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From Face-to-Face to Facebook

Abstract: The article focuses on the use of social media as a tool for organising humanitarian aid for Ukrainian war refugees. The text is based on research on the capacity of rural and small-town communities to absorb refugees, carried out in 2022–2023 at the Institute of Rural and Agricultural Development of the Polish Academy of Sciences. It was a case study conducted in the municipality of Orlin in the Greater Poland region. One of the aspects analysed was the use of Facebook as a communication channel during the refugee crisis. The article presents the functionality of social media as a tool for organising humanitarian aid. Highlighting their role reveals the scale of changes that have taken place in the ways of communicating in a “multi-network” local community.

Keywords: refugees, migration, social media, Ukraine.

1. Introduction

As a result of the escalation of the Ukraine–Russia war after the Russian invasion on 24 February 2022, one in three Ukrainian residents have changed their permanent residence. More than six million Ukrainians have left the country, while five million have changed their residence domestically, moving to areas currently not under attack by the Russian Federation. As much as 94% have remained in Europe, mainly choosing countries neighbouring on Ukraine. Poland has taken in the greatest number of migrants. The main wave of war refugees from Ukraine occurred from

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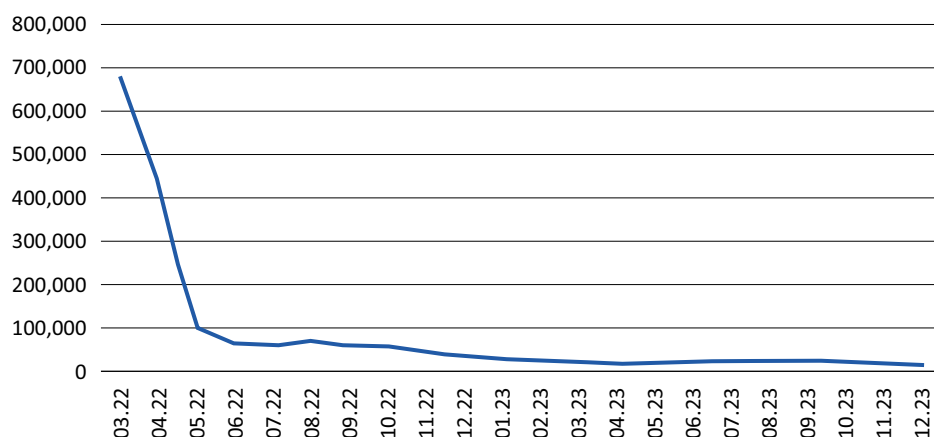


Figure 1. Number of positive decisions on granting temporary protection to Ukrainian citizens in Poland (2022–2023)

Rysunek 1. Liczba pozytywnych decyzji o przyznaniu ochrony tymczasowej dla obywateli Ukrainy w Polsce (2022–2023)

Source: own study based on Eurostat data.

Źródło: opracowanie własne na podstawie danych Eurostatu.

the last week of February 2022, continuing for the next three months, i.e. until the end of May 2022.

Eurostat data show that the biggest wave of war immigrants arrived in Poland in the first three months after the invasion. The number of temporary protection permits granted monthly between March and May 2022 was respectively as follows: 675,085, 425,620 and 96,085.¹ Moreover, in the final four days of February 2022 (i.e. in the period when legal instruments regulating the system of assistance for war refugees were not yet in force) almost 400,000 war refugees from Ukraine entered Poland (UdSC 2025).

¹ The granting of temporary protection to refugees from Ukraine in Poland is the effect of a number of legal instruments, including national and European Union regulations introduced in response to the humanitarian crisis caused by the war in Ukraine. They include: 1) The EU Council's 4 March 2022 decision activating Directive 2001/55/EC on temporary protection in case of a mass influx of refugees. This decision enables temporary protection to be granted to Ukrainian citizens in all EU member states; 2) EU Regulation 2018/1806, which gives Ukrainian citizens the right to move freely across the EU without requiring a visa and allows them to stay in EU member states for up to 90 days; 3) The law on assistance to citizens of Ukraine in connection with armed conflict on the territory of that country, which was passed by the Polish Sejm in March 2022. It provides for special regulations on legal stay, access to the labour market, healthcare, education, and other forms of assistance for Ukrainian citizens.

