

# Community resilience in response to humanitarian and refugee crisis caused by Russian invasion of Ukraine – a case study of Polish border communities

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## ABSTRACT

Since this study aim is to analyze the role of community resilience in response to crisis and uncertainty, two cases of community responses to an unprecedented refugee and humanitarian crisis caused by Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24<sup>th</sup> February 2022 made by two Polish border communities from two corners of Poland, one in northeast, in a borderland area referred to as Suwałki Gap and second in southeast, in Biecz, referred to as “Little Cracow” have been studied. The main objective of this study is to gain knowledge of one of core dimensions of community resilience, namely agency which enhances adaptability on both individual and collective level, often referred to as the locus of control [Inglehart, Welzel 2009] as well as a pillar of community resilience and crucial element in the proactive phase of crisis cycle management, civil preparedness defined as the ability to sustain functions vital to society, ensuring basic supply and the State’s capacity to act in a crisis situation [Zekulic et al. 2017 in: Civil-Military Cooperation Center of Excellence Info Sheet 2024] to see if they have enhanced community resilience in this response. For this purpose, on site and in person qualitative interviews have been conducted with research participants, from two interview groups of volunteers and community members who were privately and professionally involved in this response, namely in helping Ukrainian refugees arriving to Poland. The results demonstrate that refugee and humanitarian crisis caused by the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine triggered communities’ agency to act and kept them united by the same aim – to respond to this unprecedented crisis by helping Ukrainian refugees. Those practical and hands-on experiences of both communities in response to crisis by helping another human being in need, very often and especially in the first weeks of the invasion, bottom-up and individually, with the use of all kinds of, often ad hoc, means, methods and various solutions, provide a solid civil preparedness ground on which community resilience could be built and strengthened.

**Key words:** crisis and uncertainty, community resilience, agency, civil preparedness

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## Introduction

Communities constitute not only places but also relations, connections, motivations, attitudes and worldviews which unite community members and other actors to work together towards common goals. Strong community is a source of heightened security, safety, comfort and connectedness [Jakes et al. 2007]. In view of the fact that experiential

knowledge of citizens directly affected by crisis and uncertainty, the concept of community, specifically in disaster and development research, academically and practically, has been automatically related to the local level collective citizen bottom-up actions to cope with various challenges [Titz et al. 2018].

Resilience, in turn, is recognized as the potential to better prepare for those disturbances [Helfgott 2018] through adaptation and reorganization capacity after a disruptive event, and to continue despite challenges as well as an opportunity to transform, reconfigure and thrive [Folke 2006]. Since community resilience has been recently put into focus rather than vulnerability [Patriarca et al. 2018] understood as responsiveness and sensitivity of people and localities towards harm [Adger 2006], the approach to increase and strengthen resilience in planning disaster mitigation and community preparedness actions, is crucial especially prior to a disruption [National Academies of Science 2012 in: Xu et al. 2020]. Community resilience implies that community is capable of coping with a disruption by advance preparation and risk mitigation and in the aftermath of a disruption by adapting, evolving and transforming [The Carri 2013 in: Pfefferbaum et al. 2015].

In this context preparedness, one of the most important foundations of society's resilience [Mission of Finland to NATO 2017] and pillars of community resilience makes community response to disruption more resilient and effective than sole anticipation of such a disruption [Cimellaro et al. 2010; Hosseini et al. 2016; Xerandy et al. 2016].

Other important dimensions and characteristics of community resilience discussed in community resilience research are agency manifested in agentic behaviors through collective actions giving positive results [Stajkovic et al. 2009 in: McCrea et al. 2015] and social capital expressed in emotional and civic support on a local community level which grows and accumulates slowly in time [Mayer 2019].

Social capital is accumulated through already established in the past and nurtured connections, relations, web of connections developed and expanded which are mutual and reciprocated which help attain goals on the individual and collective level through mutual support, trust and interconnectedness [Milofsky 2023].

