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# Community Resilience Dimensions of Agency and Human Values in the Response of Polish Border Communities to the Refugee Crisis Caused by the Russian Invasion of Ukraine in 2022

**Summary:** This research aims to explore the role of community resilience in response to the refugee crisis caused by the Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022 by specifically studying two core dimensions of community resilience, namely agency and human values, to see if they helped to build and enhance community resilience to crisis and uncertainty. In this respect, two cases of responses to the refugee crisis made by two Polish border communities in two corners of Poland, one in the northeast, in Suwałki, in the borderland area often referred to as Suwałki Gap, and the second one in the southeast, in Biecz, known as ‘Little Kraków,’ have been analysed by conducting qualitative interviews with research participants in three interview groups of volunteers, community members, and municipality who privately or professionally provided help for Ukrainian refugees arriving to Poland. Qualitative results of the analysis reveal that deep awareness of members of both Polish border communities about who the aggressor is and who the defender is in the conflict between Russia and Ukraine was the main motivation to activate distinct values of, among others, compassion or mutuality that influenced the response to the arrival of Ukrainian citizens fleeing their invaded homeland and seeking safety and security in Poland – which was mainly a demonstration of sympathy and solidarity with Ukrainian refugees. The findings also reveal that one of the core community resilience dimensions – agency – was exercised collectively and individually, both bottom-up and top-down. Although the decisions were mostly spontaneously dictated by the needs of the heart, the decisions to act were made purposefully. In light of the current refugee crisis, of which the Italian island of Lampedusa is the



centre, and with which EU countries have been attempting to cope, it is crucial to continue further research about the cases of responses to such crises, specifically the reactions of the most affected responders. The results of the empirical research on the analysed cases of responses to the refugee crisis and uncertainty caused by the Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022 made by Polish border communities may contribute to the existing research and discourse on the role and impact of citizens' and communities' resilience potential in disaster response and preparedness. **Keywords:** response to crises and uncertainty, refugee and humanitarian crisis, community resilience, human values, agency

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## Introduction

Global crises, sudden disruptions, and changes may evoke and affect the responses made both by the states and the citizens,<sup>1</sup> as well as unforeseen, bottom-up collective actions.<sup>2</sup> Since the aftermath of World War II, Europe has faced an unprecedented mass movement of globally displaced people, representing a world record of inflow of refugees and economic migrants<sup>3</sup> fleeing their homelands due to poverty – in particular in sub-Saharan Africa, and deprivation, persecution and armed conflicts – in particular in the Middle East. Poorly exercised authority, violence, domestic conflicts, and wars in North Africa, the Middle East and other parts of the Arab area, as well as the complex status of the large parts of Africa, have forced people to pursue a better life outside their homelands.<sup>4</sup> The year 2015, often labelled as 'the year of the migration crisis' or the 'EU refugee crisis,' when during 'the long summer of migration' Europe experienced over one million arrivals of migrants and refugees travelling to Europe using the Mediterranean entry sea route<sup>5</sup> arriving in Greece as the main entry point to Europe, was the time of one the biggest and most challenging refugee crises on the EU borders that evoked the responses on the individual, local, and state level.<sup>6</sup> As a result of a political debate, the European Parliament, the European Council, and the European Commission recognised and acknowledged the humanitarian side of the migration and refugee crisis and determined the Mediterranean entry route to Europe<sup>7</sup> – together with the emergency measures, the principle of solidarity,

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1 Fotaki M. 2022, 295–323.