The outbreak of Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine caused the largest emigration on the European continent since World War II (Duszczuk, Kaczmarczyk 2022). Ukrainians seeking refuge in Poland mainly made their way to large conurbations – metropolises and adjacent metropolitan areas (UdSC 2025). These absorbed about 60% of the refugees. Non-metropolitan towns and villages also felt the military crisis across Poland's eastern border. In their case, the influx of refugees was smaller and often occurred later, since the size of the migrant wave and the time of its occurrence often depended on the distance from the border: localities close to the border and those that were major transport hubs, e.g. Przemyśl, served as a several-day “transfer base” for further travel. The proximity of the border in Lubelskie and Podkarpackie Voivodeships turned them into almost frontline zones, as described in a report from Lubelskie Voivodeship. Communities located further from the border had more time to prepare for receiving refugees. The present analysis focuses on the situation in non-metropolitan local communities.

In the first days of the attack, many Ukrainians were forced to leave everything behind, taking with them only the few things they managed to pack in a hurry. For Polish people involved in helping the refugees, this meant having to provide diverse forms of support, from finding accommodation to articles of daily use, from hygiene products to children's toys and books, and also many services – from transport to healthcare. Many aid efforts took advantage of the internet and social media, which became an important communication channel. Their use as tools for organising actions in crises is increasingly becoming the subject of analyses, especially in the face of the real world's growing dependence on the virtual world.

2. Purpose, Subject and Methodology of the Research

The present paper focuses on one of the topics of research in a project whose title translates as “The Potential for Refugee Absorption by Rural and Small-Town Local Communities”,² carried out by the Institute of Rural and Agricultural Development of the Polish Academy of Sciences (IRWiR PAN) in the years 2022–2023. The aim is

² The author of the present paper took part in this research and is a co-author of the report from the study: *Potencjał absorpcji uchodźców przez wiejskie i małomiasteczkowe społeczności lokalne* [The Potential for Refugee Absorption by Rural and Small-Town Local Communities]. The report, written by a research team comprising: Aleksandra Bilewicz, Kinga Chęcińska, Paweł Chmieliński, Maria Halamska, Sylwia Michalska, Agata Mróz, Aleksandra Pawłowska, Arkadiusz Ptak, Monika Stanny, Ruta Śpiewak, Julia Tsybulska, Elwira Wilczyńska and Dominika Zwęglińska-Gałecka from the Institute of Rural and Agricultural Development of the Polish Academy of Sciences as well as Irina Gontareva and Victoria Yevtushenko from the Vasil Karazin Kharkiv National University, edited by Maria Halamska, is available on the IRWiR PAN website: <https://www.irwirpan.waw.pl/948/publikacje/potencjal-absorpcji-uchodzcow-przez-wiejskie-i-malomiasteczkowe-spolecznosci-lokalne> (access: March 2024).

to show the role of social media in the self-organisation of local communities in the crisis caused by a substantial influx of Ukrainian war refugees. The research under the above project covered a range of topics and was based on a case study of Orlin aimed at exploring the response of the local community and local government (residents, local institutions, local authorities) to the refugee crisis. Identifying the communication structure was a major theme, and within it the role of a modern communicator: Facebook. The analysis of this project topic is discussed in the present paper.

The research on the role of Facebook in the process of providing humanitarian aid to refugees from Ukraine was based on the case of Orlin.³ This is an urban-rural municipality in Greater Poland Voivodeship, about 180 km² in area, with a population of around 29,000, of whom 57% lived in the town and 43% in 28 villages. The town of the same name is the county seat. The municipality is depopulating, with a reported population decrease of 4.2% in the years 2010–2021. The Orlin labour market attracts workers from beyond the municipality. Before the war in Ukraine broke out, about 2,000 foreigners were registered as workers in Orlin county, the great majority of them Ukrainians. Orlin is relatively well connected, as a railway line runs through the municipality, providing direct transport to the region's capital, Poznań. The municipality had quite a large Ukrainian diaspora, numbering some 600 people who were staying there for work purposes. Due to the sizable number of Ukrainian employees, the presence of foreigners was nothing new to the local community, which turned out to be important during the crisis, mainly in terms of building communication networks. Orlin boasts quite a high level of social capital, as can be inferred from the large number of local social initiatives, the nongovernmental organisation network, and the importance of neighbourly relations, with people helping one another. The municipality's mayor, who enjoys the residents' great approval,⁴ is an important element of this system. Orlin municipality has a diverse social structure in the town itself and in the villages, but the relatively small groupings of people encourage more direct, face-to-face interactions than are found in large conurbations. The residents share a common experience connected with local institutions such as schools, churches and community organisations.

