

Commonalities and differences in refugee sponsorship schemes

Although RS programmes were mainly inspired by the Canadian model mentioned above, they differ both from this model and each other substantially. These differences concern four issues: 1) who may be the sponsor, 2) who may be sponsored, 3) how responsibilities are shared between sponsors and the state, and 4) what is the status of sponsored refugees and what are their rights (for a comprehensive overview of the various features of RS programmes see e.g. [EC 2018b](#); [GRSI 2021](#)).

In most RS programmes, the sponsor can be either an organisation or a group of individuals (e.g., consisting of five people as in Canada). But there have also been programmes where

one sponsor is enough (e.g., family reunification schemes in Ireland or Germany), and mixed programmes where organisations establish cooperation with ‘subsidiary’ sponsors (e.g., volunteers and refugees in Belgium or France). Sponsors are also required under some programmes (e.g., Germany, the UK) to have sufficient financial resources to support the sponsored refugees.

As regards sponsored individuals, they are either refugees referred for resettlement by the UNHCR (e.g., Ireland, the UK), or people in need of protection who apply for refugee status only after arrival (e.g., Italy, Poland). In some programmes, the need for protection was not a requirement but only family members of refugees already living in these countries could be sponsored (e.g., Germany, Switzerland). Refugee sponsorship programmes often focus on specific nationalities, so far mainly Syrians and Iraqis. In some RS programmes, additional conditions are/were set, e.g., Christian denomination in Central and Eastern European countries, or requirements concerning language, work experience and age in New Zealand.

Sponsors tend to be obliged to provide integration support and cover some expenses related to admitting refugees, e.g., travel costs or basic settlement needs of refugees. The minimum amount of financial commitment of sponsors is either specified (e.g., GBP 9,000 in the UK, or EUR 1,000 in Spain) or not specified (e.g., Argentina, Italy). In rare cases, e.g., within the Canadian Joint Assistance Sponsorship programme for refugees with special needs, sponsors are not required to contribute

financially – their support is limited to providing emotional and practical support. Sponsors are also required to secure accommodation for sponsored refugees, usually for at least two years (e.g., Ireland, the UK). They are not always expected to pay the rent; these costs are sometimes covered by government institutions (e.g., Spain, the UK). All these responsibilities are usually defined in sponsorship agreements.

The state is responsible for the final selection and vetting of resettled and sponsored refugees, as well as ensuring their legal status and related rights. In the case particularly of humanitarian corridors and facilitated family reunification schemes, the beneficiaries are identified by the sponsors, but still the final decision on accepting specific refugees belongs to the state authorities. The state is also usually responsible for providing basic services, such as education and health care. Moreover, the state oversees the implementation of RS programmes, but also holds the ultimate responsibility for hosting refugees, e.g., if sponsors fail.

Recognised refugees, referred by the UNHCR, are admitted within some RS schemes. Thus, they are immediately entitled to a wide range of refugee rights, including integration programmes. Within other schemes, foreigners can either apply for refugee status upon arrival (e.g., France), or are granted humanitarian status (e.g., Ireland). Those without refugee status are not entitled to special refugee rights, but this mainly applies to foreigners who arrived under facilitated family reunification programmes.

The sponsorship period, i.e., the period during which integration support is to be provided, usually lasts from one to two years (e.g., Ireland, the UK). The shortest lasted only 90 days (Switzerland) and the longest – 5 years (in Germany, within the programme for refugees wishing to bring their families to this country). Sometimes this period is defined with the reservation that it may last longer if refugees do not become self-sufficient (e.g., Argentina, Canada). In Italy, the sponsorship duration is not specified at all; it depends on the refugees' needs.

In some countries, RS programmes have been only temporary. In others, they have become a relatively durable solution, which means that they are still implemented there (see Map 1 on the first page).

Learning from research into refugee sponsorship

The majority of analyses on the effectiveness of RS have been conducted in Canada and are based on the comparison of integration results of refugees who came under RS and those from other refugee programmes. They show that refugees' integration within RS is more effective than under government programmes, especially if we consider the labour market integration ([Kaida et al. 2020](#)).