2 Boersma K. et al. 2018, 728–742.

3 Szabó Z.P. et al. 2020, 94–114.

4 Attinà F. 2016, 15–31.

5 Panebianco S., Fontana I. 2018, 1–17.

6 Fotaki M. 2022, 295–323.

7 Panebianco S., Fontana I. 2018, 1–17.

common obligation, duty, shared responsibility<sup>8</sup> – a top priority on the EU agenda. Since the end of the Cold War, it has become the norm that the international community is involved in humanitarian response and collective action, and organisations such as the United Nations and state governments are expected to be responsible for supporting the protection of citizens from genocide and other extremely brutal and cruel mass acts of violence and inhumanity.<sup>9</sup> The Mediterranean Route to the EU has become the benchmark for new ways in which various actors practise humanitarian interventions and responses.<sup>10</sup> When in the spring of 2015, hundreds of refugees started to arrive at the Greek islands of Lesbos, Chios, Kos, and Samos, the initiatives taken by the local authorities and communities – which, in an act of solidarity, got involved in the response to this emerging humanitarian crisis and the ad-hoc solution – included the creation of reception facilities and the provision of food and non-food items, and first aid at the landing points, as well as transport and accommodation.<sup>11</sup> Other destination EU countries were also affected by this crisis.<sup>12</sup> For instance, in Hungary, through which one of the entry routes to Western Europe passes, the Keleti train station in the state's capital, Budapest, was transformed into a shelter for the thousands of refugees and migrants as well as into a hub of humanitarian aid and support provided by, among others, volunteers and activists showing solidarity with those in need.<sup>13</sup> Also, Italy – due to its geographical location and close vicinity to North African countries – became the main landing point and transit country for migrants travelling through the Mediterranean channel wanting to arrive at their desired destinations in Europe, in particular in Northern Europe.<sup>14</sup> In Holland, where over 1.2 million people formally sought asylum, the refugee crisis was also an opportunity for various actors and communities to become actively involved in responding to a sudden inflow of refugees in Amsterdam.<sup>15</sup> Similarly to Budapest's Keleti train station, Amsterdam Central Station has become the hub of numerous emerging, often spontaneous, citizen initiatives and small gestures, such as collecting clothes and groceries and distributing those goods among the refugees.<sup>16</sup>

E. Goroya *et al.* mention volunteers who joined forces to provide migrants and refugees with food, clothing, and medical help.<sup>17</sup> In turn, K. Boersma *et al.* talk about

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8 Panebianco S. 2016, 1–31.

9 Bellamy A. 2015, 161–185.

10 Panebianco S., Fontana I. 2018, 1–17.

11 Bousiou A. 2024, 1–14.

12 Attinà F. 2016, 15–31.

13 Kallius A. et al. 2016, 25–37.

14 Panebianco S. 2016, 1–31.

15 Rast M.C. et al. 2019, 1–19.

16 Rast M.C., Ghorashi H. 2018, 188–198.

17 Goroya E. et al. 2105.

the emergence of unexpected, spontaneous volunteering groups and grassroots movements involved in collective bottom-up activities and initiatives in reaction to the crisis that were motivated by a sense of solidarity in contrast to the top-down command approach adopted by formal institutions in an attempt to cope with the challenge of a large number of refugees arriving to Holland in a short period.<sup>18</sup> Authors note that such divergent bottom-up civil society responses to such emergencies can be a major alternative option to complete and enhance the top-down actions of formal institutions. Eva Youkhana and Ove Sutter<sup>19</sup> remark that due to a sudden wave of humanitarian volunteering and grassroots community-based civil society initiatives, many responsibilities in the area of care and first aid that normally should be provided by the formal institutions were taken over by those non-state actors. Feyzi Baban and Kim Rygiel<sup>20</sup> refer to the case in Germany, where citizens were ready to take risks and show solidarity with people they did not know and draw attention to the significant role of grassroots citizen initiatives, solidarity activism, and welcome movements that demonstrate and develop our universal humanity.<sup>21</sup>

In times when society has been coping with a variety of calamities and the Italian island of Lampedusa has again become a centre of refugee crisis and a burning issue debated not only by the EU but other high-profile global institutions, the phenomenon of European citizens' involvement in response to the crisis caused by the sudden arrival and dramatic inflow of tens of thousands of migrants and refugees to many European cities and towns, the demonstration of solidarity with the newcomers manifested in civil-based and communities' initiatives, and spontaneous bottom-up activities, such as helping the refugees with transportation, accommodation, provision of food, clothes and shelter,<sup>22</sup> necessitates a comprehensive study on the resilience potential of non-state actors – namely civilians, especially communities – in response to crises. In agreement with the argument presented by M.C. Rast and H. Ghorashi,<sup>23</sup> this type of resilience not only triggers adaptability and helps new initiatives to emerge but may also address the need to build knowledge about the response to a crisis and create a new model of crisis management that could potentially be implemented across countries.<sup>24</sup> M.C. Rast *et al.* propose that the resilience potential and the level of creativity shown by civilians – namely local communities, volunteers, and other involved non-state actors – in response to a refugee crisis and

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18 Boersma K. et al. 2018, 728–742.