As a result, human social capital comprises of non-material resources which unfold as a result of social interactions between people, groups and individuals to be employed in response to crisis and disruption by for instance providing support to those in need affected by crisis. Social capital takes a central role in putting forward the idea that the experiential knowledge and insight from past responses to disruption and crisis gained by affected communities should be transmitted and learned from and those community practices should be taken into account while planning future disaster mitigation and community preparedness actions [Agboola et al. 2023]. Social capital may also denote a feature which facilitates participatory action in social and community life for public benefit.

Since this study aims to analyze the role of community resilience in response to crisis and uncertainty, the main objective was set to gain knowledge of one of core dimensions of community resilience namely agency as well as and civil preparedness, a pillar of community resilience and crucial element in the proactive phase of crisis cycle management.

For this purpose, two cases of community responses to an unprecedented refugee and humanitarian crisis caused by Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24<sup>th</sup> February 2022 made by two Polish border communities from two corners of Poland, one in north-east, in a borderland area referred to as Suwałki Gap and second in southeast, in Biecz, referred to as “Little Cracow” have been studied.

To navigate this analysis a main research question was posed “What is the role of community resilience dimension of agency in response to crisis?” followed by auxiliary research questions “How the experiences of Polish border communities involved in response to refugee and humanitarian crisis could impact community resilience and civil preparedness?” as well as “How agency and civil preparedness translate into strengthening community social capital?”

## Novelty

In times of uncertainty heightened by complex international and local crises to which response has being made by various actors on global and national level, also by those affected actors on local and community level, the novelty of this study is that it aims to explore the role of community resilience and its dimensions in community response to crises and uncertainty by analyzing specific cases of responses made by members of border communities from two different corners of Poland to a new type of refugee crisis evoked by Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24<sup>th</sup>, 2022. Worthy of note is the community from borderland area called Suwałki Gap which due to its close proximity to the border with Russian exclave of Kaliningrad and Belarus has been labelled by some national and international media as one the most dangerous places on earth. Results of the empirical research on the role of community resilience and its’ specific dimensions of agency as well as civil preparedness, may benefit the existing research on community resilience and civil preparedness to crises and uncertainty.

## Theoretical background

### *Agency as a community resilience dimension*

Agency is a human ability which increases individual and collective adaptability. Sense of agency, often called the locus of control, is a motivating factor in acting intentionally [Inglehart, Welzel 2009] and allowing humans to decide of one’s own free will [Richerson et al. 2024]. As actions and activities play a significant role in responses to crisis, human agency plays a crucial role in a decision-making process [van der Veer 2020]. In times of crisis and disruption social relations, often informal, motivate and mobilize people to decide, often spontaneously [Boersma et al. 2018]. Agency, its role and potential, is captured in the idea of “participation society” created by actors exercising agency and “active citizenship” which encourages individual responsibility [van der Veer 2020].

### *Civil Preparedness*

Society's ability to respond to crisis and uncertainty relies on civil preparedness which may be defined as State's capacity to act in a crisis situation as well as all measures and actions taken in the peacetime to capacitate a nation to sustain critical for the society functions [Mission of Finland to NATO 2017]. In a contemporary global context of complexity and uncertainty heightened by interconnected hybrid crises and threats which confirm and emphasize the significance of civil preparedness [Mission of Finland to NATO 2017], it is pivotal to introduce present-day approaches to strengthen society's resilience potential and capabilities to foresee and prepare for, respond to, cope with and overcome crisis situations which disrupt society's critical functions [Kramer et al. 2015].

Therefore, the overwhelming necessity of building resilience via civil preparedness arises due to complex and interconnected changes of the contemporary global conflict and crisis landscape which target and threaten states and societies in all facets [Zekulic et al. 2017 in: Civil-Military Cooperation Center of Excellence Info Sheet 2024]. To illustrate this critical need, already in 1949 North Atlantic Treaty set the underlying assumptions of Resilience through Civil Preparedness which underpin the necessity to endure the threats through mutual help and supporting when required [NATO 2023].

