

After year of war Kraków continues to help

2023-04-20

On the morning of 24 February last year, news of the outbreak of war in Ukraine broke around the world. Kraków proved far from indifferent in the face of this tragic news and launched relief efforts for Ukraine, which was fighting the aggressor, and for the refugees arriving here in large numbers.

As early as the second day of the war, the city started collecting donations from residents, ensuring that the aid was both effective and in line with constantly changing circumstances and procedures.

The local government's efforts during the refugee crisis, particularly in the first days of the war, were focused on providing humanitarian aid to those arriving in Kraków and on providing administrative services as quickly as possible.

Residents, businesses, NGOs and local partner authorities all offered their help. On many occasions this cooperation was coordinated by city.

Number of refugees

There was a considerable number of people in need arriving from across the eastern border, especially in the first months of the war. It is estimated that at the peak there may have been nearly 270,000 refugees in Kraków (around 20% of the city's population). Many have moved on or have already returned to Ukraine, but there may still be around 120,000 newcomers currently residing in the city.

The city assisted in obtaining legalisation of their stay by assigning a PESEL number at a specially opened point in the TAURON Arena. Nearly 48,000 people received a PESEL number in Kraków.

Assistance to refugees included such areas as material support, including the provision of food, help in legalising the stay in Poland, a wide range of intervention activities and support for refugees' adaptation to new conditions, accommodation, social assistance, employment or education.

The scale of the assistance provided by the city can be demonstrated by numbers. By the end of 2022, the Municipality of Kraków had carried out tasks for refugees to the amount of PLN 197,418,699. Some of these tasks were reimbursed with funds from the central budget.

Accommodation

The basic issue was to organise temporary accommodation, as well as the logistics of relocation and transport to collective accommodation centres, and ongoing cooperation with the Regional Crisis Management Centre and neighbouring crisis management centres.

To this end, the city, together with its partners, organised several large-scale facilities. A total of 1,268 beds were in operation at the climax. These were located in the building of the former infectious diseases and gastroenterology clinic on Śniadeckich Street, in the former *Red*

Surgery building on Kopernika Street, in the former Plaza Gallery, and in the building on the Złotej Jesieni housing estate. To date, 350 places are still in operation in the former shopping centre on Kapelanka Street. By the end of December 2022, a total of 6 263 people had benefited from this form of assistance.

People also offered accommodation of their own accord. Data from the Kraków Benefit Centre shows that more than 8,500 people have provided such assistance since the beginning of the war (including 8,177 private individuals and 405 other entities, such as parishes or foundations). Thanks to their assistance, nearly 33,000 refugees received accommodation. The cost of the benefits paid out totalled over PLN 89 million.

The municipal Department of Social Policy and Health cooperated with 120 accommodation facilities, which provided shelter and food for approximately 2.5 thousand people per month. Last December, 35 such accommodation facilities were still in operation.

Provisions

Another challenge was to provide basic food needs for the huge number of refugees arriving in different parts of the city. A collection point was set up next to the city football stadium on Reymonta Street, where donations from Kraków citizens was underway, where municipal officers and volunteers handed out food packages and hygiene products. In total, nearly 1,700 of these were issued to more than 5,000 people.

The food collection also continued in 2 Kraków Makro Cash and Carry halls, where over 300 kg of food was collected. By the end of August, at the former Plaza Shopping Centre, the World Central Kitchen organisation had given out as many as 9,000 meals in accordance with the agreement signed by the Municipal Social Welfare Centre. Refugees also received packages at the main railway station and meals in collective accommodation.

The help was made possible by volunteers, of whom there were more than 4,500. The Department of Social Policy and Health ran this base and coordinated the day-to-day work of the volunteers. They were present, among others, at the Central Railway Station, where the city ran a 24-hour reception point for those arriving in Kraków, and also helped to serve a dozen points around the city.

Cooperation with foundations and sponsors

Such effective humanitarian aid would not have been possible without the cooperation with sponsoring foundations and partner cities.

All our efforts were recognised by major international organisations, including the CORE Foundation, whose chairman is Hollywood actor Sean Penn. TAURON Arena also hosted a UNHCR aid station of the UN agency and provided monetary assistance to people who had fled Ukraine. **UNICEF** also offered assistance to the youngest refugees.

Large fuel companies such as Shell and BP joined in by offering laptops for schoolchildren or support with fuel vouchers for NGOs working to help refugees. IKEA provided furniture for legal

advice centres and food and clothing collection points. In addition to in-kind donations from donors, the city received support from companies in the form of employee volunteering.

Thanks to the signing of an agreement with the city, the **CORE Response Foundation** has already supported Kraków in helping refugees in various areas of life since last March. As part of this cooperation, the foundation covered, among other things, the costs of a stay for elderly and disabled people in a private senior citizens' home, the funding of laundry services for the city's residence centres, and five grants for volunteer coordination. CORE also funded the renovation of housing for refugee families.

Another organisation that came to Kraków with generous aid was the UNICEF. Support was provided in the areas of social policy and health care, education and social welfare. Kraków signed an agreement with UNICEF amounting to over PLN 22.5 million. As part of this partnership, the city has already implemented a number of activities to support children and families from Ukraine. One of the most important of these has been the creation of an Education and Therapeutic Centre, where school and rehabilitation classes for children with disabilities are organised. UNICEF also financed nurseries in private institutions, additional places for schoolchildren in kindergartens, the *Closet of Good*, distributing clothing and footwear for refugee families, provided hot meals for refugee children in nurseries, kindergartens and schools, and organised Polish and Ukrainian language courses.