In RS, refugees receive social support, which facilitates their social integration, employment ([Senthanar et al. 2021](#)) and the feeling of belonging to the host society ([McKee et al. 2019](#)). As such, it can foster reciprocity, e.g., leading to the increased social engagement of refugees.

Refugee sponsorship seems to increase social cohesion and allows for establishing personal and close relationships between individuals with refugee experience and members of a host society. For most sponsors, as well as for most refugees, participation in RS was a valuable experience bringing positive emotions (e.g., [Phillimore et al. 2021](#)).

However, when implementing RS, we have to keep in mind that its effectiveness may be influenced by cultural and social context. What will be a success in one place may fail in another. The effectiveness of RS is also influenced by local factors (such as access to supporting institutions, healthcare and affordable housing, employment and education opportunities, attitudes towards diversity). Hence, local authorities may significantly contribute to the increase of RS effectiveness by providing refugees access to services and facilitating integration ([Agrawal and Sangapala 2021](#)).

The most effective forms of RS are claimed to be programmes in which financial costs are mainly covered by the state (e.g., [Labman 2016](#)), while private sponsors are largely responsible for refugees' social integration, in order to avoid overburdening the latter and facilitate a partnership relation between both sides. Not overburdening private hosts can be achieved by building sustainable mechanisms that help those involved to share their efforts, costs and responsibilities, accompanied by wider institutional support and a stable framework.

The attitudes of sponsors and the relationships they establish with refugees seems to be of

critical importance – the closer and more 'equal' the relationship between sponsor and refugee is, the more effective the programme can be ([Haugen et al. 2020](#)). Existing research shows that sponsors could have a paternalistic approach to refugees, and their relationships are often driven by pity or sympathy but not based on belief in equality ([Scheibelhofer 2019](#)). This can harm the well-being and sense of independence and agency of admitted refugees and might have a negative impact on the whole process of integration. This indicates the need for training, supporting and supervising sponsors to foster a mutualist approach and more equal relations, where sponsors are willing to learn with refugees and from them, and have a flexible definition of what a successful sponsorship is.

The issue of equality relates not only to relations at the individual level but also at the broader social and political context. One should be wary of the potential power imbalance between refugees and sponsors, as well as of inequalities between beneficiaries of RS, or between individuals from other marginalised groups in the receiving society and refugees who have been supported in different ways (e.g., [Good Gingrich and Enns 2019](#); [Ritchie 2018](#)). Hence, it is important to be careful and not marginalise some groups or create intergroup tensions, e.g., related to access to certain formal rights among different groups of foreigners granted protection.

Existing observations and studies suggest that any form of RS should be implemented carefully, taking into account institutional, social and cultural factors. RS can compensate

for inadequate system infrastructure for refugee reception and integration. However, as such, it might help to maintain a defective system while putting a huge burden on sponsors (e.g., [Lanphier 2003](#)). Hence, RS could be better seen as a complementary solution to other forms of refugee admission.

Developing refugee sponsorship in Poland

The first Polish RS programme was developed *ad hoc* in 2015, in response to the war in Syria and it concerned 158 Christians from this country ([EC 2018b](#)). The following assistance was supposed to be secured by the Esera Foundation, which inspired the programme: covering travel costs, providing integration support for three months and accommodation for up to one year, as well as a financial allowance of PLN 400 (then about EUR 100) and health insurance. The state, on the other hand, offered legal entry and humanitarian visas. The programme was not successful – most Syrians left Poland for Western Europe. Among factors which could contribute to this outcome, one may include the fact that the foundation was not experienced in supporting refugees and larger programmes, nor did it consult the delivery with any specialised organisation. This was in addition to problems with miscommunication between the organisers and the beneficiaries, and not sufficient funds allocated for the implementation.

