The Response by Civil Society in Berlin during the 2022 Ukraine Refugee Crisis

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Summary

1. Cities around the world continue to be a focal point for forced migration, providing sanctuary to asylum seekers, refugees and migrants in often unexpected circumstances. This paper describes the response of civil society in Berlin due to the sudden arrival of refugees from Ukraine after the Russian invasion in February 2022. It describes the various phases of response and presents three case studies of grassroots organizations which were involved.

Context

2. At the time of writing, the total number of people who have been forcibly displaced from Ukraine (which includes significant numbers of non-Ukrainians, such as foreign students and migrants from Africa and the Middle East) is six million, one million of whom have fled to Germany[1].

3. Whereas Munich was at the centre of the refugee crisis in Germany in 2015, Berlin became the main arrival point for refugees in the country in early 2022 when the war in Ukraine started. This was primarily due to its proximity to the conflict, given that the city is approximately six hours from Warsaw and only about 14-18 hours from western Ukraine (ie Lviv).

4. As a result, Berlin initially had to cope with unprecedented numbers of refugees arriving in the city. Although many people left Berlin very soon after arrival, the city nevertheless struggled to accommodate the remaining 50-70 000 people due to constraints on housing, schools etc.

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[1] Situation Ukraine Refugee Situation (unhcr.org)

5. Although Russia had previously presented a significant threat to Ukrainian stability and caused the forced migration of Ukrainians since 2014, few foresaw that events in Ukraine would deteriorate so quickly. It had not entered public consciousness in Berlin and the city authorities had few contingency plans in place.

6. Civil society had developed some experience working with refugees in the aftermath of the Syrian refugee crisis, but few anticipated the arrival of so many Ukrainians. There is no historic Ukrainian diaspora in Berlin (in comparison to the UK for example), although a small Ukrainian community had developed since the collapse of the Soviet Union, which is estimated to have been 14 000 Ukrainians before the invasion[2].

7. The first Ukrainian refugees had already entered Brandenburg (the state surrounding Berlin) by 25 February. It is thought that that many, perhaps as much as a half, of the first arrivals already had personal contacts in Berlin, or elsewhere in Western Europe, who were able to provide accommodation and support.

8. As the situation deteriorated more people fled Ukraine, whilst on 8 March a new law in Germany[3] temporarily legalized entry into the country. This followed the Temporary Protection Directive (TPD) which was adopted by the EU following the conflicts in the former Yugoslavia and which was triggered for the first time on 4 March due to the sudden movement of people following the invasion[4]. The TPD allowed Ukrainians to work up to three years and not have to apply for asylum.

9. On 2 March Deutsche Bahn, the Germany national railway, also allowed free travel to Germany[5]. Many Ukrainians also arrived in the city by car. The majority were women and children (many bringing pets) and were from a mixture of socioeconomic backgrounds.

10. Although Berlin went on to absorb many Ukrainians (up to 360 000 in the course of 2022), the city went on to become a transit destination, as Ukrainians went onto travel to other parts of Germany. The majority (approx. 220 000) settled in the most populous state North Rhine-Westphalia.

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[2] Amt für Statistik Berlin-Brandenburg (2016). Bevölkerungsstatistik - Ausländische Bevölkerung in Berlin am 31.12.2015. Abgerufen am 23. April 2023 von: https://www.statistik-berlin-brandenburg.de/publikationen/stat_berichte/2016/SB_A01-05-00_2015m12_BE.pdf

[3] https://www.gesetze-im-internet.de/ukraineaufenth_v/BJNR606700022.html

[4] Temporary protection (europa.eu)

[5] https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/aktuelles/db-ticket-helpukraine-2009416

Civil society in Berlin

11. In order to characterize civil society in Berlin it is first necessary to define the typology of Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) in the city. One approach is to cluster civil society initiatives into the following segments or categories:

- Local NGOs (such as **Ulme35[6]**, see case study below).

