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# Frontline of Refugee Reception Policy: Warsaw Reception Centers During the 2022 Ukrainian Crisis

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**Abstract:** The article explores issues of the Polish refugee reception policy from the perspective of frontline workers: officials, citizen volunteers, and NGO workers at reception centers. It presents conclusions from the research of two Warsaw reception points established by the Voivode of Mazowsze in the beginning of the Ukraine war crisis in 2022. Looking at reception policy from the perspective of frontline workers and examining institutional frameworks (policy goals, regulations and norms) as entry conditions for various actors to collaborate, the article concludes that actions taken by the state authorities in the first weeks of crisis were an example of the responsibilization practices. Insights from the research can be helpful for the Multilevel Governance scholars to better understand the impact of top-down policy on the process of service delivery and problems of collaboration between actors at the local level of policy implementation.

**Keywords:** reception policy; refugees; migration crisis; frontline-work; multilevel governance

## 1 Introduction

During the first week of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, nearly one million Ukrainian refugees crossed the Polish border. By March 8th, 2022 almost 300,000 people had arrived in Warsaw. The Polish government decided to deal with this crisis by establishing "central reception points": temporary, open facilities for refugees from Ukraine, located near the big cities. The state authorities delegated this task to the Voivodes, a regional government, and gave them a specific order to collaborate with social actors to ensure volunteers and other resources.

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The goal of this article is to present conclusions from two case studies of Warsaw reception points: Facility A and Facility B, established by the Voivode and co-operated with various actors. Our research focused on explaining the Polish government's reception policy from the perspective of frontline workers: officials, citizen volunteers, and NGO workers at Warsaw's reception centers. Reception policy refers to rules, procedures, and guidelines for organizing and providing services to refugees and asylum seekers upon their arrival. It is classified as crisis management, as it involves providing quick support to often traumatized and vulnerable individuals and families who have recently experienced loss (Kegel 2016). The duration of the reception phase is not precisely specified and may range up to several months (UNHCR 2002). During this time, refugees are usually accommodated in specialized facilities, such as asylums and reception centers, and receive basic needs support, including food, healthcare, psychological support, welfare transfers etc.

Reception policy is often evaluated through the lens of the Multilevel Governance (MLG) concept, where different actors are involved in complex, formal, and informal relationships at various levels of government policy implementation (Campomori and Caponio 2017). It is considered to be the politics of subsidiarity, where the responsibility for refugee reception is distributed among actors from different states, municipalities, and state actors to civil society (Kaya and Nagel 2021, p. 235). The MLG concept provides insights into how actors arrange institutional frameworks for reception policy: goals, rules, organizations, and laws. However, scholars often overlook the impact on the local micro-practices of the governing process, especially frontline work (Caponio, Ponzo, and Giannetto 2019; Doomernik and Glorius 2016; Hinger, Schäfer, and Pott 2016; Sahin-Mencutek et al. 2022). Our research addresses this gap and answers how institutional frameworks impact frontline services at the reception centers. We adapted the street-level work perspective (Brodkin 2020; Lipsky 2010), which considers the results of the policy as being determined by workers of the frontline service, who interact on a daily basis with the recipients, and decide how to deal with their expectations and obligations to authorities, procedures, and regulations. Our focus was on the cooperation between actors involved in providing aid, including state officials, NGOs workers, and citizen volunteers. In our research, we asked questions about the barriers and conditions for efficient collaboration at the frontline of reception policy, in the situation of crisis, and explored dilemmas and conflicts that appeared at the reception centers between actors.

The article is structured as follows: first, we present the MLG concept and discuss the current state of reception policies in Europe. Next we discuss the context of reception actions taken by the government of Poland in the first days of war. Subsequently, we describe the theoretical framework and the methodology of our case

studies and present the results of conducted research. In the discussion part we evaluate actions taken by the polish government as a responsibilization practices which led to decisional dilemmas, problems with reception management and conflicts with volunteers. The paper ends with the conclusion part where we claim that conditions for the effective engagement of social actors in reception policy require guidelines for state agents to collaborate with citizens, and transparent delegation of responsibilities.