Other pioneer community sponsorship initiatives in Poland developed in response to the ‘refugee crisis’ include [Refugees Welcome](#), originating from Germany, delivered as a programme of the Ocalenie Foundation (since 2016). Refugees Welcome uses an internet

platform connecting refugees with individuals wishing to rent them rooms, as well as facilitates refugees’ integration (e.g., by matching refugees with buddy volunteers who support them in settling). Another programme, [Welcome Home](#), (started in 2017) also delivered in Poland by the Ocalenie Foundation, is an integration and housing programme aimed to help refugee families to settle and become independent. It is financed through crowdfunding. Accommodation is secured through the foundation, by renting a flat on the market or through state agencies, whereas integration relies on matching with a multicultural mentor, often with a refugee/immigrant background, assisting refugees in dealing with practicalities and facilitating access to institutions. Refugees are also assisted in terms of medical and psychological help, Polish language acquisition, job training and support, as well as socio-economic training (e.g., planning a budget).

The [Map of Hospitality](#) was launched by the Consortium of Civil Society Organisations Working for Migrants and Refugees in 2020, after the fire at the Moria refugee camp in Greece, and operated until November 2021. It mapped out local communities, organisations and local authorities willing to host refugees from Afghanistan and other countries and provide them with accommodation, Polish language teaching, support in dealing with formalities, etc. There have also been examples of grassroots support for Afghan families evacuated in 2021, such as fundraising for a home for one family organised by the Community of Sant’Egidio Warsaw.

In Poland, there were also other initiatives containing elements of RS based on the involvement of private individuals. The difficult situation of Chechen refugees, who in the mid-2010s spent months in the vicinity of the Polish-Belarusian border, waiting for the acceptance of their applications for a refugee status, led to the emergence of the informal initiative [Children from the Brest Train Station](#), assisting female refugees and their children both in Belarus and after arrival in Poland. Various informal activities include organising integration events, but also flexible informal ‘adoptions’ of Chechen refugee families when somebody takes responsibility for a given family and assists them in settling in (after ‘matching’ and the introduction, the type and scope of help depend on the parties involved). Volunteers also play a key role in the activities of the [Polish Hospitality Foundation](#) (established in 2017), which is the continuation of its five-years older grassroots, informal initiative [With Bread and Salt](#), focused on raising awareness about the migrant and refugee situation in Poland. Their assistance entails education support (e.g., volunteers supporting children), psychological, legal and material help, and assistance in looking for and renting accommodation.

It is noticeable that the crisis at the Polish-Belarusian border escalated in the summer 2021 further mobilised non-governmental organisations (e.g., over a dozen organisations decided to form a coalition called [Border Group](#), including the mentioned group With Bread and Salt), as well as many activists and volunteers to directly engage in helping migrants at the border and in potential

receiving communities. For instance, the Facebook group [Families without Borders](#) started in autumn 2021 gives the platform for people to declare their capacity to host and support refugees. Set up shortly later, the related Facebook group [Homes without Borders](#) aims predominantly at organising help for foreigners staying in reception centres by offering them essential aid, but also currently contains posts about required/offered accommodation.

After the beginning of the Russian aggression against Ukraine in February 2022, many similar activities resembling RS programmes appeared. They have been even more improvised, as they were trying to respond to the completely unexpected and unprecedented influx of refugees. These have been largely civil society initiatives undertaken by individuals, who spontaneously welcomed refugees into their homes and provided them with basic care. The general welcoming and empathic attitude was reflected in studies, including the survey conducted by the Public Opinion Research Centre (CBOS) between 28 March and 7 April in which 63% of respondents declared personal or a household member’s involvement in helping refugees fleeing from Ukraine. According to a survey by the Institute of Catholic Church Statistics, 98% of Catholic and Greek Catholic parishes declared conducting activities to help refugees from Ukraine in Poland, with nearly half offering accommodations. It is estimated that, in total, parishes, together with male and female religious orders, provided 320,000 accommodations for refugees.