19 Youkhana E., Sutter O. 2017, 1–6.

20 Baban F., Rygiel K. 2017, 98–116.

21 Baban F., Rygiel K. 2017; Youkhana E., Sutter O. 2017, 1–6.

22 van der Veer L. 2020, 368–387; Feischmidt M., Zakarias I. 2019, 59–99.

23 Rast M.C., Ghorashi H. 2018, 188–198.

24 Attinà F. 2016, 15–31.

refugee reception should be recognised, connected, fostered, and advanced by the governments.<sup>25</sup> Likewise, L. van der Veer encourages the idea that complex correlations of actors engaged in helping refugees should be studied.<sup>26</sup>

## The Novelty

The novelty of this study is that, firstly, it analyses the most recent cases of responses in Polish border communities in two different corners of Poland to a new type of refugee crisis evoked by the Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, to establish if there has been a similar reaction and if this pattern of response can be further developed and used in the future preparedness of the civilian population to a crisis. Notably, due to its proximity to the Russian and Belarusian borders, one of the studied Polish border communities in Suwałki Gap has been labelled by some national and international media as ‘the most dangerous place on earth.’<sup>27</sup> Secondly, findings of the empirical research on the role of community resilience and its specific dimensions of agency and human values, which is a unique and original combination of elements in response to crisis and an interesting research topic *per se*, may contribute to the existing research and discourse on civilian resilience potential in disaster preparedness.

## Theoretical background

### Community resilience

Recently, resilience has been a very popular concept present in various scientific discourses,<sup>28</sup> which may signal the need for further study on the function of resilience. In the light of various interdependencies, complex and uncertain times, and new forms of unpredictable threats faced by modern societies, resilience may be the answer.<sup>29</sup> Resilience is defined, among others, as the ability of people to organise themselves in different environments and groups, such as organisations, nations, or communities to sustain and enhance their well-being when coping with challenges.<sup>30</sup> According to Peter A. Hall and Michelè Lamont, resilience also encompasses the ability of people to cope with various types of contingencies – a phenomenon that is mostly present in research on ecology, developmental psychology, and the response to disasters.<sup>31</sup> Another more progressive interpretation of resilience is that it is not only a synonym

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25 Rast M.C. et al. 2019, 1–19.

26 van der Veer L. 2020, 368–387.

27 Karnitschnig M. 2022.

28 Ögtem-Young Ö. 2018, 1–13.

29 Boin A. et al. 2010, 1–12.

30 Rast M.C. et al. 2019, 1–19.

31 Hall P.A., Lamont M. 2012, 1–31.

for robustness and persistency that helps keep the same structure or identity of the system while experiencing change or disturbance, but also a catalyst for change so that groups of people, systems, or processes can renew or evolve or start something new. Social resilience, which depends on the ability of communities to respond collectively to disturbances or disruptions, is especially vital. Hence, in such response, it is worth reflecting on the nature of key dimensions of resilience and social systems, among others, agency and core values.<sup>32</sup>

### Agency as a community resilience dimension

According to Christian Welzel and Ronald Inglehart, agency is a specifically human ability which enhances adaptability on both individual and collective levels, while a sense of agency – also referred to as the locus of control – is synonymous with the power to act on purpose.<sup>33</sup> The potential of this core dimension of community resilience is that it enables humans to learn and to choose purposefully.<sup>34</sup> As actions and activities play a significant role in responses to crises, especially in emergent spontaneous volunteering, humans' aptitude to exercise agency allows them to make decisions in their lives.<sup>35</sup> Furthermore, in reaction to crises, specifically on the local level, attention is given to the role of agency exercised by various actors involved in refugee reception. Also, the contribution of civil society in this area is highlighted.<sup>36</sup> During emergencies, social relations (often informal), common interests, beliefs, and identities motivate and mobilise people towards actions, which is usually a spontaneous decision.<sup>37</sup> The role and potential of the agency is encapsulated in the concept of 'participatory society' apparently consisting of agentive actors exercising 'active citizenship', which, in turn, fosters individual responsibility.<sup>38</sup>

### Human values as a community resilience dimension

Values are an underlying feature of humans.<sup>39</sup> Key theorists in different disciplines highlighted the role of people's key values in understanding and predicting their conduct, decisions, and actions.<sup>40</sup> Values are guiding posts that help humans choose and

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32 Folke C. et al. 2010, 1–9.