## 2 Multilevel Governance of the Reception Policy

In EU, member states have shifted away from isolated, state-run reception policies to a model in which responsibility is shared among international agencies, state and local governments who collaborate with NGOs, municipalities, and private companies to provide support for refugees and asylum seekers (Campomori and Caponio 2017; Caponio and Jones-Correa 2018; Polat and Lowndes 2022; Scholten and Penninx 2016). This transition has been analyzed through the lens of the Multilevel Governance (MLG) framework, and focus on how actors collaborate to establish the 'institutional frameworks' of policy, including goals, organizations, regulations, and norms (Campomori and Caponio 2017; Danış and Nazlı 2019; Sabchev 2021). Furthermore, it focuses on explaining how these frameworks impact the process of policy implementation, service provision, and arrangements among actors at the local level (Glorius et al. 2019; Ponzo 2022).

The current state of research indicates that reception policies are being developed under the pressure of internationalization and crisis on the one hand and a "local turn" on the other (Kaya and Nagel 2021; Caponio, Ponzo, and Giannetto 2019; Polat and Lowndes 2022). International agencies, such as the UNHCR and the UE, attempt to establish similar standards for reception governance, such as the EU Reception Conditions Directive (Directive 2013/33/EU), which sets requirements for basic provisions such as food, housing, medical support, or UNHCR guidelines for the organization and management of reception facilities (UNHCR 2016). However, these attempts often fail because state authorities have a high degree of discretion in interpreting and implementing international regulations (Kaya and Nagel 2021). The patterns of reception policies differ, as each country has a distinct approach to managing migration issues rooted in their institutional settings and traditions (Nagel and Kaya 2020; Scholten and Penninx 2016). Regarding the migration crisis, state governments appeared to face limited capacity – in the sense of resources and organizational solutions – to address the needs of refugees (Sahin-Mencutek et al. 2022; Polat and Lowndes 2022). In response to insufficient state actions, the local authorities,

NGOs and other civil society actors collaborate, sometimes with help from the international organizations, and often evolve into more permanent networks of assistance for refugees (Doomernik and Ardon 2018; Sabchev 2021).

Such local networks, due to their ability to efficiently organize resources, are able to act quickly and directly address the needs of refugees. While they are often praised for their problem solving capabilities (Glorius 2022; Sabchev 2021; Sunata and Tosun 2019), they also pose a risk of being non-accountable and lacking political control (Klijn and Koppenjan 2015; Piattoni 2009; Sørensen 2005). Municipalities do not only implement top-down policies, but they develop their own particular goals, ways of service delivery and patterns for collaboration with local actors (Alexander 2007; Caponio and Borkert 2010; Penninx et al. 2004). Without efficient coordination and control mechanisms, this can lead to a disconnection from state policies and decoupling (Glorius et al. 2019; Jørgensen 2012; Poppelaars and Scholten 2008; Spencer 2018). Therefore, despite increasing prominence of local actors in managing the reception process, the state authorities do not withdraw but develop new strategies to regain control over "the local" (Danış and Nazlı 2019; Glorius 2022) or even move toward centralization of reception policies (Caponio, Ponzo, and Giannetto 2019). State authorities do not always take into account the existing bottom-up arrangements and force solutions that can create tensions and hinder cooperation between actors. This poses a risk of unequal distribution of responsibilities among actors that often end with blaming of non-state actors in the event of a failure (Polat and Lowndes 2022; Pasetti and Garcés-Mascareñas 2018) and increase the risk of "responsibilization" (Shamir 2008). Responsibilization is a state "master-key of governance" and means shifting responsibility to social actors to solve public issues (Shamir 2008, p. 5). This includes assigning individuals the positions of professional problem-solvers and burdening them with addressing issues caused by structural factors (Peeters 2019), such as in case of volunteers who are engaged in performing tasks within the domain of professional state agents (Lacey and Ilcan 2006; Verhoneven and van Bochove 2018).

While there are a number of studies that focus on explaining the nuances of institutional frameworks established by state authorities or international agencies and how they impact local-level actions, there is a knowledge gap on how these frameworks actually work in the everyday practice of reception services. The MLG research approach often fails when it comes to "zooming" on the local and micro-practices of the governing process (Caponio, Ponzo, and Giannetto 2019; Doomernik and Glorius 2016; Hinger, Schäfer, and Pott 2016; Sahin-Mencutek et al. 2022). In particular, there is limited insight into the impact of institutional frameworks on frontline workers, who take responsibility for the actions, but may not always identify with the policy or involved organizations.

