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THE ENGAGEMENT OF THE WARMIAN-MASURIAN REGIONAL BRANCH OF THE POLISH RED CROSS IN ASSISTING REFUGEES FROM UKRAINE¹⁵

The full-scale Russian aggression against Ukraine on February 24, 2022, triggered the largest humanitarian and migration crisis since World War II. According to UNHCR data from the end of May 2022, over 6.8 million people had fled Ukraine since the onset of the war, including both Ukrainians and foreign nationals residing in Ukraine at the time of the invasion.

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Poland emerged as the primary destination, recording the highest number of border crossings among Ukraine's neighboring countries and hosting the largest number of war refugees from Ukraine.

As indicated by Polish researchers, by the end of May 2022, 1.15 million Ukrainian citizens had registered in the PESEL system. Women aged 18 – 65 accounted for 45.75% of the registered individuals, while those over 65 years constituted 2.8%. Children under the age of 18 represented 45.7% of all registered war refugees from Ukraine.

From the outset of Russia's full-scale aggression in Ukraine, Poles have emphasized the importance of providing humanitarian assistance to war refugees from Ukraine.

The Polish Red Cross (PRC) has been one of the key humanitarian organizations responding to this crisis. From the very first hours of the conflict, the PRC mobilized to aid Ukraine and its inhabitants. Refugees in need have consistently relied on the support of the PRC throughout this time. In Poland, the PRC has distributed 9.3 thousand tons of food, clothing, and hygiene products to Ukrainians. Additionally, approximately 100,000 Ukrainian families in Poland have received financial assistance in the form of vouchers.

According to data from the PRC, from February 24, 2022, and the following two years, 1.8 million Ukrainians received various forms of assistance from the organization, with the total value of aid exceeding 304 million PLN.

On the very day of the full-scale aggression, PRC rescue teams, equipped with essential supplies, were present at the Polish-Ukrainian border. They helped establish reception and medical points for Ukrainian refugees. Volunteers from the organization provided those fleeing the war with food, drinking water, blankets, and warm clothing. Medical assistance was delivered to 9,000 individuals, primarily women, children, and the elderly.

From the early days of the full-scale conflict, PRC also organized humanitarian aid transports to Ukraine. To date, the organization has carried out 965 shipments, including food, hygiene products, medical supplies, and essential equipment such as industrial power generators (82 generators valued at over 5 million PLN). These generators support the operation of critical facilities such as schools and hospitals. The aid organized by PRC,

with a total weight of 5,800 tons, has reached numerous locations in Ukraine, including Bucha, a town deeply scarred by genocide and atrocities.

The PRC serves as a partner to the Ukrainian Red Cross and extends its support to war-affected populations within Ukraine.

Russia's aggression against Ukraine began in 2014, prompting an initial wave of Ukrainians to migrate to regions such as Warmian-Masurian Voivodeship in Poland. At that time, they were primarily classified as migrants. However, following February 24, 2022, the number of Ukrainians seeking refuge in Poland, particularly women and children, increased significantly. These individuals are now referred to as 'refugees.' However, it is important to note that this region, due to its direct proximity to Russian Federation (Królewiec Province), with a border approximately 200 kilometers in length, did not attract a significant number of refugees.

Data from the Warmian-Masurian Regional Branch of the PRC in Olsztyn indicates that the scale of aid provided to refugees in 2022 was unprecedented and significantly exceeded the assistance provided in 2023. The largest allocation in 2022 was for financial aid in the form of prepaid vouchers, including Sodexo cards, amounting to PLN 739,900. This support reached 3,399 individuals, of whom 3,078 were women. Substantial aid was also provided through food parcels valued at PLN 620,966.76, distributed to 29,936 individuals, including 19,220 women. These parcels weighed a total of 81,081 kilograms. The third category of social assistance comprised chemical and cosmetic product packages worth PLN 401,471.65, which were distributed to 29,913 individuals, including 19,238 women, with a total weight of 7,644 kilograms. Clothing and footwear worth PLN 41,318.86 were provided to 2,691 individuals, including 2,002 women. Additionally, over PLN 50,500.00 was allocated to integration activities, attended by 170 individuals, including 100 women. Other forms of aid, valued at PLN 358,930.09, reached 2,686 individuals, including 1,705 women. This assistance included items such as bedding, blankets, first-aid supplies, strollers, and car seats, weighing nearly 6 tons (5,952 kilograms). Regarding refugee demographics from the Regional Branch of PRC, 29,913

individuals were classified as ‘impoverished,’ 16,422 were unemployed, and 14,532 were single parents. Elderly individuals (over 60 years old) numbered 11,741.

The category of ‘children and youth, including those from socially vulnerable backgrounds,’ comprised 11,565 individuals. Nearly 3,000 people (2,921) were individuals with disabilities, while 2,864 were dependent, chronically ill, or terminally ill. Victims of violence numbered 208, while 15 refugees were identified as homeless. Polish language courses were attended by 20 women, with the Regional Branch of PRC allocating PLN 16,000.00 to this initiative.