From the first days of the war in Ukraine, Orlin was an active participant in organising humanitarian aid for refugees. This activity involved the local authorities, local institutions and residents. The first migrants arrived already on 26 February 2022, but an intensive influx began in early March and continued

³ Anonymised name.

⁴ In the local government elections in 2024, he won 72% of the votes in the first round of voting.

till the end of May, when the number of war migrants grew to 506. The number of arrivals subsequently dropped by about 50%, with another increase in the summer months, most probably due to the arrival of seasonal workers for the horticultural and agricultural sectors. In late December 2022, the migrant population decreased by 25% compared to the end of May.

The present paper describes the part of the research that involved an analysis of social media. The focus is on Facebook, or, more precisely, the profile created exclusively for organising charitable aid for war refugees from Ukraine. The research was aimed at showing how social media – including Facebook as an example of a popular communication tool – influenced the level of aid, its speed and its effectiveness in the crisis unquestionably created by the influx of so many war refugees. The analysis was based on the activity of the group Orlin dla Ukrainy [Orlin for Ukraine], a portal that was set up by a volunteer from Orlin on 26 February 2022, i.e. two days after the war in Ukraine broke out. Focused interviews⁵ show that this was someone who was active in the community, familiar to the locals also from earlier community activity. The aim of the portal was to organise aid for Ukrainian refugees arriving in Orlin and its environs. Its role was mainly as a means of communication enabling residents to offer support to Ukrainians arriving in the municipality. If there had been direct contact between residents and refugees earlier, posts sometimes contained requests for particular aid for specific people. The profile's activity was based on a simple principle: any resident wanting to help could publish posts offering aid that they were able to provide.

Observation of the medium covered all of the posts published in the period under analysis, i.e. from February 2022 to April 2023. Posts were exclusively in the form of text and computer graphics. It was assumed for the purpose of the study that every post had its individual value in the form of information about a real need of people in refugee crisis. The total number of posts studied was 548. Due to the nature of the study, 28 of them were disregarded as having insufficient value as research material. These were posts that did not fit into the theme of the group, mainly graphics sending best wishes or thanking users for special services. The ultimate analysis covered 520 posts, which were divided into 16 categories based on their content. Each post was placed in one category.

There were several factors behind the choice of Facebook as the medium for the study. First of all, as shown by data, e.g. from research conducted by Statista, which updates statistics on the Polish internet space on an ongoing basis, Facebook is the social platform with the greatest reach among all mainstream modern media

⁵ Interviews with members of the local community were one of the stages of the project "The Potential for Refugee Absorption by Rural and Small-Town Local Communities".

in Poland and the world,⁶ with a daily global number of active users of almost three billion people (Sas 2025). The number of Polish users of this platform oscillates around 20 million (Kemp 2022). The decision to choose Facebook for the study in Orlin municipality was supported by an analysis of residents' and municipality authorities' activity on other social media. Orlin municipality is not strongly represented on other platforms, nor were there any indications that media other than Facebook were used to help organise humanitarian aid for refugees from Ukraine.

Despite the main function of social media being amusement and entertainment, they also have qualities making them useful tools for navigating aid in crisis situations. Its popularity and huge number of users make Facebook one of the most efficient communication channels. Its greatest advantage is the fact that every piece of information is made available simultaneously to all those interested, or, as in the case of the research material under discussion, all the members of a given group. As opposed to traditional media, new media enable two-way communication, which in practice gives precise control over how a situation develops. The administrator or group members can influence group composition. Additionally, thanks to modern internet communicators like Messenger,⁷ we gain the option of efficient communication without using the mobile telephone network, which is particularly important in crises.⁸ The authors of a report entitled *Społeczeństwo łatwopalne. Praktyki pomagania uchodźcom wojennym z Ukrainy w roku 2022 w Polsce* [A Flammable Society: Practices of Helping Ukrainian War Refugees in Poland in 2022] (Kalinowska et al. 2023) quote excerpts from the recollections of people involved in organising charitable aid for refugees; these people pointed out the advantages of internet communicators and the fact that they made it possible to create further tools in a specific situation, such as lists of needs with the most urgent ones highlighted, created with the help of a social communication app.

Volunteers thus had their internal channel: an internet communicator group used exclusively for exchanging information about supply needs, so that information on the lack or shortage of provisions quickly made its way to the people able to solve the problem. At the same time, there was a group on social media and a fan page for external communication. First and foremost, this was served by the publication of lists of needs updated daily, with the most

⁶ Media considered: Facebook, Instagram, X (Twitter at the time of the study), YouTube, and TikTok.