## 3 Context of Polish Reception Policy in March 2022

Before the war in Ukraine began, Poland transposed EU Reception Conditions Directive and UNHCR standards into the national legislation acts.[1] The responsibility for the reception policy is divided between the Chief Office for Foreigners (COF) being the body and the Ministry of Family and Social Assistance. The COF is responsible for providing housing for asylum seekers which include management of the two reception facilities. After the start of the war, the Polish government concluded that existing infrastructure is insufficient, as the expected number of refugees from Ukraine in need of temporary housing will be much higher than the capacity of the reception centers run by the COF. Therefore, the Prime Minister decided to act under the National Crisis Strategy (NCS).[2] NCS anticipates the establishment of additional "central reception points" as temporary facilities, allowing for a stay of up to three days, and remaining under the supervision of a Voivode. The NCS made Voivodes accountable for the critical infrastructure and resources in reception centers (including beds, kitchen facilities, and toilets), Voivode was also responsible for partnering with food providers, maintaining security, and ensuring sanitation. However, the NCS did not specify the source of funding, assuming that the expenses would be covered by the Voivode's budget. It needs to be emphasized that the NCS for reception centers was written more as general guidelines rather than specific procedures, giving the Voivodes significant discretion in determining how to manage facilities. For example, the NCS instruction for facility equipment say only "*it should enable to organize housing, medical care and food provision*" (NCS part B, p. 119) and give no further indications how it should be organized except the fact that the Voivode ought to cooperate with municipalities in this matter. Moreover, the Prime Minister gave Voivodes direct instructions to cooperate with social actors in order to acquire resources, i.e. food, hygienic and sanitary articles and volunteers.

The government's decision to involve Voivodes in the management of reception facilities is considered to be the first step toward shifting responsibilities for the reception policy to the local level. Ultimately, Voivodes established 28 central reception centers placed in big cities, ensuring proper infrastructure and access to resources, such as volunteers and social actors who can provide food, equipment etc. However, the document lacks clarity on the types of services that social actors and volunteers can or cannot provide, their prerogatives, and the regulations or procedures that should be

1 For detailed information see: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/NIM/?uri=CELEX:32013L0033 (12.02.2024) and Pachocka et al. (2020).

2 The National Crisis Strategy its an act established by the National Security Center an governmental body under the polish Prime Minister. Voivodes are regional representatives of the central government, responsible for adjustment and implementation of the NCS in voivodeships.

followed when collaborating with them at reception facilities. The second step of the responsibilization process came with the Law of March 12, 2022 on Assistance to Citizens of Ukraine, which aimed to remove regulatory barriers in the management of refugee reception and assistance, and established a special fund exclusively for the purpose of providing aid for refugees.[3] The act granted Voivodes authority to bypass public procurement regulations and allocate money at their own discretion to organizations that support Ukrainian citizens. In fact, Voivodes found themselves in a position with new obligations to fulfill (reception centers establishment and supervisory), new challenges (collaboration with social actors and volunteers), without detailed instructions and clear prerogatives on how to act, but with relatively high levels of discretion and flexibility in taking actions. Some observers recognize that voivode officials interpreted the government decisions as a "do it yourself" message, which created expectations to take matters into their own hands (Łukasiewicz and Matuszczyk 2023). These expectations covered ideas about sharing responsibilities with social actors and clashed with the reality of frontline work in the reception centers, where volunteers and social actors played a significant role.

# 4 Theoretical Framework

For the purpose of our research, we adopted the street-level work perspective (Brodkin 2020; Lipsky 2010) and considered individuals acting at the reception centers as frontline workers. The term frontline worker derived originally from the *street-level bureaucrat* (Lipsky 2010) definition of state agents, i.e. social workers, policemen, teachers, who interact on a daily basis with the citizens and make decisions that are appropriate for clients and their situations.[4] Street-level bureaucrats make decisions within an institutional framework (van Berkel 2020) where they are expected to perform their tasks in line with procedures while also addressing the needs of citizens in a professional manner, and being held accountable for both (Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003). In many situations that occur on the frontline of service delivery, these two obligations are often contradictory and creating decisional dilemmas, which are often resolved through exercising discretionary power that can help fill system gaps (Brodkin 2020; Lipsky 2010).

**3** The Special Law does not specifically cover only refugees (however, the term is mentioned in the act) but all Ukrainians who arrived in Poland (crossed the Ukrainian/Polish border) and submitted application for internal protection, declared the intention to submit an application for international protection or who are benefiting from temporary protection in other country.

