

# POLICY BRIEF

## Japanese-Polish cooperation in the field of humanitarian aid for Ukraine: formal and informal networks

After the Russian military assault on Ukraine on 24 February 2022, Poland became an entry point into the EU for millions of refugees fleeing the conflict zone, both Ukrainian and other non-EU citizens. According to Polish Border Guard data, by 4 September 2023, 15,271,000 people from Ukraine had crossed the Polish-Ukrainian border. While 13,553,000 of them returned, the majority of the 1.7 million refugees remaining in the Schengen zone in 2023 were likely to have at least passed through Poland.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, 1.7 million refugees from Ukraine applied for a Polish PESEL UKR identification number, which is necessary to receive healthcare and welfare benefits in Poland.<sup>2</sup> According to Eurostat, by the end of September 2023, Poland had accepted 958,655 refugees from Ukraine, second only to Germany and one of the highest per capita numbers in the EU (along with the Baltic states, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic and Slovakia).<sup>3</sup> In the first wave, an overwhelming majority of the refugees were women and children.<sup>4</sup>

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1 Polish Border Guard Data 2023.

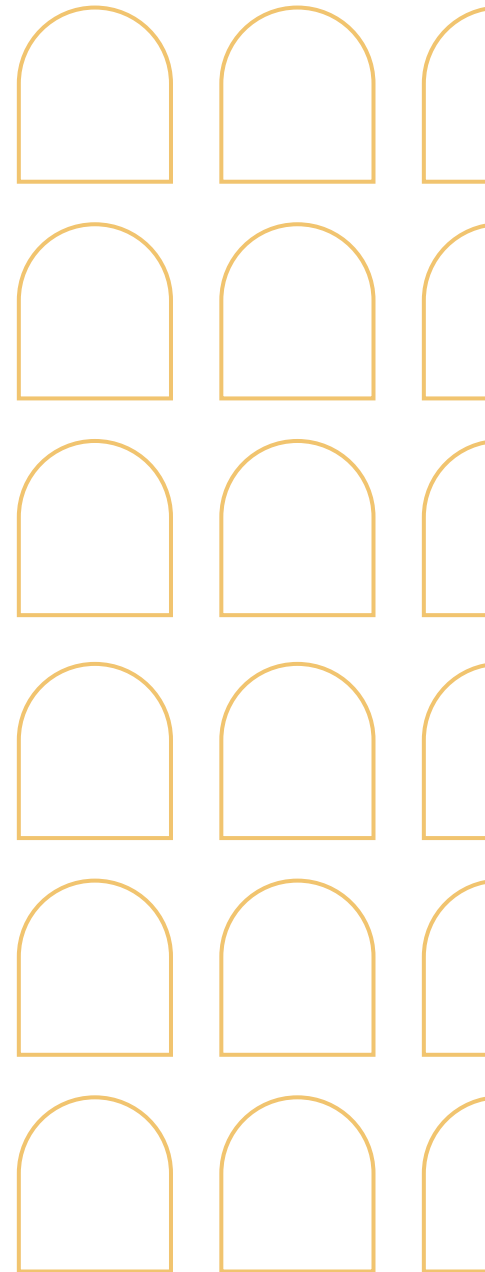
2 Poland Data Portal 2023.

3 Eurostat 2023.

4 Embassy of the Republic of Poland in Tokyo 2022, News Release: half a year after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, 26 Aug. concerning women and children.

### Authors

Barbasiewicz Olga, SWPSU; Merklejn Iwona, AGU.