In 2023, the scope of material assistance provided to refugees by the Warmian-Masurian Regional Branch of the PRC significantly decreased. This reduction was due to a shift in PEC’s aid priorities, as well as reduced financial resources and fewer donations designated for refugees. The most substantial aid category in 2023 was food parcels valued at PLN 206,250. These were distributed to 2,563 individuals, including 2,435 women. Financial aid in the form of prepaid vouchers accounted for the second-largest expenditure, amounting to PLN 75,010. This assistance reached 577 individuals, including 538 women. The value of chemical and cosmetic product packages also declined in 2023, amounting to PLN 21,550. These packages were distributed to 356 individuals, including 332 women. Clothing and footwear were provided to 1,327 individuals (1,259 women) at a total value of PLN 10,616. In 2023, the Regional Branch of PRC in Działdowo continued operating the “Smiling Haven” integration center, an initiative that remains active as of May 2024. The center hosts vocational and language courses, psychological support, career counseling, and provides playrooms, integration activities, and workshops for children. This initiative was funded with PLN 21,100. Funding for Polish language courses increased compared to the previous year, reaching PLN 26,540 in 2023. Twenty women participated in these courses. In 2023, an additional PLN 44,400 was allocated to ‘other’ forms of assistance (including pharmacy vouchers), benefiting 370 individuals. However, the Regional Branch of PRC in Olsztyn did not collect data on specific refugee groups from Ukraine receiving immediate or material aid in 2023. It is important to note that, from the onset of the full-scale war in Ukraine, the Warmian-

Masurian Regional Branch of PRC operated a warehouse for donations intended for Ukrainian refugees, which was active until the end of June 2023. The aid was directed both to individuals who directly approached the warehouse and to a refugee assistance point located in the Greek Catholic Church in Olsztyn. By December 31, 2022, nearly 39 tons of donations had been collected, including long-term food supplies, cleaning products, cosmetics, blankets, pillows, and clothing. The Food Bank in Olsztyn also assisted in the donation collection. While social aid to Ukraine from the PRC Regional Branch in the Warmian-Masurian Voivodeship amounted to PLN 2,229,087.36 in 2022, this figure decreased to PLN 405,466 in 2023. Up until May 31, 2022, the warehouse had received 22 tons of donations. In 2022, the warehouse operated on weekdays from 10:00 AM to 3:00 PM, providing assistance approximately 38,000 times. The Regional Branch submitted requests to the PRC Headquarters for funds to cover warehouse operation costs. With the received funds, equipment was purchased for the warehouse, including a laptop, lighting, furniture, a refrigerator, shelving units for stored items, a tent to improve waiting conditions for refugees, as well as a children's corner with a table and chairs, a water dispenser, and a cart to facilitate the unloading of food and cleaning products. Refugee women were employed in the warehouse. In May 2022, the PRC Regional Branch received nearly PLN 80,000 in funding from the Assistance Fund through a competition announced by the Voivodeship Office in Olsztyn. This funding was used to distribute food packages to Ukrainian refugees, benefiting 1,000 individuals until the end of June 2022. According to subsequent reports, by the end of June 2023, the warehouse had been utilized nearly 50,000 times. In addition to providing material aid, the PRC also organized integration events for Ukrainian refugees to promote their integration with Polish society. These events, held during holidays and other occasions, included picnics on Children's Day as an example of efforts to alleviate the psychological burden on children and help them escape thoughts of war.

The war in Ukraine is one of the largest humanitarian crises in contemporary Europe. The Polish society, followed by local and government authorities, responded with great commitment to organize humanitarian assistance for the rapidly arriving refugees from

Ukraine. Although the Warmian-Masurian Voivodeship is distant from the Polish-Ukrainian border and directly borders the Russian Federation, refugees fleeing the war also reached this region of Warmia and Masuria. The residents of this region, like those in other Polish areas, were incredibly active in assisting Ukrainian refugees. One of the organizations providing aid to war refugees was the Polish Red Cross and its Warmian-Masurian Regional Branch. The assistance provided was significantly larger in 2022, which was due to the high number of arrivals. In 2023, however, as people gradually acclimated to the looming threat of war, many began to slowly leave the borders of the region and Poland. Many returned to Ukraine or sought safer refuge in other countries. The involvement of the studied public benefit organization would not have been possible on such a large scale, as described, without the tremendous support from donors and volunteers, as well as the dedication of the PRC's full-time employees. It was worthwhile to conduct the research presented in this text in order to document the activities of the Regional Branch of PRC in Olsztyn and demonstrate that PRC in Warmia and Mazury, just like in other regions, fulfills its mission of providing aid to the victims of war.

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17. Annex No. 6A, Social Assistance for Ukraine in 2023.