- Umbrella church/faith-based charities such as Caritas and Diakonie with a Germany-wide operating network

- Groups formed through digital self-organization. This is a new and significant sector based around the ***power of self-organization in the digital era***, and distinct from local NGOs and charities such as Caritas and Diakonie in Germany. This category can include mutual aid groups which are decentralized and tech-savvy. It includes initiatives such as in the **Herz Jesu and St. Adalbert churches[7]** and the **Hotel Anhalter Bahnhof** (also covered in the case studies below) which mobilized quickly in reaction to quickly moving circumstances.

12. Another significant phenomenon has been the role of Ukrainian CSOs in Berlin since February 2022. As well as German-led activity by groups such as those types listed above, this diaspora also reacted quickly and formed influential organizations. As a result, there has been at times healthy competition between Ukrainian-led and German-led CSOs. Whereas many German-led refugee NGOs had worked with Afghans, Syrians and other nationalities before, there was often a sense that Ukrainian groups considered the new refugee situation unique.

How did Berlin react to the arrival of Ukrainian refugees in early 2022?

13. The interaction between civil society and municipal authorities in Berlin in response to the arrival of large numbers of refugees from Ukraine can broadly be described as having evolved over several phases:

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[6] Home - Interkulturanstalten Westend e.V.
[7] Gemeinde Herz Jesu | Kath. Kirchengemeinde Pfarrei Bernhard Lichtenberg Berlin-Mitte (bernhard-lichtenberg.berlin)

- ***Phase 1 - Civil society in the lead (February – late March 2022)***

14. The surprise of the Russian invasion, leading to growing numbers of forcibly displaced migrants, was initially met with only a small degree of formal organization. However civil society in Berlin mobilized quickly, with significant numbers of volunteers amongst the local population. For example, several teams of volunteers started to manage arrivals at the main train station (*Berlin Hauptbahnhof*), organizing quickly over the social media platform Telegram. The Senate of Berlin (*der Senat von Berlin*), which governs the city of Berlin, was overwhelmed and at times slow to react, with no contingency plans apparently in place.

15. Many self-organised ad hoc groups initially installed themselves at both the main train station and the central bus station (*der Zentraler Omnibusbahnhof or "ZoB"*). This included first aid facilities on the ground floor of the main train station, with large number of citizens coming forward to support their work (including many native Russian or Ukrainian speakers).

16. The perception that the German authorities were initially slow to react led to the realization that the state would need the support of NGOs. This is arguably in contrast to 2015 where there was often hostility between government actors and German NGOs.

17. This raises interesting public policy questions about whether local or national state actors could avoid such initial inaction by learning more effectively from past activity. This could be achieved for example by more effective monitoring and evaluating processes, as well as putting in place communication and logistical channels to react to unforeseen situations more quickly and by drawing on the support of local civil society.

18. Many rapidly moving NGOs faced difficult trade-offs between being able to respond to the new situation in Berlin in an agile manner and also being able to put proper processes in place. Ensuring effective safeguarding was a particular challenge and emphasizes just how digital technology can radically change how NGOs operate (for example in terms of quickly finding accommodation in the city for refugees), but with the resulting challenge of ensuring that hosts underwent proper background checks.

- *Phase 2 - City Hall imposes structure and process (early April – mid May 2022)*

19. As it became clear that Berlin was going to be a central focus for forcibly displaced migrants from Ukraine, the municipal authorities enforced appropriate structures and processes.

20. The main points of entry to the city remained the main train and bus stations. At the main train station the Senate of Berlin commissioned the NGO Berliner Stadtmission[8] to construct a large "welcome tent" (*Willkommenszelt)* to offer initial support to Ukrainians arriving in the city.

21. Trains from Warsaw typically arrived starting from 7.30pm every evening with NGOs on standby. Information posters are put up around the main train and bus stations, with the police authorities looking out for Victims of Trafficking (VoTs). A large reception centre (*Ankunftszentrum*) was set up in Reinickendorf in the north-west of the city.