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Unequivocally supporting Ukraine in the current combat, Poland has also become a hub for international humanitarian aid flowing towards the victims of war in the neighbouring country. One important partnership in this humanitarian crisis has been with Japan, which engages in pro-Ukrainian efforts to a degree unseen of late in the island nation known for meticulous screening and low acceptance of refugee applications. Upholding its general stance towards refugees (*nanmin*), the Japanese government has created a special category of 'evacuees' (*hinanmin*) for Ukrainian citizens, whose journey to Tokyo from Warsaw is streamlined by means of high-profile humanitarian interventions. The Russian aggression on Ukrainian territory was discussed during the visit to Poland by Japan's Foreign Minister Hayashi Yoshimasa in April 2022, at both the government and presidential level. Representatives of both countries agreed that strong sanctions should be implemented against Russia.<sup>5</sup> Hayashi visited the displaced people acceptance site and brought back on his government plane 20 refugees who expressed a desire to stay in Japan (Diplomatic Bluebook 2023).<sup>6</sup> On arrival in Tokyo, the 'evacuees' (2,557 people by 17 Nov. 2023)<sup>7</sup> have been extensively covered and interviewed by the Japanese media, mostly in conventional frames designed for foreign tourists. Consequently, they are given little choice but to repeatedly express gratitude and delight about Japanese hospitality, culture and the landscape.<sup>8</sup>

In the first year of the war, eight Japanese humanitarian organisations connected by a national coordinating body called Japan Platform delivered funds and sent personnel to Ukraine and neighbouring countries that had accepted large numbers of refugees.<sup>9</sup> Japanese public opinion has shown unusually high and long-lasting levels of engagement with the distant war, which is expressed through generous donations, public pro-Ukrainian demonstrations and volunteer dispatches to Poland, going beyond the usually professionalised international activities of Japanese NGOs.<sup>10</sup> All this happens despite the fact that even for very experienced humanitarian workers from Japan, Eastern Europe in 2022 was, by and large, unexplored terrain. In addition, the way in which the current crisis unfolded bore little resemblance to what they were used to in the global South.

Nakatsubo Hiroaki, a Japanese humanitarian aid worker currently with AAR Japan and a former journalist with long experience of covering refugee crises, after a short visit to Poland in March 2022 shared his surprise at the fact that he had not seen any refugee camps, even when travelling from Warsaw all the way to the Ukrainian border. This crisis was marked by high mobility of refugees, who were free to travel not only within Poland but within the Schengen zone, and avoidance of excess concentration along the border. Instead, an unprecedented number of refugees were located in small-scale temporary shelters and private homes due to grassroot initiatives by people and organi-

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5 Still, in 2022 Japanese imports from Russia were high (up 6.2% year-on-year) despite the sanctions and a decrease in Japanese exports to Russia due to the so-called "effects of soaring global resources and the depreciation of the yen." See *Diplomatic Bluebook 2023*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Japan, 2023, p. 153.

6 *Diplomatic Bluebook 2023*, op. cit., p. 137. Nobira Yuichi, "20 Ukrainian evacuees arrive in Japan, and join 393 others," *Asahi Shimbun*, 5 April 2022, online English edition.

7 Shutsunyūkoku Zairyū Kanrichō (Immigration Services Agency), «Ukuraina hinanmin no ukeire, shien jōkyō ni tsuite», [On the current situation concerning acceptance and support of evacuees from Ukraine], 17 Nov. 2023, <https://www.moj.go.jp/isa/content/001388202.pdf>, accessed 21 Nov. 2023.

8 Iida Takao, Yoo Jimmine, Zhu Ziqi and Handa Sōya 2022, "Ukuraina 'hinanmin' wa dō hōjirareta ka? Fureemu bunseki ni yoru kōsatsu," [How were 'evacuees' from Ukraine reported? A study based on framing analysis], paper presented at the annual conference of Japan Association for Media, Journalism and Communication Studies, 19 Nov. 2022.

9 Japan Platform 2022, cited in Kuwana Megumi 2022, Heiwa kōchiku ni NGO, shimin shakai ga hatasu yakuwari [The role played by NGOs and civil society in peace building]; *Seikatsu Kyōdō Kumiai Kenkyū*, Tokushū: shimin ga tsumugidasu heiwa [Consumer Coop Studies. Special issue: Citizens starting to spin threads of peace] vol. 561, pp. 13-21.