⁷ Messenger – an app that is part of Facebook; it enables rapid and efficient communication between users, who can send text messages, voice messages, visual content and files in various formats.

⁸ This is a huge advantage, considering the frequent problems with mobile phone coverage in rural areas.

urgent ones highlighted. This kind of communication was directed to private individuals, small groups of friends and small organisations that wanted to join forces to help – by buying needed products or preparing food. Thanks to its currentness and legible structure, such a list was an extremely effective tool; through social media users, it was promoted further – on their individual accounts and in the aid groups they belonged to. At the same time, the backroom people worked to reach major players (trans. from Kalinowska et al. 2023, p. 138).

In the context of operating in crises, the following functionalities of Facebook are worth mentioning:

- the possibility of setting up a collaboration channel between stakeholders: private individuals, organisations and institutions. According to researchers from Civitas University, the reach created by social media has been key to the formation of “a society without borders” (Kalinowska et al. 2023, p. 244). It has also led to a discussion on the concept of a network society, which comprises “a specific configuration of global, national, and local networks in a multidimensional space of social interaction”;
- the possibility of getting in touch with people sharing the same views and attitudes, which in practice may translate into willingness to organise a specific type of charitable aid (e.g. activists involved in supporting the LGBT community undertook an initiative to help refugees from the Orlin community). Similar values often become an impulse for joint projects. “Societies and communities are built on a foundation of moral values, as exemplified by the academic community. In the context of the emergence of aid initiatives such as Doctors Without Borders, community is built on readiness and willingness to act for those in need, initiated by an individual and implemented by the community, with its significant participation” (Kalinowska et al. 2023, pp. 244–245);
- the possibility of communicating in real time;
- prompt responsiveness among the entities involved: staying in touch facilitates better organisation;
- the possibility to organise projects on a very large scale, involving a very broad area. On the one hand, information about specific needs is passed on to specific people, e.g. those who are at the border. Simultaneously, collections of various articles are organised, involving hundreds or even thousands of people from around the globe;
- the possibility of spreading information immediately. Writing one post – depending on the amount of detail – takes a maximum of a few minutes. In this short time, the information is passed on to a substantial number of people, who would have been unable to receive it within such a short time in any other way.

Potential drawbacks of Facebook as a platform for organising humanitarian aid should also be mentioned. Firstly, all those involved must have good organisational and technological skills, otherwise chaos and communication problems might occur. Although using Facebook is not particularly challenging (judging by the portal's global popularity), for a large percentage of Polish society it is an insurmountable challenge. A Ministry of Digital Affairs (Ministerstwo Cyfryzacji 2020) report from 2020 states that almost 16 million Polish residents aged from 16 to 74, i.e. 57%, do not have even basic digital skills. Among senior citizens aged from 65 to 74, this figure is as high as 90%. In the European Commission's annual Digital Economy and Society Index, Poland came 24th of the EU-27 member states. Only citizens of Greece, Bulgaria and Romania have poorer digital skills than Poles (Marszycki 2021). Secondly, you need hardware with internet access, which can be a challenge in the tough makeshift conditions of a crisis. In addition, Poland still has areas where internet access is difficult. According to Statistics Poland's *Information Society in Poland in 2023* report, 93.3% of Polish households had internet access (both fixed-line and mobile broadband). However, about 6% of the country could be described as blank spots.⁹ These are all rural areas.

Another thing worth mentioning is the diffusion of responsibility among users. Facebook allows for the formation of communities where there are no boundaries, rules or leaders. Organising crisis aid using social media is largely based on trusting strangers, which may lead to potentially dangerous situations. In theory, Facebook's parent company, Meta, provides user protection mechanisms in its terms and conditions, offering a safety framework, e.g. reporting tools that enable users to report inappropriate content, harassment, or suspicious accounts. However, this is still something that has to be taken into consideration. "Although numerous critics accuse Facebook of being a 'corporate perpetual motion machine', one has to admit that, in its own way, this flagship social medium has confirmed the idealistic vision of its creator in the case of the global aid movement for war refugees from Ukraine" (Kalinowska et al. 2023, p. 247).