- *Phase 3 - City Hall and civil society collaborate (early/mid May until end of June 2022)*

22. Having introduced greater processes and structures, the municipality continued to administer the situation, with the explicit objective of trying to keep down the total number of Ukrainians staying long term in Berlin. Registration was encouraged by the authorities to ensure that people got access to state benefits which they were entitled to and so would not be vulnerable to exploitation.

23. NGOs continued to play an important role with the initial welcome to Berlin for Ukrainians, including helping signpost new Ukrainian arrivals onto onward travel to other major German cities. For those Ukrainians that nevertheless stayed in the capital finding housing in Berlin remained a challenge.

24. The online website "Unterkunft Ukraine[9]" formally sponsored by the Senate of Berlin did not live up to expectations about matching available housing (private or commercial) with Ukrainians looking for more permanent housing in Berlin. NGOs compensated to some extent by mobilizing and providing housing space within their own networks.

25. As time went on the resilience of CSOs was stretched as the number of volunteers decreased, which made it hard for small voluntary groups to stay afloat. In the middle of July the dismantling of the welcome tent outside the main station was announced.

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[8] Home | Alles auf einem Blick | Berliner Stadtmission (berliner-stadtmission.de)
[9] Gelebte Solidarität und direkte menschliche Verbindungen. | #Unterkunft Ukraine (unterkunft-ukraine.de)

Although the numbers of arrivals in Berlin had by then started to significantly decrease, it will remain a challenge as long as the war in Ukraine continues.

Discussion

26. How can the response of civil society in Berlin to the events of 2022 be assessed in retrospect? **Primarily the city's response has clearly demonstrated the tremendous power of self-organization and digitization.** Although self-organization has long been a feature of civil society in Germany (for example the humanitarian response to emergencies such as flooding), it is clear that digitization has significantly accelerated its development and made social action possible at scale.

27. This is in stark contrast to 2015 when many Germans also volunteered to support the arrival of Syrians by helping out in refugee camps or at train stations. In the beginning every shift had to be organized by hand, by email or Facebook messages. Eventually the platform "Volunteer planner[10]" was used which meant that individuals did not need to organise shifts etc for volunteers. However by 2022 Google Forms, Slack and many other digital tools were available which meant that groups could organize hundreds of volunteers within days potentially.

28. These developments open up many public policy questions about the role of CSOs in Germany and their likely role in future crises. Clubs (*Vereine*) for social activities have long been part of German life. The German state has also worked together with well-established larger organizations for a long time.

29. However officials are sometimes sceptical about working together with grassroots civil society groups which suddenly emerge (and sometimes disappear quickly) in response to a crisis. Such groups also often lack a hierarchical structure, which can lead to a culture clash with state structures.

30. This is in contrast to the UK where partnership working between local government and the voluntary sector is well established, for example during Covid. The German state arguably still has a long way to go with learning to effectively work with, and supporting the development of, grassroots organisations for example by helping them improve their levels of governance, capacity etc.

31. A good example is the way that refugees in Germany are often offered befriending services (*Partnerschaftsprojekte*). In contrast to how this service is often provided by

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[10] https://volunteer-planner.org/

grassroots organisations in the UK, in Germany clients often do not have much choice whether to accept this service or not and it is often not tailored to individual needs.

32. The following three **case studies** given in the boxes below attempt to show the different ways that different CSOs reacted to the crisis in 2022.

Case Study 1: Herz Jesu and St Adalbert (Location: Mitte/Prenzlauerberg)

Photo: Signs used by Herz Jesu and St Adalbert churches to welcome guests at Berlin main train station (Source: Private)

The churches of Herz Jesu and St. Adalbert both belong to the Catholic parish of Bernhard Lichtenberg and are located in the centre of Berlin in the neighbourhoods of Prenzlauerberg and Mitte respectively. Both of these churches had previously been instrumental in providing shelter and care for local people in need, for example the homeless in the Winter and the socially deprived throughout the year. This capacity, both in terms of facilities and resources, has been key to the ability of both churches to welcome refugees both in 2015 and 2022.