10 Hikotani Takako, "How the Russia-Ukraine War Is Changing Japan: Tokyo Moves Toward a More Assertive Security Strategy," *Foreign Affairs*, 28 April 2022, digital edition. See also Kuwana, op. cit.

sations best described as civil society.<sup>11</sup> Later the same year one of the authors, giving a talk in Tokyo describing the refugee crisis in Poland encountered disbelief among the Japanese audience, who commented “Surely it is impossible to accommodate that many people on a homestay basis?” (Foramu Porando, 3 Dec. 2022).<sup>12</sup>

In fact, the practice of hosting refugees in private homes became widespread in Poland in the first months of the war, and it can be partly explained by state policies. Volunteering to help refugees was encouraged in the so-called ‘inclusive’ model of refugee crisis management, unlike the established practice in UNHCR operations. The framework of this system was set up on an emergency basis within three weeks of the Russian aggression in a process of cooperation between Polish government institutions and companies, NGOs and grassroots movements. According to Firlit-Fesnak (2023), the inclusive model was based on the following principles: 1) openness to all Ukrainian citizens who crossed the border, 2) cooperation between Polish citizens and the state, 3) including refugees in Polish social life, 4) no forced relocations. Firlit-Fesnak also notes that Poland did not actively seek EU- or internationally-coordinated assistance to transport migrants to their destinations.<sup>13</sup> The whole process was undoubtedly facilitated by the cultural proximity between Poland and Ukraine, and the presence of a considerable and relatively well assimilated Ukrainian diaspora in Poland before 2022 (the previous large influx of Ukrainians to Poland, often not registered as war refugees, took

place in 2014 after Putin’s annexation of Crimea). It was also fuelled by a strong anti-Russian sentiment connected with many years of Russian (including Soviet) aggression on Polish territory and nationals. Therefore, as Jasiocki (2023) comments, aid for refugees from Ukraine can be described as a “new social movement” in Poland because of its strong motivation, the need for it and its ability to self-organise. Prompted by Russian aggression, it evokes historical resentment of modern Russia as the heir to both the Soviet Union and Czarist Russia.<sup>14</sup> The perception of Russia as a security risk, especially in the context of territorial issues, is also a factor in the relatively intense and long-lasting engagement of the Japanese government, media and public opinion with the war in Ukraine.<sup>15</sup>

Other counterintuitive experiences of Japanese humanitarian workers arriving in Eastern Europe in 2022 included higher levels of digitalisation than in Japan (especially in banking and finance), and the leverage of religious organisations (mostly Catholic charities) operating in both Poland and Ukraine. The scarcity of native Japanese expertise in the region meant that in order to effectively distribute aid locally, unlikely alliances, both formal and informal, were formed on an *ad hoc* basis or in some cases restored from the not-so-distant past. Those made by AAR Japan and other Tokyo-based organisations are discussed in detail elsewhere by the authors.<sup>16</sup>

We also need to mention that over the decades, and especially in the 21st century, Japanese-Polish relations have been built on the basis of high

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11 Nakatsubo Hiroaki, *Ukraina shien kinkyū hōkokukai* [Emergency support for Ukraine: report meeting], AAR Japan, 26 March 2022. See also Taguchi Masahiro and Kaneko Hiroshi, “Pōrando - Ukraina kankei to Pōrandō no Ukraina nanmin ukeire no genjō” [Polish-Ukrainian relations and the current situation in Poland accepting refugees from Ukraine], *Roshia Yurashia no Shakai*, 9-10.2022 (1064), p. 55-85. Kuwana, op. cit.

12 Merklejn Iwona, “Pōrando to Nihon o musunda jindō shien no rekishi to genzai” [Humanitarian aid connecting Poland and Japan: history and present], Foramu Pōrando (Forum Poland), Tokyo 3 Dec. 2022, <https://forumpoland.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/FP2022年会議プログラム-1.pdf>, accessed 21 Nov. 2023.

13 Firlit-Fesnak Grażyna, “Budowanie systemu pomocy dla uchodźców wojennych z Ukrainy w Polsce z perspektywy doświadczeń uczestników tego procesu.” [Building a system of assistance for war refugees from Ukraine in Poland from the perspective of the experiences of participants in the process] *Studia Politologiczne*, 68/2023, p. 119-137.

14 Jasiocki Krzysztof, “Pomoc humanitarna dla uchodźców z Ukrainy jako katalizator nowej aktywności społecznej w Polsce.” [Humanitarian aid for Ukrainian refugees as a catalyst for new social activism in Poland.] *Studia Politologiczne*, 68/2023, p. 138-159.