It has not still been ultimately resolved how crises could operate as an opportunity for the society to transform [Benessaiah, Eakin 2021]. Also, the capacity to operationalize the concept of resilience in response to crisis is highly anticipated by actors applying resilience practically [Carpenter et al. 2012], for instance those in charge of crisis management, civil preparedness and national security.

Thus, an ongoing humanitarian and refugee crisis caused by Russian aggression against Ukraine which escalated into a full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, may provide an opportunity for different stakeholders to operationalize the concept of social resilience. Numerous and versatile responses to this unprecedented for an EU country phenomenon [Rozakou 2017] made by different actors, especially civilians [Beldyga 2023] as well as the characteristics of resilience which has strengthened social and community resilience [Patel et al. 2017] in response to this crisis should be the focal point of an extensive and thorough analysis.

### **Research methods**

To pursue this study's aim to analyze the role of community resilience and its dimension of agency as well as civil preparedness in community response to crisis and uncertainty, an interview guide was developed to cover topics to be discussed during qualitative interviews conducted with members of two border communities, one in Suwałki, in the northeast, in borderland area called Suwałki Gap, and the second in Biecz, in the southeast called "Little Cracow". Research participants were selected through non-probability sampling, on the basis of their specific characteristics relevant for this

particular study and through an auxiliary method, namely snow-ball sampling, where approached research participants were asked by the researcher for recommendations of other participants who could be representative for this study. The only criterion adopted was informant's private or professional involvement in helping Ukrainian refugees arriving to Poland. Criteria such as age, gender, marital status were not applied for the purpose of this sampling.

In the next step selected research participants were divided into two interview groups of volunteers and community members. In the period from March 2023 till June 2023, during two field trips to Biecz and in Suwałki, a researcher's native town, on site and in person qualitative interviews, lasting from 30 minutes to 2.5 hours, with selected informants have been conducted.

This article presents results of a qualitative analysis of collected empirical data which have been coded into sub-categories to identify main themes, namely the answers of 10 research participants from each interview group of volunteers and community members, i.e., 5 informants from Suwałki case area, coded as S\_INF and 5 informants from Biecz case area coded as B\_INF. For this specific study interview questions focused on the topic of community resilience dimension of agency as well as civil preparedness. In the case of agency, research participants from two interview groups of community members and volunteers were asked following questions *"Did you take any action on your own to support Ukrainian refugees arriving to Poland?"*, *"Did you look for any groups or initiatives supporting Ukrainian refugees so you could contribute or join too?"* In the case of civil preparedness, informants were addressed questions *"If it happened again how would you react?"*, *"What are biggest challenges?"*, *"What are lessons learned for the future?"*, *"What can you recommend for better preparedness?"*. A limitation of this article is that it presents results of the research which is a part of a larger doctoral dissertation research project and collected empirical data is to be further analyzed and interpreted. This research, including the interview guide, have 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.

## Results

Informants' answers to the questions about agency have been coded as *"Mental alertness to act in order to help"*, *"Individual, independent, spontaneous, voluntary, bottom-up initiatives and humanitarian actions"* and *"Giving up one's material benefits"*.

For questions about the topic of civil preparedness codes such as *"The same yet more experienced, coherent, committed response"*, *"Rational behavior instead of panic and emotional frenzy"* and *"Unity, compassion, respect"* have been established.