Churches in Germany have a role in supporting refugees, although they arguably have cautious and complex decision-making processes. Although the concept of compassion (*Barmherzigkeit)* is central to the church's work which expresses itself through the

concept of "*Caritas*" (ie charity), it is typically the initiative of individual parish members which leads to charitable activities.

The parish church of Herz Jesu was approached in as early as 4 March 2022 to make its facilities available for housing 17 incoming Ukrainian refugees per night. Shortly after this further approval was given to provide a further 19 sleeping spaces in the nearby dismantled sister church of St. Adalbert.

A simple message to the existing mailing list for the volunteers of the homeless shelter catalysed the daily support which eventually allowed both churches to welcome **a total of 3 100 guests over a period of five months**.   The churches provided accommodation for newly arrived Ukrainians for one or two nights, as well as food, a shower and travel advice for their onward journeys in Germany. The churches established themselves at the welcome tent at Berlin main train station where they advertised their offer of help to newly arrived Ukrainians (see picture).

The teams of volunteers were organized entirely digitally via a link to two Google Docs which were a live shift-plan (*Schichtplan*) and also a set of guidelines (*Leitfaden*) for volunteers to access anytime.

Key aspects which made this operation a success were:

- **Leadership:** both churches had strong leadership demonstrated by two women experienced in volunteer refugee work, fundraising and stakeholder management. They were the key drivers behind the concepts and the mobilization.

- **Volunteers:** over the process of five months, a total of 380 volunteers registered to help, approximately 120 of whom provided active and regular support in both institutions.

- **Shift managers:** a handful of shift managers ensured that all shifts were properly staffed and mobilised using WhatsApp to plug any gaps. They also ensured compliance to the guidelines and organized shopping, cleaning, and washing in collaboration with the volunteering institutions.

- **Interpreters:** a separate group of interpreters was established, initially sourced locally from Berlin, then later on drawing on former Ukrainian guests who had stayed in Berlin and were happy to support.

In terms of the religious dimension to this organisation's work, whilst some volunteers gained motivation from the Christian concept of compassion, many were clear that they did not want to promote that specific context.

Retrospectively, the affiliation with the church was useful since it leant credibility to the humanitarian offer when Ukrainian refugees were approached in the main train station.

Many of the guests were overwhelmed by the welcoming environment they found at the churches, some asking to participate in masses or praying in the dormitory.

Case Study 2: Ulme35 (Location: Westend, Charlottenburg)

Photo: Cultural event for refugees at Ulme35 (Source: Private)

Ulme35 is a cultural and refugee centre in Westend in Charlottenburg, an affluent neighbourhood in the west of the city on a street called "Ulmenallee", hence its name. Although far from the city centre it is relatively close to the central bus station (the *ZoB*).

Ulme35 first came to prominence in 2015 in response to the Syrian refugee crisis. Given the strong professional network of people who support Ulme35 it has been able to mobilise many forms of support on different occasions, not just for refugees but also for example during Covid where it worked with the local council in Charlottenburg.

When Ukrainians first started to arrive in the city, Ulme35 surveyed the situation, in particular at the *ZoB* and concluded that there were already more than enough volunteers active in supporting the initial needs of Ukrainians. This raised questions about what value Ulme35 could add to the crisis and so they turned more to providing **secondary support**. When other refugee groups had previously arrived in Germany they often lived in camps for months and although far from ideal, this did at least give them access to social workers and other support networks. In contrast, most Ukrainians stayed either with German hosts, in hostels or with relatives and so they did not have immediate access to such support.

Ulme35 therefore set out to become a support space for Ukrainians and mobilized volunteers, who set up a counselling service in Russian and Ukrainian; activities for kids; organized a clothes bank and offered language support in the form of "**Sprachcafés**" or

"language cafes", an informal way for groups of refugees from different backgrounds to learn German. This "Meeting Point Ukraine" (*Treffpunkt #Ukraine[11]*) started in March 2022, operating five days a week and one year later it had at least twenty volunteers keeping it running three days a week.

