‘It’s the right thing to do’: specificities of the Polish response to the Ukrainian crisis

Overwhelmingly, the Polish response to the 24 February 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine has been based on the moral imperative of ‘It is the right thing to do’. Within three months, Poland was hosting 3.3 million Ukrainian refugees. This is equivalent to 8.7% of Poland’s population of 38 million. The numbers are difficult to grasp. I have identified four specificities in the Polish response. Firstly, a collective intergenerational trauma and fear that Russia may not stop at Ukraine. Secondly, the attitude of the Polish state towards refugees is generally restrictive and hostile with the exception of Ukrainians. Thirdly, there were pre-existing Polish-Ukrainian relationships upon which Polish society’s response has been layered upon. Lastly, there has been sustained collective and grassroots response for over nine months. For how much longer can the humanitarian response be driven by local authorities, local organisations and civil society ‘to do the right thing’?

Keywords: Poland, Ukraine, refugees, intergenerational trauma, grassroots response, civil society

This is a particular moment in which, by looking at the Russian invasion of Ukraine, we can glimpse the intersection of historical trauma, humanitarian aid, border management, civil society, European and international migration management, and refugee studies. There is hence much to consider, research and debate related to the challenges of humanitarian bordering practices at the present moment. In this editorial, I focus on **the specificities of the Polish response to the Ukrainian crisis**.

In Poland, there has been a collective national atmosphere that supporting Ukrainians fleeing Russian aggression and large-scale destruction on Ukrainian soil is the primary moral option. ‘It is the right thing to do’ is a common refrain I hear from my polish family and friends living in Poland. The research data and analytics technology group YouGov found that, in March 2022, 67% of Poles felt Poland had a moral obligation to offer asylum to Ukrainian refugees (Smith 2022). By July 2022, this has fallen to 50%.

Poland is bearing the brunt of refugee resettlement compared to other member states of the European Union. This can be seen by the sheer numbers of women and children on the move. Specifically, 1.5 million Ukrainian refugees arrived in Poland in the first two weeks after the 24 February

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2022 invasion. On the 11 March, the Mayor of Warsaw, Rafał Trzaskowski (2022) tweeted that, in Warsaw alone, 300,000 people had arrived during this period. Within one month the migration into Poland skyrocketed to 2.3 million. This is the greatest movement of displaced people on European soil since World War 2 (WW2). Within three months, Poland was hosting 3.3 million Ukrainian refugees. This is equivalent to 8.7% of Poland's population of 38 million. The numbers are difficult to grasp. There is no other country in Europe – not even Turkey – hosting such a sheer number of refugees, and most importantly, within days and weeks of the mass exodus.

How do we consider the absorption capacity of a nation to host millions of unexpected residents, with all of their needs including emotional, educational, housing and livelihood? I have identified four specificities to the Polish response: collective intergenerational trauma and fear of Russia, attitude of the Polish state, pre-existing Polish-Ukrainian relationships, and a sustained collective and grassroots response.

Firstly, Russian aggression on Ukrainian soil triggers anxiety and palatable distress in Poles. There is a collective, intergenerational trauma and fear. Russia's aggressions towards its geopolitical neighbours and their residents motivated Poles on the 24th of February 2022 to immediately respond to Ukrainians fleeing. Support may be pragmatic, related to the securitization of Poland's borders and in particular fears that Putin may well not stop at Ukraine. There was also a concern that the EU and 'the West' would allow Ukraine to be absorbed within the Russian fold, and if so, would Poland be next? Flashbacks to WW2 and its aftermath are felt below the emotional collective surface of Poles.

Secondly, the Polish state's (and some residents') attitude towards refugees is generally restrictive and hostile. In November 2021, the Polish border police forcibly stopped Syrian, Afghani, and Iraqi migrants from entering the country at the Belarusian border (Fox and Upright 2021). Through the winter of 2021, the situation did not improve (Human Rights Watch 2022). The state is keen to build a physical wall to keep migrants, asylum seekers and refugees out of Poland. It is worth noting that in August 2021, in a poll for Polsat News, almost 55% of Poles were opposed to accepting refugees and 47% wanted a border wall with Belarussia (Tilles 2021). However, 16 days after the Russian invasion of Ukraine started, Poland passed a 'Special Act'; on assistance to *Ukrainian* refugees, but notably, *not* for stateless persons and third-party nationals and their families fleeing Ukraine (European Commission 2022). This allowed Ukrainians to stay in Poland for 18 months (with the possibility to extend for another 18 months), the right to employment, access to health care, benefits and other assistance, access to education and tax incentives.