Table 1. Community resilience dimension – agency

Sub category	Quote	Interview group
Mental alertness to act in order to help	<i>We listened to TV, we listened to the radio, and here it was, we were prepared for it, that here something might hit. I mean we were, mentally we were prepared that here something might start happening after all (S_INF2)</i>	Volunteer
Individual, independent, spontaneous, voluntary, bottom-up initiatives and humanitarian actions	<i>I have compiled a directory of entities from across the country which provide support and specialized accessibility assistance to refugees with disabilities (B_INF1)</i>	Volunteer
Giving up one's material benefits	<i>I bought some things with the idea that I'm going to sell them to make money, because there well, like a jacket, cost, let's say, three zlotys sometimes at a second-hand shop, and it was in very nice condition, and you can sell a jacket for one hundred, one hundred and fifty. Well, and so they were lying around I was going to put them up on sale, but all in all they were lying around so well, and finally I came to the conclusion that you have to send them because they will come in handy (B_INF3)</i>	Community member

Source: Author

Table 2. Civil preparedness

Sub category	Quote	Interview group
The same yet more experienced, coherent, committed response	<i>I am richer with this new experience, I think, we would do exactly, exactly the same, now bearing in mind all these facilities, infrastructural, already worked out routes, in terms of routes, people who also did not let us down, those who also expressed willingness to help here and now. So, it's a matter of, I think, such a coherent just working together, such maybe a little mechanized even, so that I to you, you to me, you something there, and all the time all this ping pong is going on somewhere. I think I would do exactly, exactly the same thing (B_INF5)</i>	Volunteer
Rational behavior instead of panic and emotional frenzy	<i>Don't, somehow don't get very emotional, because it, because it eats you up terribly and, and your energy goes the wrong way where it should kind of go like that. No, no, not to the goal. And don't act feverishly, emotionally (B_INF2)</i>	Community member
Unity, compassion, respect	<i>Civil preparedness is certainly that people should unite again, because we live side by side. Even once in those blocks still from the stories of parents or grandparents, everyone knew everyone. Neighbors were closer even met for coffee and now you don't really know your neighbors. You say good morning and you don't even know sometimes that this is a neighbor (S_INF3)</i>	Community member

Source: Author

## Discussion

The results reveal that informants in both interview groups of volunteers and community members in both communities, in Suwałki and Biecz, exercised their agency at a comparable level which manifested in similar actions taken in response to refugee and humanitarian crisis. Once they learned about the Russian military aggression against Ukraine, they were mentally ready to provide support and assistance in case refugees from Ukraine arrive to or will be transiting through Poland, as those informants anticipated that this full-scale invasion on Ukraine may cause a mass movement of people fleeing their attacked homeland. It should be noted that communities' mental alertness to act to help, collectively or individually, in majority of cases was manifested in a bottom-up and spontaneous manner as in the case of one of the informants whose *"first thought was [...] about the disabled. That was my first impulse [...]. What's going to happen to these disabled people, for God's sake, how is the evacuation going to take place, I'm thinking so technically, [...] but it just, my very first association was [...] how is it all going to move, how is it all going to move. All the logistics. Well, I was terrified, where nothing had really started yet"* (B\_INF1). To address this problem the informant decided to prepare and continually update a list of institutions from all over Poland which provide specialized assistance in the field of accessibility for disabled refugees so *"When the information came out that Ukrainians were coming, that they were at the border, that they would come to Przemysł, well I had in the back of my mind, gosh, after all, there are no facilities at this station. It is a beautiful building, but how will these people get there, what will it look like, what about the blind, what about pregnant women and so on and so forth. So, I started such a list, it was my grassroots activity, free absolutely, I expanded it on a regular basis for a whole month and a half"* (B\_INF1). Other helpers provided material assistance which often meant giving-up their own material benefits as in the case of informant who donated military gear for Ukrainian soldiers which if sold could bring profit for the owner as it has been collected for commercial purposes. Informant explained that this support was *"for the benefit of Ukrainian soldiers, so simply help them there"* (B\_INF3). Other respondent already on the second day of the invasion created in his private house a warehouse where people could bring donations for Ukrainian refugees to be transported to the Ukraine *"Yes it was the 25<sup>th</sup>. Well on the 25<sup>th</sup> of February. And this announcement [...]. I think appeared somehow in the afternoon around 5pm on the 25<sup>th</sup> of Friday, and from 8 in the morning people started coming to our house, because we gave, as it were, our private address, people started coming, people we knew, people we didn't know, we also gave a phone number, so people called. It turned out that this is in the whole district, as if also a little more widely, as if the only functioning, of course unofficial point of any transfer action"*.