**4** As the public service often does not require for the workers to be hired directly by the public administration, the term street-level bureaucrat was replaced for more accurate term street-level worker or frontline worker.

The multilevel reality of the reception process presents a complicated scenario, as frontline workers are not only state agents, but come from different environments with different agendas and obligations, and yet they are compelled to collaborate on the same ground. This refers not only to professional workers, but also to the volunteers, clerks, NGO representatives and all others who encounter refugees on the ground of the reception point and engage in organizing and providing services. Certain activities, such as refugee registration, may be straightforward, while others, such as coordinating delivery and distributing supplies, regulating food, supervising volunteers, monitoring and enforcing safety, can present significant challenges. Frontline workers find themselves tasked with the simultaneous fulfillment of duties involving the provision of aid to traumatized and injured refugees, while also navigating organizational concerns, adhering to administrative protocols and following safety guidelines. If roles and tasks are not clearly defined and assigned, there may be an accountability deficit among frontline workers responsible for reception management. For instance, volunteers at reception centers who are typically supervised, may act without being accountable to any particular organization that is in charge of reception (Fredericksen and Levin 2004; Martin and Nolte 2020). For the state-frontline workers faced with "shared-responsibility" situations, decisional dilemmas occur due to the fact that management staff is not the same as those they are required to justify their actions to, which again creates a risk of contradictory incentives (Hupe and Hill 2007). Without a proper institutional framework and clear guidelines for cooperation, reception centers may face a high risk of non-transparent decisions and difficulties in collaboration. This can be especially problematic during a crisis, when institutional frameworks are tested for their coherence and ability to create scenarios for frontline workers to make accountable decisions.

Our research focused on exploring how decisions about organization of reception centers and the frontline were made. We aimed to understand the decisional dilemmas that actors faced and how they overcame them. We chose to examine the reception centers as a space of "shared responsibility" where voivode officials, NGOs and volunteers work together as frontline workers, under pressure of time and the upcoming high number of refugees from Ukraine and within the context of unclear regulations and lack of guidelines.

## 5 Methodology

For our study we selected two out of the four existing reception centers in the Warsaw agglomeration. The centers were chosen based on the following criteria: the number of refugees, the character of the contract with the facility owner (outsourced management; management by the Voivodeship employees), and media attention.

The first reception center (Facility A) was located in a government-owned sports hall near the city center and was rented to the Voivode. The region's smallest reception center, as measured by the number of beds for refugees, was open for only seven weeks and was considered by the Voivode to be an additional facility in case of overload. The second reception point (Facility B) was the largest in the Mazovia Region and was located on the outskirts of the city. The Voivode outsourced management of the center to a private company. Both reception centers faced management issues reported by the media. At Facility A, the media accused the Voivode of not taking responsibility for the facility and overburdening the volunteers. In the case of Facility B, the media reported on the potential fraud of the facility's owner and the Voivode's insufficient control.

The research covered several methods, including: individual in-depth interviews with Voivode officials (6), volunteers (12), and NGO workers (5) who were involved in coordinating management at the reception centers; media reports analysis; desk research of legal acts, reports, and internal documents from the Voivodeship office; and content posted in social media groups dedicated to the organization of aid activities at the reception centers. This study was conducted between April and December 2022. Key interviewees (like voluntary coordinator or Voivode coordinator) were identified in the desk research stage. For the rest of the case study participants we used the *snowball* recruitment technique with the help of the key interviewees. The duration of the interviews ranged from 45 to 129 min, and the transcribed interviews and all materials were analyzed using MaxQda.

# 6 Results

## 6.1 Facility A

The Voivode appointed a Facility A Coordinator who was supported by four clerks from the Voivode's Office. The Coordinator had access to resources from the strategic crisis management reserves, including beds, tents, and disinfectants. These resources did not include food, personal care items, or medicine, which were to be organized with the help of NGOs and volunteers. The Voivode's Plenipotentiary for the Cooperation with Non-Governmental Organizations (CfCN) was responsible for contacting, organizing and providing logistics for supplies and volunteers. It should be emphasized that the Facility A Coordinator and the CfCN had no financial resources under their disposal. From the very beginning, it was clear that the current financial and human resources were inadequate. As a result, the responsibility of supporting the refugees fell mainly on volunteers and charities.