Thirdly, there were pre-existing social and economic relationships between Poles and Ukrainians upon which these particular responses are layered onto. Polish people have longstanding links with Ukrainians, they are friends or work colleagues. In the form of circular migration, up to 2 million Ukrainians worked in Poland before 2022 (Perzyna 2022). The people currently on the move are hence not viewed as 'refugees' within Poland but rather as 'guests', and Poles call themselves 'hosts'. This language signifies a familiarity rather than an 'othering' (see Gill *et al*. 2022).

Fourthly, the sustained Polish response has been grassroots driven. The Polish central government has pushed the responsibility for the response to regional and local authorities, and to the civil society. The central government did not want to lead the efforts. Neither has the international humanitarian sector led them in Poland. Foreign aid was very quick to arrive and was gratefully received, however it was overshadowed by the generosity of mutual aid and solidarity initiatives arising from the Poles themselves. The collective response has included the Ukrainian diaspora in Poland, collaborating with Polish civil society, the Roman Catholic churches, businesses, and countless informal and individual response efforts. That is, ordinary people and local organisations doing the right thing, showing care and compassion.

In closing, the four specificities of the Polish response to the Ukrainian crisis give rise to questions for the immediate future. For how much longer can the humanitarian response be driven by local authorities, local organisations, and civil society 'to do the right thing'? For how much longer can people – who have given time, money and energy – keep up the sustained support when, now, it is close to a year since the invasion of a sovereign nation began? Will the attitude of Poles, who believe it is their moral obligation to support Ukrainians, continue its recent downward trajectory? At what point will the Polish central government provide leadership in the refugee response efforts? The next

months, year and two will be important to the specificities of the Polish response to the evolving crises. How similar will the Polish response become over time to other (European) contexts, such as Turkey and Greece, remains to be seen.

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Content of the issue

This is issue of *Fennia* includes two research papers, two articles in the review and essays section, and six contributions to the reflections section of which one is based on a Lectio Praecursoria and the others are commentaries to *Fennia* articles published in our previous issue (199(2)).

The first original article is by Kim Pawliw and Étienne Berthold, whose research in Canada concerns Ukrainian identity politics in the context of urban development. The paper *Construction of the Ukrainian identity in a neighbourhood: the role of the host society – example of the Parc de l'Ukraine in Rosemont, Montreal* offers a discourse analysis on the role of the host society in immigrant identity construction processes. Focusing empirically on the Ukrainian community of Montreal, they reveal different perspectives to a process where an open urban space – a green area known as Parc de l'Ukraine since the early 1980s – went through a complete renewal in 2017, including both urban governance perspectives and those of the Ukrainian community. The critical analysis reveals that the views of municipal representatives and professionals, and the ethnic associations differed to a large extent, especially regarding the inclusivity of the planning and the following renovation process. Based on their findings Pawliw and Berthold (2022) argue that in these kinds of urban projects, the risk of instrumentalization of the immigrant communities is apparent, which may have significant impact on their experiences of belonging in the new home country in relation to their experienced ethnic identities. The topic thus connects with issue brought up by Hanna Ruszczyk in the above guest editorial, that is, how the Ukrainian people (and other refugees) who settle in host societies are included in societal decision-making and the related administrative and professional practices.

The second article in the research papers section comes from a research project in Finland, concentrating on equalities related to suburban ice skating environments, which children and young people may enjoy during their leisure time. Ice skating is one of the activities that even young children can practice in urban space rather easily, in Finland, as they gain basic skills at school (part of the national physical education program) and ice skates are a rather affordable sports equipment. *Assessing travel time-based accessibility to outdoor ice skating fields for children in Helsinki during the COVID-19 pandemic*, co-authored by Charlotte van der Lijn, Marisofia Nurmi, Elina Hasanen, Janne Pyykönen, Lotta Salmi, Anna-Katriina Salmikangas, Kirsi Vehkakoski, Ilkka Virmasalo, Tuuli Toivonen and Petteri Muukkonen, introduces empirical research results based on a quantitative travel time analysis. With focus on 7 to 19 year-olds in Helsinki, they measured the accessibility of outdoor ice-skating fields in the time of climate change and during the COVID-19 pandemic, including both natural and mechanically frozen fields. The analysis focuses on children and young people's (un)equal opportunities to use these leisure areas independently, by walking or by public transport. The results show that, as natural ice skating fields are becoming rare due to climate change, also inequalities isnaccessing this leisure activity especially by foot are increasing (van der Lijn *et al*. 2022).