15 Ninivaggi Gabriele, “Ukraine fatigue unlikely to reach Japan anytime soon,” *Japan Times*, 11 Oct. 2023, digital edition.

16 Barbasiewicz Olga and Merklejn Iwona, “Japanese-Polish aid for refugees from Ukraine: civil society and international cooperation,” 2024, forthcoming.

bilateral trust and the perception of Poland as a reliable partner in the eyes of the Japanese government. In the 20th century, Japan and Poland officially and unofficially cooperated in rescue operations for Polish refugees – both just after the revival of the Polish state in 1918, evacuating Polish children from Siberia (1919-1923)<sup>17</sup> and during World War 2 providing aid to Polish Jews.<sup>18</sup>

Japanese citizens residing in Poland – both as individuals and within enterprises – participated actively in a social movement helping those who arrived from Ukraine at major railway stations, providing those in need with food and other forms of support.<sup>19</sup> Such activity which was organised in advance, and also that driven by heartfelt impulses which then evolved into systematic aid, increased Japan's visibility not only at the political level but also in the everyday life of displaced Ukrainian citizens arriving in Poland.

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17 Theiss Wiesław, *Dzieci syberyjskie 1919-2019. Z Syberii przez Japonię i Stany Zjednoczone do Polski* [The Siberian Children 1919-2019. From Siberia to Japan and the United States to Poland]. 2nd updated edition, Cracow: Manggha. 2020.

18 Barbasiewicz Olga, "Tadeusz Romer – the missing link in the humanity chain: the role of the Polish ambassador in providing aid to Polish Jews in the Far East, 1940-1942 in the context of today's politics of remembrance." In A. Domanski & S. Latek (eds.), *Tadeusz Romer, 1894-1978: from the crash of empires and Poland's rebirth to the dawn of Solidarność* (pp. 75-91). Montreal: Polish Institute of Arts and Sciences in Canada, 2021.

19 See, for instance, Free Onigiri Project. Available on Facebook at <https://www.facebook.com/freeonigiriproject>, accessed 29 Nov. 2023.

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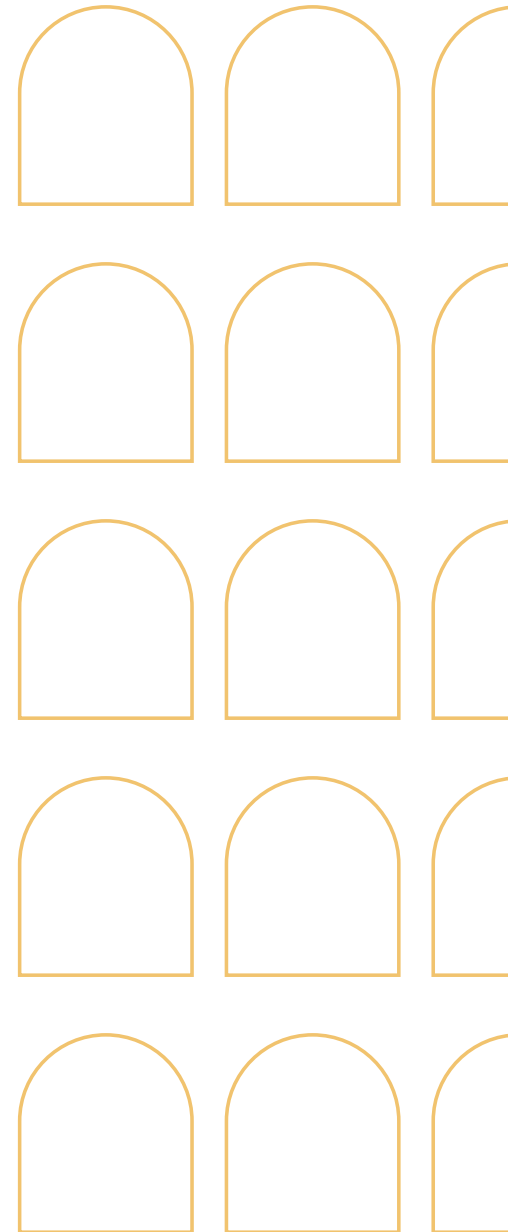
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