A group of volunteers who initially helped on day one formed an informal collective to manage resources and provide support. Within days, this group grew to over 30 members and adopted a structured approach similar to a corporate setup, complete with leadership roles and specialized divisions such as resources, logistics, kitchen, and childcare. The volunteers coordinated their work through social media to acquire supplies from donors. The leaders, one with event management experience and the other a seasoned charity coordinator, prioritized swift and comprehensive aid with professionalism. They supervised the collaboration of non-profit organizations, such as scouts and charities, at the reception site. They even provided guidance to clerks and security personnel.

Facility A was under the pressure of a large number of incoming refugees. Volunteers quickly became exhausted and overwhelmed. Despite receiving donations from non-profit organizations, private companies, and citizens, there was a problem with finding medical and psychological support, translators, medicines, hygienic articles, and hot meals or equipment. Additionally, security was a concern as there was no identification or authorization of volunteers, and refugees were not registered during the first week. Furthermore, the facility was only monitored by two police officers during daytime. Suspicious situations, including theft or impersonation of volunteers were handled by leaders of the voluntary group with the help of police officers. As a result, volunteer leaders started to complain that the Voivode Coordinator threw off responsibility for solving such important problems:

> I have alarmed Voivode clerks and told them: it's great that we are working together, but if something happens, if someone will be raped, die, I will not take responsibility for it. But they remain silent and passive. (Volunteers' leader)

On the tenth day of Facility A's operation tensions escalated as the volunteers' leader voiced her concerns to the media. She blamed the Voivode for taking insufficient action and requested increased involvement from the Voivode's office and clearer partnership conditions. In response, the Coordinator acknowledged that while most of the work at the reception frontline was done by the volunteers, the clerks were engaged in solving problems off-site, such as organizing medical points, preparing space, organizing transfers for refugees, and providing security services. The Coordinator also underlined that the clerks were often investing their private time and were similarly exhausted and overwhelmed by the situation. Their unresponsiveness to reported problems was primarily caused by their limited discretion and lack of expertise:

> For us, this situation was completely new. We did not have competence and experience in dealing with the problems we faced. We did not have guidance or procedures for organizing the reception to follow, and we barely had any resources to manage. However, we were obliged to

> follow other procedures, like data protection or sanitation, which caused a lot problems because they become a barrier that we wouldn't cross (the Coordinator).

It should be emphasized that clerks often faced decisional dilemmas: to act according to the procedures or handle the problem efficiently but, by the law.

The conflict resulted in negative publicity for the Voivode, which led to his direct intervention. As a first step the Voivode appointed another coordinator, a close associate, to restore order in the facility. Unlike the initial coordinator, who viewed volunteers as independent, the new coordinator treated them as Voivode employees:

> It was obvious from the beginning that the Voivode was in charge, and all of them [volunteers] were working for him. It's the Voivode who is solely responsible for the reception, not others (Second Voivodeship coordinator)

The second coordinator believed that sharing responsibility with volunteers was risky, fearing that they might make irresponsible decisions that could endanger the security of refugees or themselves. However, the volunteers disagreed with her management approach, feeling overcontrolled and sometimes disrespected:

> Once I have made decision without informing her and she shouted at me that I, as volunteer, don't have authority to make any decisions at all (Volunteer)

In the second step the Voivode proposed individual contracts for volunteers, outlining tasks and working conditions. However, some volunteers, particularly those from informal groups and their leaders, refused to sign. They objected to the clause requiring them to 'care for the positive image of the office' and feared the contracts would demand complete submission to the coordinator. In the third step the Voivode introduced a third party to the reception management, the Foundation that was in charge of the government special operation fund established just for the purpose of handling the Ukrainian refugee crisis. The Foundation, comprising experienced professionals, implemented efficient management practices, including volunteer identification systems. They mediated between volunteers and Voivode clerks, integrating volunteer suggestions while maintaining their autonomy. Voivodeship coordinators respected the Foundation's authority and stepped back. Although the reception point functioned well, there was still tension between the volunteers and officials. This tension became apparent when the Voivode announced the center's closure and thanked the volunteers for their commitment, but excluded the group leader and their closest coworkers from acknowledgment:

> Voivode had mentioned and thanked everyone, but not me and my volunteers. I was crying. I felt explored, used and undervalued (Volunteers' leader)