In the case of questions related to the topic of civil preparedness, research findings indicate that informants in both communities, when asked how they would react if such a crisis happens again, they responded that they literally ready to respond anytime and similarly or *"the same [way]"*(B\_INF3) as *"it is impossible to do otherwise"* (B\_INF2) but *"only at the moment certainly with more commitment"* (B\_INF3) in a more coherent and organized manner as they have already gained the experience and *"even if it was not so cyclical just a sudden signal that listen today some [refugee] group in the evening will come and we would have a full house [train station] for tonight"* (S\_INF4).

When asked about the recommendations for crisis preparedness and if it is possible at all to prepare for one, informants claimed that it is difficult to prepare but the consequences could be mitigated and challenges solved *“because it is a matter that ok there was a problem, but problems are not to sit and pity over them only to solve them”* (S\_INF1). Some informants suggested preparations for crisis strictly in a material sense as *“it’s important to have the papers all, prepare such a backpack you know, so that there are inside documents and some cash well and cards”* (S\_INF5) and it is important to *“[...] collect in some way food, water, clothes [...], but above all, what I personally recommend is such an escape backpack in the form of packing such necessities for the survival of a week at most two [...], because this is crucial at this point”* (B\_INF3). Other recommended non-material preparedness so that in an emergency and crisis situation people *“do it smart”* (B\_INF2), demonstrate rational behavior instead of panic and emotional frenzy. Some informants suggested that preparedness in fact starts with compassion and respect for another by for instance to try to know our neighbors so in times of crisis we could integrate and act together and thus become stronger. Such a sense of unity *“[...] could help, because in an emergency situation people would unite more. And so, I bet most of it would be to get in the car and leave”* (S\_INF3).

## Conclusions

The results demonstrate that refugee and humanitarian crisis caused by the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine triggered communities’ agency to act and kept them united by the same aim – to respond to this unprecedented crisis by helping Ukrainian refugees. Russia’s war in Ukraine has been disruptive for Ukrainians and as well as for Poles, who experienced a sudden and massive arrival of refugees fleeing Ukraine to Poland to seek safety and security outside their attacked homeland. Those practical and hands-on experiences of both communities in response to crisis by helping another human being in need, very often and especially in the first weeks of the invasion, bottom-up and individually, with the use of all kinds of, often ad hoc, means, methods and various solutions, provide a solid civil preparedness ground on which community resilience could be built and strengthened. Quite distinctive is also a recommendation for non-material crisis preparedness defined as unity, compassion and respect, exercised especially prior to crisis and disruption. This in turn provides a considerable potential for deepening social connections and relations on community and individual level through which social capital is accumulated.

- Agency starts with a first thought and impulse to act. Though exercised individually, if done by many, it may significantly impact community resilience to crisis and uncertainty;
- Community response to an unprecedented crisis and uncertainty provides an opportunity to use direct, practical hands-on experience gained by individuals involved in response in civil preparedness planning;



- Individuals' experiences within communities involved in this response are a source of experiential knowledge to be employed by actors in charge of planning resilience and civil preparedness;
- Deepening social connections and relations on individual and community level for civil preparedness planning may further strengthen community social capital;
- It is important to bring interdependencies between community resilience, agency, civil preparedness and social capital into focus, especially in the resilience research and within affected by crisis communities involved in the response.

This article is based on the results of a qualitative analysis of a small part of a larger sample which still remains to be further analyzed for the purpose of the preparation of a researcher's doctoral dissertation.