3. Social Media as a Tool for Organising Humanitarian Aid

Organising aid activities on the internet, just like in the real world, requires taking advantage of existing social relations and establishing completely new ones. Let us consider this on the example of a local community. The organisation of aid in the "real world" in a local community has always involved voluntary and face-to-face

⁹ These are areas outside the range of internet access offering speed of at least 30 Mb/s (or 100 Mb/s in the case of educational institutions) (Ministerstwo Cyfryzacji 2017).

social contacts, on which the community's safety and support functions are based. Global processes, including modernisation and the development of technology, have had an unquestionable impact on the character of interpersonal relations, and consequently on the nature of social ties. As Starosta (1995, p. 168) notes, "Due to the growth of technology and advanced work methods, social behaviours are shifting from the collective and community stage to individualism and egotism". Nevertheless, particularly in rural areas, contacts are more extensive than in large conurbations. Even though face-to-face interaction has been the predominant form of communication in local communities, face-to-face neighbourly contacts have undergone reduction in favour of more formalised ties. Starosta notes that an increasingly important role in local communities is played by institutional and work-related contacts. Their role increases in crises, as shown by an analysis of local self-organisation during the crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. It was mainly based on local institutional ties, supported by personal ties (Halamska, Ptak 2022). In such situations, the subject of contacts gains significance. A characterisation of the subject basis of contacts consists in describing what forms the platform of the internal social contacts being established. It is therefore some kind of connection, i.e. an entity, attitude, interest, situation that partners consider a value or a factor encouraging them to establish and uphold contacts. In other words, it is the content of social contact (Starosta 1995, p. 167). In specific crisis cases in local communities, face-to-face relations are very often combined with institutional and work relations.

A quarter of a century ago, a new means of social communication emerged: the internet and social media. This is a different form of contact, currently a very important one when organising any kind of project involving local community resources. "Widespread social media usage contributes to the transformation of possibilities for being involved in creating places, interaction in space, establishing relations with local activists, residents" (Janc, Jurkowski 2020, p. 24). Social media may be used to renew or establish ties at various stages of a crisis, enabling information dissemination and two-way communication as well as supporting residents' commitment to the activities in question (Bonsón, Royo, Ratkai 2015). In addition, they increase awareness of existing needs among a wide group of users. Through social media, it is possible to quickly increase social awareness of an ongoing crisis, which may result in a speedier and stronger response from people who are willing to help (Xiao, Huang, Wu 2015).

In his article "The strength of weak ties", Granovetter (1973) pointed to the role of weak networks in spreading information and their impact on social structure, in the context of acquiring new information and possibilities that are not available in the case of strong ties. According to the American sociologist, weak ties

are those characterised by lower emotional intensity and intimacy, and to which we devote less time and attention. That is why they may be useful in specific situations such as a crisis, even though they will not be cultivated in daily life. Granovetter argued that weak ties were of key importance for the flow and dissemination of information, a crucial element in crises. These diverse social tie types and means of communication in local communities play diverse roles in crises.

Contemporary local communities exhibit the three aforementioned kinds of communication: face-to-face, work-related and with institutions as well as mediated by social media. Each of these forms of communication may generate a particular type of social tie, all of which may interpenetrate. The research presented here thus fits into the discussion on new forms of communication and their impact on the character of local community ties. Communication through new tools such as internet communicators transforms existing social relations and creates completely new ties that may never have emerged through traditional means. In its study of social ties, contemporary sociology increasingly draws attention to their connection to the psychosocial states of individuals. New forms of communication suggest that the character of social ties is changing (Szacka 2003, p. 161). This stems from their very nature, as “a fundamental indicator of all forms of social life uniting people – members of social groups, where the degree of group cohesion is the outcome of all the forces that affect the group members and induce them to remain in a group of people who share the same values” (Szacka 2003, p. 192). As the “virtual world” permeates and influences the “real world” more and more strongly, sociologists face the challenge of describing the relations between these two spheres. This also applies to analyses of social networks, which emerge and function in both realms.

Krzysztofek (2006, p. 70) has pointed out that virtual life is not separated from real life, but is simply a part of it. As a window onto the “e-world”, the internet may very well serve as a platform for building social microworlds. According to the sociologist, the internet allows people to establish contacts on a global level, but people mainly use it to uphold relations at the local level. The internet does not replace interpersonal communication, but only supplements it. The impact that the internet has on local community ties has been discussed by scholars Wellman and Hampton (2003). According to these cybersociologists, it does not weaken community but, rather, enhances neighbouring. While weakening social ties, it lends them more mobile character, better adjusted to neighbourly activity.

The universality and growing popularity of social media means that they are increasingly the subject of research. Their popularity and the increasing competence of the average citizen has led to the emergence of ever new usage patterns, possibilities and opportunities (Pawluczyk 2025). The role of social media has been

researched thoroughly in the context of the crises brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. In most cases, however, they have been presented as a part of the new reality, permanently embedded in citizens' everyday functioning. Social media are also considered in terms of a tool actively used in organisational activity in crises (Tworzydło 2022; Łaszyn et al. 2020; Kaczmarek-Śliwińska 2019, 2015, 2013), but there is a research gap regarding social media in refugee crises.