An important project is the *Sunny Spaces of Support*, opened in September, where both Ukrainian children and their Polish peers can receive help from psychologists, school counsellors and speech therapists. As part of this cooperation, Kraków schools have also received additional funds for the purchase of computers, books and teaching aids in Ukrainian. More intercultural assistants have also been employed, including for children with disabilities. Cooperation with UNICEF will continue this year.

Material support for refugees was also granted by the Korean university community, the Taiwanese TzuChi Foundation, the Evangelical Lutheran Church and the World Lutheran Federation in Poland, which donated a sum of almost PLN 1.5 million for humanitarian aid.

The Japanese Social Welfare Cooperation Fukudenkai Foundation also donated vouchers for winter clothing for citizens from Ukraine. Kraków is planning to set up a foster care facility for unaccompanied Ukrainian children in our country, and this is also possible thanks to generous foreign and Polish donors. The property for this purpose has already been purchased and the start of operations is planned for the second quarter of 2023.

Partner cities

In response to the Mayor of Kraków's appeal for help to the war-torn Ukraine, over 20 cities, including our partner cities, donated goods. Assistance was provided by Nuremberg, Leipzig, Orléans, Frankfurt am Main, Trondheim, Innsbruck, Bordeaux and Edinburgh, among others, who sent medicines, medical and fire-fighting equipment and food to Ukrainian cities or to refugees staying in Kraków.

The partner cities, in cooperation with Kraków, took in refugees who found safe haven in, for

example, Orléans (France), Solothurn (Switzerland), Innsbruck (Austria) or Lille (France).

Education

One of the challenges for the city was also the need to prepare schools for the new circumstances and to work with Ukrainian students in a short period of time.

In just a few months, almost 7,000 pupils were enrolled in Kraków's schools and kindergartens, of which more than 4,000 in primary schools and almost 2,000 in kindergartens. This was an organisational challenge, as normally the admission of so many pupils would have necessitated the construction of several schools and kindergartens.

By the end of the 2021/2022 school year, 98 preparatory classes had been launched in 61 schools, with 1,827 pupils (by comparison, before the outbreak of war, there were only four such classes).

The Academy of Intercultural Assistants programme, which had already been launched before the outbreak of the refugee crisis, proved extremely helpful. The assistants trained within the academy became guides for incoming teachers from Ukraine willing to work in such a capacity. After 24 February, 145 people with Ukrainian citizenship were employed, including 16 teachers, 103 intercultural assistants and 26 support staff. To help them start in their new jobs, the city launched an intensive Polish language course run by qualified teachers.

After the outbreak of war in Ukraine, Kraków teachers and employees of psychological-educational counselling centres also faced an important task - the need to support pupils and children with experience of war trauma. The psychological-educational counselling centres quickly set up help lines with refugee children and families in mind, and the city organised special training courses and workshops for teachers, school counselors, psychologists and school educators.

Currently, nearly 8,000 refugee students from Ukraine attend Kraków's kindergartens and schools. There are still as many as 50 preparatory classes in Kraków, attended by 720 students. The remaining Ukrainian refugee pupils attend classes with other pupils. Intercultural assistants are still working in Kraków's schools.

Employment

We estimate that more than 30,000 people have found work in Kraków in the past year. Throughout this period, the Grodzki Urząd Pracy w Krakowie (Grodzki Labour Office in Kraków) maintained a database of over 5,000 offers for refugees. The predominant sectors in which refugees have been employed are manufacturing, transport, construction, catering, warehousing and a wide range of services.

Assistance directly to Ukraine

Since the beginning of the Russian invasion, the Kraków authorities have been actively involved

in helping to protect historical monuments, organising and coordinating transports with materials to secure the cultural heritage of Lviv, Kiev, Kharkiv and Odessa, applying to international organisations, organising collections, and cooperating with the OWHC.

Kraków donated a total of 89 trucks, 141 lorries, 1 ambulance and 6 city buses with donations. The buses serve public transport in Lviv. In total, Kraków donated more than 1,000 tonnes of goods.

Information

To ensure that refugees could learn about all these aid activities taking place in the city, information was important. We published information in Ukrainian, in particular on the open.krakow.pl and associated websites, a Welcome to Kraków guide was printed, and the appropriate signs of aid sites were posted.

During the period of the largest influx of refugees, the city also prepared leaflets providing information about the city's life in terms of health, education or business, the most important official procedures were translated and Ukrainian-Polish dictionaries were published and distributed.

Open Kraków

All these activities would certainly have been more difficult had it not been for the fact that Kraków has always been an open city. It had already carried out intensive activities for foreigners as an intercultural city. The Open Kraków Programme had already cooperated with Ukrainian NGOs. Thanks to this experience, a few days after the outbreak of war, more than 60 organisations joined the Open Kraków Coalition, which was a platform for exchanging information about the needs and activities of individual organisations and the city. To this day, the organisations in the coalition work together and carry out joint projects, use each other's premises, exchange information about needs and transfer surplus humanitarian aid to each other, allowing it to reach those in need across the city and various refugee communities.

The NGOs, in part with the support of the city, run dozens of humanitarian, psychological, care, day care, legal and information support and integration points.

The war continues, we continue to help and support people and institutions in need of assistance. We are monitoring the situation in order to adapt our aid activities accordingly to current events. With the organisational experience of the first months of the war, we are already prepared to provide such support effectively.