

Romanian NGOs and other voluntary actors' relationships with government in aiding migrants from Ukraine: gaps, partnerships, and opportunities

Flanigan Shawn

San Diego State University, School of Public Affairs, San Diego, United States

Abstract: Within six months of the Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, over 1.1 million migrants entered Romania (UNHCR 2022). This was an unprecedented humanitarian crisis for a country with limited experience with immigration that is much better known for mass emigration (Ernst 2022) and depopulation (Chirileasa 2022, Reuters 2022). Additionally, most migrants entered through small municipalities on the Romanian border where municipal capacity was strained and local nonprofit capacity was limited, even as all parties mobilized as best they could to support their Ukrainian neighbors (Stănică et al. 2023)

In this paper, we present findings from fieldwork conducted in Romania five to six months following the Russian invasion of Ukraine. From July to August 2022, interviews were conducted with twenty-nine individuals from twenty-six distinct organizations or initiatives in Romania, including NGOs, informal citizen groups, individual volunteers, government officials, and key informants involved in advocacy efforts. All but one of these initiatives was conducted by Romanian nationals or Moldovan residents of Romania (i.e., local actors). Interviews/site visits were conducted in person with eighteen service providers, and informal observations were made of day-to-day migrant interactions in communities in Romania.

Based on these data, we describe practices local NGOs and other voluntary actors as they mobilized to provide emergency humanitarian assistance to migrants from Ukraine alongside, in partnership with, and often in the absence of the state. Research participants describe gaps in state provision of services, and emerging partnerships with government entities in ways that are reminiscent of Dennis Young's (2006) explanation of complementary and supplementary roles of the third sector filling gaps in government skills and services. Some senior government emergency management officials, noting the value of civil society partnerships, sought to formalize and maintain the network of actors for activation in future large-scale disaster scenarios.

The majority of NGOs and voluntary actors in the study had no prior experience working in crisis response and emergency management situations, and had no experience working with migrants. Our data also demonstrate a heightened risk of the dangers of human trafficking, particularly for women and children, which has been particularly noted as a risk in armed conflict and in Romania and Ukraine (UNODC 2022, McAlpine et al. 2016). Garkisch et al. (2017) explicitly document the lack of research on the third sector and migration in Romania and nearby countries, and this paper contributes to that literature.