Social media are distinguished by flexibility, understood as the capacity to adjust quickly to new circumstances and respond immediately to changing needs. As opposed to traditional tools such as formal organisations, social media enable groups, initiatives and communication channels to be formed spontaneously. Users have the possibility to change goals at any time, to expand the range of activities, or redirect resources wherever they are needed the most at a given moment. This flexibility enables aid to be organised in real time, funding to be raised quickly, and people to be mobilised for community action. Social media thus enable the immediate exchange of information, the involvement of a large number of people, and effective adaptation of actions to a crisis. This allows for proper utilisation of available energy, limiting the amount of "wasted resources". It should also be noted that, due to their unpredictability, social media have a tendency to trigger crises (Kaczmarek-Śliwińska et al. 2022).

4. Facebook in the Aid Effort for Ukrainian Refugees in Orlin

The portal under consideration – Orlin dla Ukrainy – was set up on 26 February 2022 by a group of volunteers from Orlin two days after the war in Ukraine broke out. Its mission was the organisation and coordination of aid for Ukrainian refugees arriving in Orlin and its environs over different periods of time. The aim of the portal was to support residents in offering specific forms of assistance and to create a widely accessible network of contacts between donors and those in need.

The monthly distribution of posts reflected the community's commitment to helping refugees. In the first days of the group's functioning, from 26 February to 1 March 2022, as many as 112 posts were published, which was 22% of the total number of posts in the 15 months covered by the study. After this initial intensive period, posting activity decreased gradually, with a noticeable turning point between May and June, when the average daily number of posts dropped from 1.2 to 0.3. This point was taken as the transition from the reception stage to the integration stage (Jarosz, Klaus [eds.] 2023).

The reception stage lasted for the first three months (late February, March, April, May) and was characterised by residents' intensive involvement as they made an effort to best meet the refugees' basic needs. This was followed by the integration

stage,¹⁰ when the number of posts decreased and the aid effort focused on long-term support and the integration of refugees into the local community. Apart from the change in what donors offered, the needs of the Ukrainians changed as well. Those who decided to stay in Orlin for longer became more independent and did not need the same level of aid any more.

The first stage of aid efforts – the reception stage¹¹ – involves providing basic goods and humanitarian aid to those in need. In the absence of any legal framework, top-down norms or recommendations in the first days of an intensifying conflict, chaos and a lack of coordinated activity prevailed in many areas. Aid efforts in Orlin, including setting up a dedicated group on Facebook, began on 26 February 2022, the day that the first refugees arrived in the municipality. Practically overnight, the local government and residents were faced with a truly critical situation. There emerged an immediate need to take action to organise aid for the new arrivals. At this point, social media were harnessed as one of the tools for organising aid.

From the start of the Russian invasion, Orlin residents organised themselves efficiently through social media. They did their best to meet as many of the refugees' needs as possible. A high level of commitment is noticeable both in terms of the quality of published posts (the aid being offered)¹² and in quantitative terms.

The analysis carried out in the study shows that in the initial period, at the reception stage, there was a lot of activity on Facebook. In the first four days of the group's functioning, from 26 February to 1 March, 112 posts were published, accounting for 22% of all the posts published during the time covered by the study (15 months). The first stage of aid efforts mainly involved meeting the refugees' basic needs. This was reflected in the Facebook activity during the first days of the war. Orlin's residents undertook many efforts to adjust the aid being offered to the needs of those who potentially needed helping. It is worth underlining here that in the initial period of a crisis, when things are far from well organised and there is no clear plan of action, many decisions are made ad hoc.

The Orlin aid group on Facebook was set up on the very day that the first migrants arrived. The key activity during the first stage was to secure safe shelter and basic humanitarian aid. Most of the actions were organised spontaneously and, most importantly, as the personal initiatives of residents.

¹⁰ In our report (Halamska [ed.] 2023) this is called the adaptation and normalisation stage.

¹¹ Reception means taking people in and getting to know them.

¹² It is worth noting that the aid being offered constituted real-term support for those in need. An analysis of photos published with the posts shows that equipment was of relatively good quality and donations were intentionally adapted to the migrants' needs.