Drawing on the existing networks, platforms of exchange and cooperation have emerged, such as the bottom-up initiative Resource Group, organised by volunteers to link guests from Ukraine and hosts through a special application, website, social media account. Finally, accommodation was provided to 5,530 people from Ukraine, mostly for short periods (in half of the cases for up to 3 days) ([Bieńkowski et al.](#)) Other platforms that offer accommodation for refugees fleeing from Ukraine include: the mentioned Map of Hospitality, [Ukrainian Home](#) (run by the Our Choice Foundation), [Poles for Ukraine](#) (platform supporting local authorities in managing offers of free accommodation for Ukrainians), [UA SOS](#), [The Club of Catholic Intelligentsia](#). An important hub for people offering assistance, including shelter, and for Ukrainians in need of help, is the government website [I Help Ukraine](#). To increase the safety of refugees, people offering accommodation have to enter their offers on this website after official e-authentication.

The institutional response has followed the spontaneous engagement of the society, firstly organised at the level of local authorities and later at the level of central government and institutions. The act on assistance for Ukrainian nationals, passed on 12 March 2022, offered financial support to companies and individuals providing accommodation and meals to refugees. It amounts to PLN 40 (EUR 8.5) per person per day for up to 120 days (period extended from 60 days by the latest amendment to this law) and is paid on the basis of an agreement with the commune.

Different ways of learning from refugee sponsorship

It should be acknowledged that apart from Canadian society having supported over 300,000 refugees over 40 years within RS programmes, the other previous RS programmes have been implemented on a relatively small scale (e.g., 500 refugees within the Community Sponsorship Scheme (CSS) in the UK since 2016). Moreover, the context of their emergence and implementation was not as unprecedented as the current situation, so the former RS programmes could be prepared and developed to combine diverse resources and wider institutionalised support mechanisms. For example, CSS in the UK has been supported by Reset Communities and Refugees (Reset), promoting the idea, training sponsors and acting as a conduit between sponsors and the Home Office. The new response of the UK to the current humanitarian crisis caused by the war in Ukraine, called the [Homes for Ukraine](#) scheme, differs from CSS, yet utilises previous experiences and resources. Approved and security checked individuals (unlike in CSS, in which only groups and organisations participated) can provide named refugees from Ukraine a place to live for six months by inviting them into their homes and families and supporting in adaptation and integration (e.g., signposting to local services and assisting in contact), preferably ensuring wider local support.

There had been a completely different context in Poland, where the governmental refugee

integration system had been underdeveloped, with limited NGO support and just few small-scale pilot programmes of RS prior to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. However, the unprecedented, spontaneous response from individuals, groups and institutions not previously involved in supporting refugees has helped to make up for the difference between the existing institutional infrastructure and the enormous level of assistance needed so abruptly.

Different advantages of RS should be highlighted. It not only facilitates admitting refugees and their integration but may also increase the social acceptance of helping refugees and facilitate the agential engagement of civil society and refugees themselves.

In a model form, RS enables the controlled reception of refugees, where foreigners who are in need of protection receive assistance from pre-screened, reliable sponsors. RS is based on a contract between sponsors and the state, where potential sponsors are usually vetted, sometimes even required to have prior experience working with vulnerable people. However, with the current massive influx of refugees and large spontaneous aid from the public, it is a great challenge to develop solutions meeting all the desired safety measures, particularly in the first safe countries such as Poland. The safety of refugees needs to be underscored, especially bearing in mind that mainly women, children (including unaccompanied minors) and the elderly are now fleeing Ukraine, and they are vulnerable not only because of their traumatic

experiences, but sometimes are also at risk of exploitation, including human trafficking.

This means that new solutions need to be developed that do not, however, stifle the grassroots initiative. What is more, the civic response should be used in a most effective and productive way, supporting the individuals involved, to avoid their overburdening and burnout in the face of the predicted long-term military conflict and need for assistance for refugees. The private engagement should be treated as complementary to the main institutionalised systemic solutions.

The lessons from the former experiences of RS both in Poland and in other countries, although valuable, have limited applicability. Hence, the assessment of the used solutions is needed as bespoke, flexible, and contextualised responses to the current unprecedented challenge. In the end, it is also worthwhile to note that, although the Polish experience in RS pre-24th February 2022 was very limited, the current civic engagement in receiving and supporting hundreds of thousands of Ukrainian refugees in Poland in a very short time is so significant and quickly evolving that it potentially can provide valuable material other countries may also learn from.

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