## 6.2 Facility B

At the Facility B the Voivode signed a contract with the private company for establishment and management of the accommodation point. Due to the lack of relevant regulations, the Voivode had procedural problems with financing reception centers. However it was possible to finance the accommodation points, as long-term stay facilities for refugees. This allowed the Voivode to establish the accommodation and the reception center in one place, paying only for the former. According to the contract, the building administrator was to provide adequate infrastructure for refugees (toilets, bathrooms, canteen) as well as regular meals and cleaning services, and the owner was to be paid for each inhabitant per day. The Facility B Coordinator assigned by Voivode was officially responsible for monitoring and supervision (e.g. preparing daily reports on the number of refugees and the problems that occurred). Despite that, she assisted the administrator in organizing medical care and arranging places to eat and sleep. Additionally, she volunteered her time during and after work hours. Although the private company bore the responsibility, the Voivode's Coordinator was aware that addressing all needs based solely on the company's resources and expertise could be problematic. Therefore, citizen assistance was kindly welcomed and perceived as crucial, especially in the first days of the crisis.

The volunteers helped with organization of the support, and brought their own resources into the reception center. They have also managed to reorganize work and create a structure of specialized sections: reception, storage, dining, and bedrooms, and use social media for coordination. Facebook was used to communicate current needs, setting schedules and organizing introductory training sessions for new volunteers. However, at Facility B there were no volunteer leaders, so the coordination of their work was split among the Voivode's Coordinator, the administrator's staff and some more experienced volunteers.

At Facility B the main issue was the lack of communication and transparency in the management structure which caused conflicts between volunteers and the facility management. The volunteers were not informed who was in charge, so they attempted to solve problems independently, for example they tried to address the issue of theft by providing each refugee with a registration document containing information about the products they have received. However the hall administrator took more control measures and undermined their efforts. He was convinced that theft incidents were caused by the minorities, e.g. Roma, which led to a decision of refusing admission to certain groups. Volunteers stood up against this decision and convinced the owner of the building to allow families with children:

> […] Roma registrations were blocked and a family with a one-month-old baby was not allowed in. I had to intervene because a friend called and said that they had been sitting at the Western Railway Station for six hours because no one had let them in. (Volunteer)

After the reception center had been operating for some time, there was a high level of distrust between the facility management and volunteers. The hall administrator accused the volunteers of stealing from the warehouse (which they had set up and run) and restricted their access to the goods as well as ordered his employees to monitor the volunteers' work and inventory each new shipment. These actions caused problems with delivering the collected goods to the refugees. His next step was to hire some new coordinators and make changes to established solutions without consulting the volunteers. The volunteers felt insulted because the new coordinators treated them as free labor:

> And nobody paid them for it, they were there for free, I heard [the Coordinator] say, "Fuck off if you don't want to be here." […] She had no right, just because she got angry. (Voivode coordinator)

As for the Voivode Coordinator, she was very committed to helping on the ground and wanted to create a good atmosphere in the facility. She also tried to avoid the conflict. However, she did not see herself in the position of the person in charge:

> […] The coordinators and the volunteers had such a power pressure because they saw themselves as coordinators, […] and I accepted it and it was okay for me. I let them rule. […] And I know that there was some conflict between the staff and the volunteer, somehow that situation was mitigated. […] I was busy, I wasn't involved in that. (Voivode coordinator)

On the one hand the Voivode Coordinator did not have any formal power over the hall administrator to impose solutions in order to resolve the situation with volunteers. On the other, the hall administrator had a lot of discretion in managing the reception and accommodation process. For him the volunteers were useful until they started to oppose the new management policy. After all, the conflict between volunteers and the hall administrator was never addressed, which made volunteers feel as if the Voivodeship Coordinator was not on their side.

The previous official coordinator resigned and was replaced by a few coordinators from the Crisis Management Department. The obligation to register the number of refugees was transferred to the Expo coordinator. It was discovered that the Expo staff had reported more people in the facility than there actually were. The Voivode ordered an inspection, which revealed the discrepancy in the number of refugees.

It needs to be emphasized that the Voivode did not establish any methodology to count refugees at the reception centers. After all, he decided to end the contract and withdrew officials, security services (e.g. soldiers, policemen), and sections created

on the initiative of the office (e.g. the Canadian Embassy section) from the facility. The Voivode also decided that inhabitants from Facility B will be transferred to other facilities. The hall administrator made this task difficult by discouraging refugees from leaving. As a result, only a few people decided to move and most of them stayed unsupervised by the state.