33 Welzel C., Inglehart R. 2010, 43–63.

34 R Boyd R., Richardson P.J. 2005, 287–309.

35 van der Veer L. 2020, 368–387.

36 Glorius B. et al. 2019, 19–30.

37 Boersma K. et al. 2018, 728–742.

38 van der Veer L. 2020, 368–387.

39 Verplanken B., Holland R. 2002, 434–447.

40 Rohan M.J. 2000, 255–277.

evaluate actions and events.<sup>41</sup> In social sciences, values are regarded as a key motivator of human action and behaviour as people aspire to think and act independently. Conceivably, some distinct values can be a moral or ethical foundation for human conduct. At the same time, certain values may be activated through confrontation with specific situations or information. As the values respond to the needs and options present in their environment, it could be presumed that in most cases specific values must be activated to make an impact.<sup>42</sup> It is noteworthy that, since values could be viewed as essential truths about the most expected outcome of human conduct, the crucial aspect is the activation of motivation and not the activation itself.<sup>43</sup> Since human societies adapt, organise, and orientate themselves by following patterns on an individual micro level,<sup>44</sup> eventually, whole societies may change – if a change has taken place in the individuals – through values or behaviours transmitted in a bottom-up manner.<sup>45</sup> Consequently, a sufficient number of micro-level individual changes can create a macro-level trend which then introduces a social change.<sup>46</sup>

## Methodology

To achieve the objective of this study, i.e., to explore the role of community resilience and core dimensions of community resilience (namely agency and human values in response to the refugee crisis caused by the Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022) and see if those dimensions helped to build and enhance community resilience to crisis and uncertainty, the author has analysed two cases of responses to refugee crisis in two Polish border communities in two corners of Poland – one in the northeast, in Suwałki, in the borderland area often referred to as Suwałki Gap, and the second in the southeast, in Biecz, known as ‘Little Kraków.’

This article is based on the empirical data collected during research conducted from the beginning of March 2023 till the end of April 2023 in the two above-mentioned Polish border communities in Suwałki and Biecz during a field trip.<sup>47</sup> Qualitative interviews were conducted on-site in Poland with informants from three interview groups of volunteers, community members, and municipality officials (employees of the municipality and subordinate units) who were privately or professionally involved in helping Ukrainian refugees arriving in Poland. The sources of insights

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41 Schwartz S.H. 1992, 1–65.

42 Welzel C., Inglehart R. 2010, 43–63.

43 Kilburn H.W. 2009, 868–885.

44 Dunbar R. et al. 1999, 1–14.

45 Barber N. 2007, 123–148.

46 Welzel C., Inglehart R. 2010, 43–63.

47 This research, including the interview guide, has been approved by the Research Ethics Commission of Kaunas University of Technology confirming that the project does not contradict the general principles of research ethics – protocol No. M4-2023-03.



presented in this article are the answers given by 6 informants from each interview group, 3 from Suwałki and 3 from Biecz, which have been transcribed, coded into sub-categories and main themes, and interpreted by applying a qualitative analysis.<sup>48</sup>

The interview guide questions were directly related to the topic of community resilience and its core dimensions – agency and human values. In the case of the agency, the question asked in two interview groups of community members and volunteers was, ‘Did you take any action on your own to support Ukrainian refugees arriving in Poland?’ and in the municipality interview group, was ‘Could you describe the actions and initiatives of the municipality in response to Ukrainian refugees coming to Suwałki/Biecz?’ In the case of human values, the question asked in two interview groups of community members and volunteers was ‘Why did you decide to support Ukrainian refugees?’ and in the case of the municipality interview group was ‘Why did the municipality decide to support Ukrainian refugees?’.