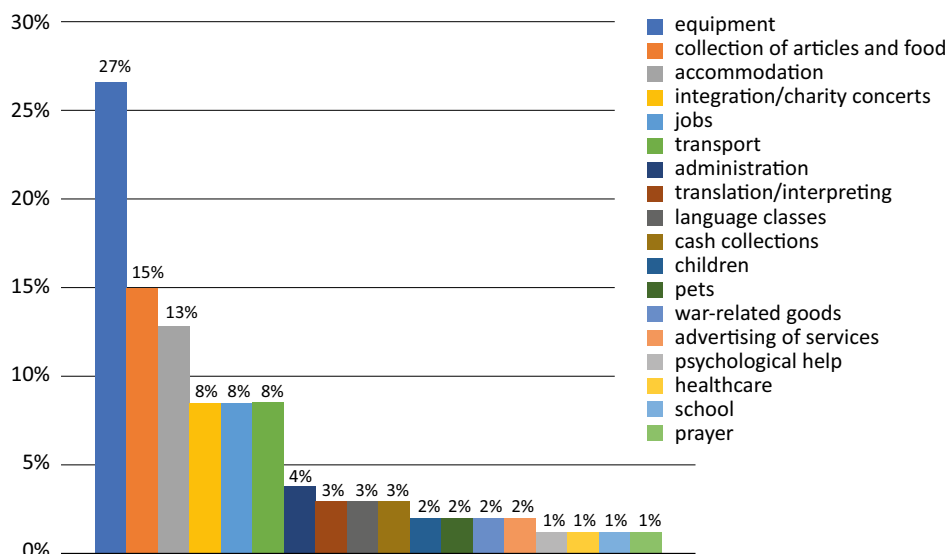


Figure 2. Topic categories of posts in the “Orlin dla Ukrainy” group on the Facebook platform (15-month period)

Rysunek 2. Kategorie tematyczne postów w grupie „Orlin dla Ukrainy” na platformie Facebook (okres 15 miesięcy)

Source: own study.

Źródło: opracowanie własne.

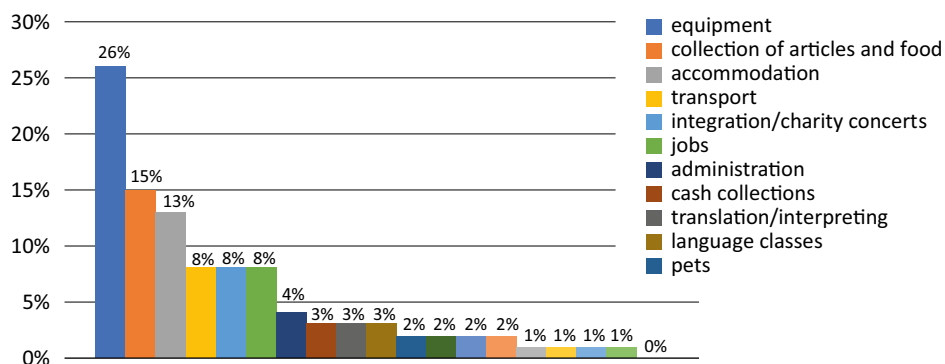


Figure 3. Aid categories during the refugee reception stage (in %)

Rysunek 3. Kategorie pomocy na etapie przyjmowania uchodźców (w %)

Source: own study.

Źródło: opracowanie własne.

The greatest number of posts published in the profile's first weeks concerned in-kind aid, i.e. clothing, food, furniture, medications, personal hygiene products, articles for children and babies, and household appliances. A sizable number of posts concerned the operation of the "warehouse" – a makeshift centre for storing and distributing donations in the municipality. The posts contained questions about current needs and articles in short supply as well as requests for the delivery of specific goods. The third most noticeable need published in the media was accommodation. This issue was mentioned in 24% of posts. This category was interesting because, according to research, most refugees make their way to a given location because of existing private connections to the place. As the study discussed here showed, a similar mechanism functioned in Orlin (Halamska [ed.] 2023). The first months of the profile's functioning – the reception stage – accounted for 90% of all posts.

One element worth considering in the process of organising charitable aid with the help of social media is that of moderators. Their role was extremely important. They were responsible for connecting the virtual world with the real one, for the actual utilisation of activities pursued on the internet. They were responsible for organisational activity among the community that emerged on the profile, and for two-way transmission of information between people sharing posts on Facebook and refugees, as the latter – for many reasons – were not necessarily able to follow the information on social media, especially in the first days after leaving their homes.¹³ The authors of the report "A Flammable Society: Practices of Helping Ukrainian War Refugees in Poland in 2022" point out that social media groups allowed for external communication, being used for daily updates of lists of the most urgent needs.