Ulme35 also opened its space for self-organized activities, such as a Summer cultural festival, yoga, tours of Berlin, an improvised barber shop (where a Ukrainian hairdresser cut the hair of their countrywomen) and trauma therapy organized by Ukrainians.

One challenge has been that many Russians wanted to volunteer and help people who fled the war in Ukraine. This was originally resisted by Ukrainian members of the organizing committee, but the ethos of Ulme35 was clear that no one should be judged by their nationality. Germans, Ukrainians and people from Russian speaking countries have worked throughout as volunteers together.

During the arrival of Ukrainians Ulme35 also continued to support the needs of other refugees such as Syrians, for example by offering support with bureaucracy or help with finding accommodation.

Case Study 3: Hotel Anhalter Bahnhof (Location: Kreuzberg)

Photo: Recently arrived Ukrainians eating dinner at the Hotel Anhalter Bahnhof (Source: Private)

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[11] Treffpunkt #Ukraine in der Ulme35 - Interkulturanstalten Westend e.V.

The former 47-room Bed and Breakfast Hotel Rewari, close to the Anhalter Bahnhof in the Berlin neighbourhood of Kreuzberg, ceased operations at the end of 2021. It was acquired by Mount Real Estate Capital partners and Natives Capital in January 2022. It was due to be reclassified as serviced apartments in April 2022 and leased to operator Limehome[12] from January 2023.

At the start of the conflict in Ukraine there was therefore a vacancy window in which the hotel was still fully furnished but without any structural interventions imminent. ***The building was prepared for Ukrainian refugees within five days with the future operator Limehome and the Rotary Club Berlin-Checkpoint Charlie***. The rooms were arranged via the digital platform Every Bed Helps.

The idea for this project was born on an intercity train during a business trip. A member of the Rotary Club, the owners of Natives Capital, and a partner from Mount Capital discussed this large project, whereby the empty but fully equipped hotel with 65 beds would offer Ukrainian refugees excellent temporary accommodation.
The founder and CEO of Limehome was then dialled into the brainstorming session and before the train journey was over the idea was set in stone. Seven days later 60 Ukrainian families were able to check in.

The members of the Rotary Club Berlin-Checkpoint Charlie organized the catering for the refugees, and as the hotel kitchen was not professionally equipped with either a stove or an oven, hot meals for lunch and dinner had to be organized and picked up from surrounding hotels and restaurants – all of whom donated these meals.

Refugees were also donated clothes, toys, suitcases and hygiene articles. A local paediatrician visited on two evenings to check all of the children and donated medication where needed.

Over 80 families used the facilities until they had to be closed on 3 December 2022. Most found a place to live in Berlin or travelled further to their family members or friends in other German cities or European countries.

Overall this project delivered:

- 3854 meals served (1304 b-fast/ 1234 lunch/ 1304 dinner)
- 1539 total overnight stays (340 kids/ 1199 adults)

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[12] Limehome offers a digital apartment rental experience with fully furnished apartments designed for short-term and long-term stays.

- 32 kids checked by a doctor
- Two jobs were found in Berlin
- Three apartments were brokered in Berlin
- Six remaining family members have been evacuated from a contested area
- 30 trolley cases were donated

Conclusions

33. Cities around the world will continue to be at the forefront of the humanitarian response to future refugee crises for the foreseeable future. The case of Berlin and its collective response to the sudden influx of people from Ukraine in the first half of 2022 demonstrates how the latest phase of urban response to such crises is characterised by:

    i)   the power of self-organization and digitization by NGOs

    ii)   the need for state and local government to work in collaboration with such fast moving social action by NGOs.

34. In particular now that the situation in Berlin has stabilised, local and central government actors in Berlin should reflect on lessons learnt and incorporate them into contingency planning for similar future scenarios. This is particularly important in terms of partnership working between NGO's and the authorities to find solutions to accommodation for new arrivals.

35. Given the open-ended nature of the conflict in Ukraine and the possibility of further significant population transfers to Western Europe European cities, including in the UK, should consider how more organised partnership working with grassroots organisations could lead to successful future outcomes.

July 2023