In the face of an ongoing war and crisis in Ukraine and other parts of the world which also affect civilians, one main observation is that it is highly recommended to undertake in-depth qualitative research of very specific group of people i.e., helpers and first responders who were helping refugees from Ukraine who have sought safety, security and shelter in Poland at reception points and /or mass accommodation points across Poland. These were mainly railway and bus stations in major Polish cities such as for instance Rzeszów, Przemyśl, Kraków and Warsaw but also in smaller towns such as Suwałki as well as City Sports and Leisure Centers, so-called OSiR or MOSiR, and other venues which have been transformed into mass accommodation and/or reception points either informally in a bottom-up manner by private individuals or formally by local authorities.

Those hands-on experiences of people directly involved in the first response to humanitarian and refugee crisis could be a rich and valuable source of experiential knowledge and practical information about the mechanism and architecture of response to crisis.

Moreover, those accounts may enable to deconstruct the process of the development of social resilience in a disrupted reality caused by crisis, for instance in terms of what triggered such a process and how and if social resilience evolved and was enhanced in time. Results obtained by such an analysis have a great potential to be further interpreted and employed, specifically by actors in charge of crisis management, civil preparedness and national security.

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## **Analiza reakcji polskich społeczności przygranicznych na kryzys humanitarny i uchodźczy spowodowany inwazją Rosji na Ukrainę – studium przypadku**

### **STRESZCZENIE**

Celem artykułu jest analiza roli odporności społeczności w sytuacjach kryzysowych i niepewności. Analizie poddano dwa przykłady reakcji społeczności na bezprecedensowy kryzys humanitarny i uchodźczy wywołany inwazją Rosji na Ukrainę 24 lutego 2022 r. Analizowane społeczności znajdowały się w dwóch przygranicznych obszarach Polski: północno-wschodnim – w regionie przygranicznym zwanym przesmykiem suwalskim, oraz południowo-wschodnim – w Bieczu, znanym też jako „Mały Kraków”.

Podstawowym celem analizy było lepsze poznanie podstawowych wymiarów odporności społeczności w celu zbadania ich wpływu na reakcję na wspomnianą sytuację kryzysową. Jednym z tych wymiarów jest sprawczość, która ułatwia dostosowywanie się do zmieniających się warunków, zarówno na poziomie pojedynczych osób, jak i społeczności [Inglehart, Welzel 2009]. Drugim elementem odporności społeczności, jak też istotną częścią proaktywnego etapu zarządzania kryzysowego, jest gotowość cywilna, rozumiana jako możliwość utrzymania procesów kluczowych dla funkcjonowania społeczeństwa, zapewnienie dostępności do podstawowych zasobów i zdolność aparatu państwowego do funkcjonowania w sytuacji kryzysowej [Zekulic i in. 2017].

Na potrzeby analizy wykonano badania jakościowe w postaci wywiadów przeprowadzanych na miejscu i na żywo z przedstawicielami dwóch grup, wolontariuszy i członków lokalnej społeczności, zaangażowanych w pomoc ukraińskim uchodźcom przybywającym do Polski. Wyniki badań wskazują, że kryzys uchodźczy i humanitarny wywołany pełnoskalową inwazją Rosji na Ukrainę uruchomił zdolność społeczeństw do działania i zjednoczył je w jednym celu: odpowiedzenia na tę bezprecedensową sytuację kryzysową pomocą dla uchodźców z Ukrainy. Obie wspomniane grupy podjęły się praktycznych działań w terenie w odpowiedzi na sytuację kryzysową, pomagając istotom ludzkim w potrzebie. Pomoc ta często, w szczególności w trakcie pierwszych tygodni inwazji, miała charakter oddolny i indywidualny, z wykorzystaniem wszelkiego rodzaju, często doraźnych, sposobów, metod i rozwiązań. Stanowi ona tym samym solidną podstawę do budowy i rozwoju odporności społeczności.

**Słowa kluczowe:** kryzys, niepewność, odporność społeczeństw, sprawczość, gotowość cywilna

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