Numerous posts about specific items being needed show that there was a strong network of contacts and good communication between those helping and those in need. During the reception stage, posts concerned very specific needs. Most of them were followed by a large number of comments from people offering to help. Almost no request was left without a response. This proves that social media were utilised well as a tool for organising aid in the real world.

After the first three months, the activity of the Facebook community in question decreased. In practice, this meant a lower level of offered aid, as shown in the significantly smaller number of posts published on the profile.

¹³ In Orlin, the crisis team coordinator kept closely in touch with the facilitator. The coordinator had information on the identified needs of refugees from interviews conducted during their registration (Halamska [ed.] 2023, p. 42).

5. Conclusions

Social media, in this case Facebook, turned out to be an effective tool for organising humanitarian aid in a crisis. As opposed to traditional means of communication, mass media enable information to be passed on to a large number of people within a short time, and allow conversations to be held simultaneously on different levels, which is extremely important in dynamically changing circumstances during a crisis. Continual communication allows actions to be adjusted to the changing situation.

Social media played a special role during the first stage of providing aid – the reception stage. Over the first three months, the Orlin community showed great commitment and willingness to help. This period accounts for 90% of all posts from the entire period under consideration. They mainly concerned the distribution of goods, coordination of overnight stays, organisation of cash collections and planning of transport. The second stage – integration – brought a significant decrease in social media activity. As time passed, the Ukrainians became more and more comfortable in the local community and did not need as much help as they had upon arrival. The character of published posts also changed. The number of messages concerning basic necessities decreased, while more messages appeared that referred to meeting secondary needs such as toys, furniture and sports equipment. There were also numerous posts inviting Ukrainians to all kinds of special events, concerts, fairs and festivals. Facebook thus turned out to be a useful tool in the process of adaptation/normalisation as well.

Social media are an efficient tool in crisis management, enabling activities to be organised on a scale unattainable using traditional communication. In crises, both face-to-face communication and social media are essential for the organisation of charitable aid. Research has shown that local communities form new ties, or “bubbles”, that create a local network enabling different groups to work together effectively. In the Orlin local-government community, the idea of building such a structure emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic and was used in crisis management. Social media make it easier to build new relations and coordinate activities, combining virtual initiatives with real-world assistance.

The study has shown that in crises like the war in Ukraine, local communities activate both strong and weak social ties, which enable aid to be organised effectively. Strong social ties, which are formed on the basis of everyday close relations between community members, were visible in the direct organisation of aid, e.g. local donation collections. Weak ties, on the other hand, which are characterised by less intensive contacts, play a role through social media like Facebook. It was these weak ties that enabled information to be disseminated

quickly, reaching a greater number of people. It is worth noting the connections between the various types of communication – traditional and new. In the complex network of relations observed in the crisis under consideration, the internet network was “expanded” to include individuals who were formally absent from it. People from outside the network were included through personal, face-to-face contacts or via the internet, as every volunteer had a network of relations, or “bubble”, woven from the people close to them, who supported them in their activity. These structures, as the study shows, contributed to the effective coordination of aid activity. The internet became a platform enabling diverse virtual ties to be formed which, through private “bubbles”, extended into personal/face-to-face ties. One may therefore surmise that local community ties are complex and hybrid.

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Od spotkania twarzą w twarz do Facebooka

Streszczenie: Artykuł poświęcony jest wykorzystaniu mediów społecznościowych jako narzędzia do organizacji pomocy humanitarnej ukraińskim uchodźcom wojennym. Tekst opiera się na badaniach dotyczących możliwości absorpcji uchodźców przez wiejskie i małomiasteczkowe społeczności lokalne, zrealizowanych w Instytucie Rozwoju Wsi i Rolnictwa Polskiej Akademii Nauk w latach 2022–2023. Było to studium przypadku przeprowadzone w wielkopolskiej gminie Orlin. Jeden z analizowanych podczas badań aspektów odnosił się do wykorzystania Facebooka jako kanału komunikacji w czasie kryzysu uchodźczego. Artykuł ma na celu przedstawienie funkcjonalności mediów społecznościowych w roli narzędzia służącego organizowaniu pomocy humanitarnej, co uświadamia skalę zmian, jakie zaszły w sposobach komunikowania się w „wielosieczowej” społeczności lokalnej.

Słowa kluczowe: uchodźcy, migracja, media społecznościowe, Ukraina.