In the reviews and essays section, the first article in this issue of *Fennia* focuses on the production of urban poverty, from a Lefebvrian perspective. Continuing the previous articles' theme of inequalities in urban space, Sònia Vives-Miró's paper *The urbanization of poverty: rethinking the production of unjust geographies* is a thorough introduction of a critical framework for approaching the uneven distribution of resources in the city. With specific focus on the spatial roots of urban inequalities, Vives-Miró (2022) considers the production of spaces of poverty not as consequence, but a cause, of social injustices. The concepts 'spatial justice' and 'unjust geographies' are first discussed drawing from pertinent critical literature, which is followed by deep engagement with the idea of 'urbanization of poverty' as a form through which unjust and unequal urban spaces are produced.

The final long paper takes us from the urban context to a regional studies perspective. Ejike Okonkwo's review article *An overview of the Nordic Battery Belt: an emerging network for cooperation within the Nordic battery cluster* traces transport connectivity in an emerging battery cluster, taking notice both on the challenges faced by this co-operation and the solutions identified in regional networking. With empirical focus on Nordland in Norway, Ostrobothnia in Finland and and Västerbotten in Sweden, Okonkwo (2022) has carried out a documentary analysis based on openly available information about the Nordic Battery Belt, a regional institution established to encourage the development of the supply value chain in the battery cluster. The paper offers fruitful starting points for exploring further this industry so significant to the green transition yet involving also serious environmental concerns related to mining, but also sustainable transportation.

The reflections section begins with Laura Lo Presti's commentary to the review article by Gertrude Saxinger, Alexis Sancho Reinoso, Sigrid Irene Wentzel (2021), titled *Cartographic storytelling: reflecting on maps through an ethnographic application in Siberia*. Her reflection, stemming from the open review process, begins with the question of *Leaving or rescuing the (story) map?* The essay that follows draws on multiple cartographic literatures and highlights growing theoretical perspectives on the humanistic potential of maps and connections between cartographic storytelling and ethnographic mapping (Lo Presti 2022).

The second contribution is a *lectio praecursoria*, an introduction of a PhD thesis by Hossam Raafat Hewidy who defended his thesis at the School of Arts, Design and Architecture in Aalto University, Finland, on August 21, 2022. *The hidden city of immigrants in Helsinki's urban leftovers: the homogenization of the city and the lost diversity* is a study of ethnic retail, an emerging phenomenon in Helsinki that has rapidly brought many vacant premises into life. Hewidy's (2022) study reveals how municipal planning has ignored the potential of immigrant amenities in creating a diverse cityscape, and its role in the livelihood of an immigrant community contributing to the recovery of urban street life.

The final four pieces in the reflections section are commentaries to the Fennia Lecture 2021 by Hilde Refstie (2021), titled *Reconfiguring research relevance – steps towards salvaging the radical potential of the co-productive turn in searching for sustainable solutions.* The first, by Jouni Häkli (2022) pays attention to the key problems in co-creative research in our fast-paced academia coupled with the notoriously fuzzy concept of sustainability. The second, by Eveliina Lyytinen (2022) addresses "what doing our part means in a progressive world of fast policymaking" from the perspective of forced-migration studies, contemplating solutions for designing and implementing action oriented research for and with refugees. The third, by Diana Vela-Almeida (2022) aims to expand Refstie's critique on the role of an ethics of care in dismantling the neoliberal university, highlighting the need to build transformative practices and inclusive spaces of care. The fourth, by Colin Lorne (2022) addresses Refstie's paper on co-production and the role of academia in the search for sustainability in times of fast policymaking and keeps the conversation going, reflecting on the open-review processes at *Fennia* by asking, what if we start from a more careful – if no less critical – position of listening and learning, rather than necessarily rushing to critique?

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