A limitation of this article is that it presents interpreted findings only about two core dimensions of community resilience, namely agency and human values, out of other dimensions of community resilience, as this particular study is part of a larger doctoral dissertation research project.<sup>49</sup>

## Results

The results of the qualitative analysis indicate that at the very onset of the invasion, members in both Polish border communities clearly understood who the aggressor and defender were in the Russia-Ukraine conflict. One of the volunteers answered that ‘It does not matter if he brought a zloty or brought a chicken or a kilo of sugar, this is a man who realises who the aggressor is, yes, in this war.’<sup>50</sup> This strong awareness was a motivation that led to the activation<sup>51</sup> of values on an individual macro-level<sup>52</sup> – guiding posts that helped informants choose and evaluate actions and events.<sup>53</sup> One of the activated values was compassion, as informants in all three interview groups sympathised with Ukrainian citizens and, in an act of solidarity, got actively involved in helping and supporting Ukrainian refugees arriving in Poland. Quite often, those actions were based on spontaneous decisions to help. As for all the informants,

<sup>48</sup> For the purpose of the analysis, the informants in all three interview groups were coded as B\_INF1 for a volunteer representing case area Biecz, S\_INF1, a volunteer representing case area Suwałki, and respectively community members were coded as B\_INF2 and S\_INF2 and B\_INF3 and S\_INF3 for informants in the municipality group.

<sup>49</sup> As part of the same doctoral research project, the article (Beldyga N. 2023) was prepared, which examines the crisis on the Polish-Ukrainian border through the lens of community resilience dimensions of agency and mobilized resources.

<sup>50</sup> Answer provided by interviewee B\_INF1.

<sup>51</sup> Kilburn H.W. 2009, 868–885.

<sup>52</sup> Welzel C., Inglehart R. 2010, 43–63.

<sup>53</sup> Schwartz S.H. 1992, 1–65.



it was simply a need of the heart and a human reaction to show kindness and purely be humane towards people fleeing their homeland seeking safety and security. Another important factor and a signpost guiding the informants in their response to the crisis was the value of mutuality, i.e., the hope that should they find themselves in need, somebody would help them too. As one of the community members put it, she decided to support Ukrainian refugees because ‘Well I would like someone to help me.’<sup>54</sup> The study’s findings also reveal the role of the value of citizenship exercised by agentive actors of the ‘participation society’<sup>55</sup> in the reception of Ukrainian refugees in both Polish border communities. This motive to act and respond to the crisis was explained by an informant from the municipality interview group, ‘If something happens and affects our residents, it is impossible for the local government not to appear. I can’t imagine such a local government.’<sup>56</sup>

Results show that in the case of the potential of agency as the core dimension of community resilience, although it was a natural and spontaneous reaction followed by an instant decision to act to help Ukrainian citizens, the informants chose to do so purposefully.<sup>57</sup> Agency was exercised on both individual and collective, bottom-up and top-down levels, out of human duty and responsibility. As one of the informants described it, ‘My first thought was to help people, yet I just didn’t know how and where to find them.’<sup>58</sup>

## Discussion

Whether on Lesbos, in Budapest, Amsterdam, Suwałki or in Biecz, the response to the sudden, massive and dramatic arrival of displaced people forced to seek safety and security outside their homelands was similar in relation to the citizens’ motives that activated much of the same values and in consequence led to the spontaneous yet purposeful decisions to act and get involved in providing help and support for refugees arriving at their countries in an act of solidarity. Although citizens responded to the refugee crisis in various ways, the emerging pattern of response to a sudden disruption, such as a refugee crisis, may be a sign of the untapped resilience potential of citizens as non-state actors, which can be enhanced not only by core dimensions of community resilience, such as among others agency or human values but also other core dimensions. Such empirically obtained knowledge about the resilience potential of civilians may be further developed and used in civil crisis preparedness

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54 Answer provided by interviewee B\_INF2.

55 van der Veer L. 2020, 368–387.

56 Answer provided by interviewee S\_INF3.

57 Boyd R., Richardson P.J. 2005, 287–309.

58 Answer provided by interviewee S\_INF2.

by state actors in charge of contingency planning. Hence, it is essential to research other core dimensions of community resilience by examining cases of responses from the most affected actors.

## Conclusions

In light of the current multifaceted refugee crisis faced by the EU countries, it is crucial to continue further research about the cases of responses to such emergencies, specifically the reactions of the most affected responders. The results of the empirical study on the analysed cases of the Polish border communities' responses to the refugee crisis caused by the Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24, may contribute to the existing research and discourse on the role and impact of citizens and communities' resilience potential in disaster response and preparedness.

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