Volunteers also decided to leave the facility. They closed some areas (such as the cafeteria or housing), and the administrators of the Facebook group stopped posting information about needed products. It led to outrage of the Facility B staff, who once again accused the volunteers of stealing - this time of a Facebook page. In the end, the volunteers felt cheated and used:

> Suddenly everything was so dirty, and the emotions, the empathy that the people of Warsaw had, were soiled by them. Such a calculation, I didn't realize what the possibilities of earning from charity help were. (Volunteer coordinator)

# 7 Discussion

In both reception centers, the situation in the first weeks was described as organizational chaos: there was a problem with defining who is responsible for what. From day one, spontaneous volunteers became the main workforce, and took personal responsibility for providing services. At that stage the volunteers did not have official authorization from the Voivode or from Coordinators to provide support as organized groups. However, Coordinators in both reception points permitted the non-formal volunteer groups to act with only minimal supervision, as deemed necessary in the moment of crisis and scarcity of resources.

The lack of resources and an experienced team made them dependent on social actors and not in the position of taking a leading role. Moreover, the responsibility for the management was blurred because the Voivode officials were struggling with the lack of clear guidelines to navigate between procedural restrictions and situations that required quick and efficient decisions. The conflicts burst out mainly because the volunteers felt overwhelmed with duties and fear that they will be held accountable for their decision in case of accident or crime. Moreover, volunteers often felt discouraged by public representatives' and management attitudes and lack of recognition and support for their engagement.

The main difference in responsibility structure was that at Facility A official representatives were directly involved and could be held accountable, even if at the initial stage they had very limited resources and lacked agency. In practice, the discretionary power was held by volunteers' leaders, who were the main driving

force behind the initial center activities. At Facility B, the Coordinator was not held accountable for the organization of the facility, and the contract between the Voivode and the owner of the facility did not contain any guidelines or procedures, which meant that it was the hall administration that had discretion in this field. In both cases the volunteers had an impression of organizational chaos and were confused about who was responsible for what, but in case of Facility A they had more influence and could set provisional management structures.

In the end, the lack of clear guidance for reception organizations created a dilemma: both volunteers and officials were unsure of their prerogatives and legitimacy. This confirms findings from other research indicating that accountability can be a problem in bottom-up initiatives, where the delineation of responsibilities often remains ambiguous for participating actors (Fredericksen and Levin 2004; Martin and Nolte 2020). However, it is important to note that the consequences of such a situation ultimately led to volunteer burnout and a loss of trust in public administration. The Voivodeship management created situations where volunteers experienced contradictory incentives (Hupe and Hill 2007). Initially, they felt deeply engaged and willing to cooperate as they were encouraged to organize help and share their resources, but because of the pressures to control them, they started to feel unappreciated and treated as unpaid workers. This could be avoided if the Voivode coordinators had more resources at their disposal and were better prepared to take on leadership roles, effectively managing the collaboration among actors from various sectors. It needs to be emphasized that officials were also actively involved in finding solutions and assisting with activities. They sometimes took risks by overpassing the procedures only to get the job done.

Another matter is the reaction of the Voivode to organizational problems in reception points. The response aimed at deflecting blame and avoiding bad publicity rather than at taking responsibility for initial decisions. At Facility A the Voivode attempted to fix problems by regaining control over reception management. This re-control strategy failed, as the new coordinator treated volunteers as the "servants" of the Voivode, causing them to feel disrespected and undervalued. However, the situation was resolved thanks to the involvement of a professional and resourceful Foundation. The Foundation took full responsibility for management and decision-making, resulting in the elimination of organizational chaos. The Voivode's actions should not be interpreted as a reaction to the process of decoupling the state policy from the local policy. During the first weeks of the crisis, the authorities relied solely on local actors and citizens. Voivode's actions were rather an effort to maintain control, as he was pushed by the media to prove his commitment to the case.

Facility B's case led to a slightly different conclusion. Voivode's decision about outsourcing the reception to the private company turned out to be a mistake, as the hall

administrator was more focused on profits than on the quality of the reception itself. The Voivode's tactics of standing back, monitoring, and not interfering – eventually led to a lower quality of service and problems with the volunteers. In the end, the Voivode withdrew from the contract and left the refugees at the center, unsupervised by the state. This can be interpreted as blame avoidance, as the Voivode did not want to be held responsible for the outcome.

Both cases provide valuable insights for evaluating recent centralization trends in reception policies (Caponio, Ponzo, and Giannetto 2019). State authorities' actions in this regard may be superficial, aimed primarily at creating the appearance of control, while the local practices could be disconnected from the national policy goals. From the practitioner's perspective the Facility A's case highlights the importance of third-party intervention and expertise in resolving organizational chaos and improving service quality. In contrast, Facility B showcased the weaknesses of profit-driven outsourcing and hands-off management, resulting in decreased service standards and ultimately to the Voivode's abdication of responsibility.

# 8 Conclusions

The article presents insight into the frontline level of the reception policy during the Ukrainian refugee crisis in Poland in 2022. The reception policy is often evaluated through the lens of the Multilevel Governance concept, where different actors involved in complex, formal, and informal relationships at various levels of government implement the policy (Campomoro and Caponio 2017). Scholars often focus on explaining how actors arrange institutional frameworks, but they often overlook the impact of the micro-practices of the governing process, especially frontline work (Caponio, Ponzo, and Giannetto 2019; Doomernik and Glorius 2016; Hinger, Schäfer, and Pott 2016; Sahin-Mencutek et al. 2022). The main goal of the presented research was to explore this gap and determine how institutional frameworks established by Polish state authorities impacted frontline services at reception centers. To evaluate this impact, we adapted the street-level work perspective (Lipsky 2010; Brodkin 2020), which focuses on the frontline workers dealing with expectations of the recipients on the one hand, and obligations to authorities on the other. Our research investigated the decision-making dilemmas and conflicts faced by state officials, NGOs workers, and citizen volunteers at reception centers during the time of crisis. We also examined the barriers and conditions that affect efficient collaboration among actors from different environments.

First, our study confirmed observations from other countries that reception policies are turning local, and social actors are becoming crucial in providing effective services for refugees in crisis situations (Glorius 2022; Sabchev 2021; Sunata and Tosun 2019). Our

research has shown that volunteers in reception centers were not only useful as workforce, but have proven to be resourceful professionals with organizational skills who can effectively manage reception processes. A key to their effectiveness was their ability to collaborate with other actors, including public officials, NGOs and private companies. We found that successful cooperation depends not only on shared goals, mutual trust, or individual competences, but also on an appropriate institutional framework that provides access to resources, management tools, and, most importantly, clearly defined roles and responsibilities.

Second, we found that the Polish government's strategy for organizing reception exemplified the politics of subsidiarity. Responsibility for providing aid to refugees was shifted onto the social actors, and the local level of governance (Kaya and Nagel 2021). The Polish authorities tasked the Voivodes, regional state representatives, responsible for reception of Ukrainian refugees with clear indication that they need to rely on the NGO's and help of citizens. Both reception points cases confirmed that the tactic of *shifting responsibilities to the state* can result in 'responsibilization' and blaming non-state actors in the case of failure (Pasetti and Garcés-Mascareñas 2018; Polat and Lowndes 2022; Shamir 2008). The institutional framework created tensions among the actors at the reception centers, resulting in a dispersion of responsibility, decisional dilemmas for public officials, blaming of volunteers, and leaving the refugees to be "serviced" by the private company.

The results showed that an effective institutional framework is necessary for engaging social actors in reception policy, particularly during crisis situations. This framework should include resources, guidelines for state agents to collaborate with citizens, and transparent delegation of responsibilities. Otherwise, it could lead to the problem with transparent and accountable decisions. In this context, it needs to be emphasized that Voivode and the officials did not look for help from international organizations nor use the already existing guidelines, such as those provided by UNHCR (2016) or EASO (2018) which offer detailed information on how to address similar issues that have arisen in Polish reception centers. The National Crisis Plan, a crucial guideline for the officials, only provides general instructions on the organization of the reception facilities (beds, kitchen, security). This confirms that Poland is among these state\s that have their own ideas rooted in institutional setting in approaching the refugee problem (Nagel and Kaya 2020; Scholten and Penninx 2016).

Future research on the reception policy within the Multilevel Governance Framework, should consider the perspective of the frontline workers and the decisional dilemmas they face. Insights from the frontline can be crucial in understanding the connections between different layers of policy implementation, identifying problems and "cracks" in actors' collaboration, and assessing the impact of top-down policies on the process of service delivery.

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