

When Roles Collide: How Ambiguities Triggered an Organisational Crisis in a Polish Refugee Reception Centre

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This study investigates deviant behaviours within a volunteer-based refugee assistance centre operating during a time of crisis. Drawing on ethnographic fieldnotes, interviews and autoethnographic observations from multiple site visits, we argue that the absence of clear operational rules, blurred normative frameworks and tensions between market logic and altruistic values all contributed to irregular practices by the private entrepreneur managing the facility, volunteers, and displaced persons. The findings underscore the challenges of public–private collaboration and call for a critical rethinking of multilevel governance assumptions in crisis contexts. During the ‘organisational crisis’ phase, irregularities surfaced, including an unequal distribution of labour, ambiguous employment conditions and tolerated illicit activities such as currency trading. According to participants’ accounts and field observations, these dynamics contributed to organisational disorder, disproportionately burdened female volunteers and gradually eroded trust in leadership. The subsequent ‘crisis of legitimization’ phase intensified internal conflicts, revealing tensions between solidarity-based and profit-oriented motivations.

Keywords: organisational chaos, marketised mentality, refugee reception centre, volunteers

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Introduction

Since 24 February 2022, the onset of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Poland has become the primary destination for millions of Ukrainians fleeing the war. According to UNHCR data, by the end of 2022 more than 7.8 million people had crossed the Polish border, with approximately 1.5 million remaining in Poland and relying on various forms of support offered under the framework of temporary protection (UNHCR 2023). The sheer scale and rapidity of these migratory flows necessitated the creation of an unprecedented reception system that encompassed governmental and municipal responses, as well as grassroots civic initiatives.

From the outset, the management of the refugee crisis in Poland adopted a multi-level governance (MLG) model, in which key operational responsibilities were distributed among state administration, local governments, non-governmental organisations and international institutions (Błaszczyk, Dolińska, Makaro and Pluta 2024; Caponio and Ponzo 2022). This approach stood in contrast to strictly top-down, hierarchical decision-making processes – although it did not entirely preclude hierarchical elements. In practice, the distribution of responsibilities emerged organically within self-organising, volunteer-based initiatives, even though the voivodeship government legally retained sole responsibility for establishing and managing reception centres.

While this structure enabled swift and flexible responses during the initial weeks of the crisis, over time it revealed substantial challenges related to coordination, sustainability and accountability in the provision of assistance. A significant share of the burden of aid management was shifted onto local communities, individual households and volunteers – often without adequate institutional support (Hospitable Poland 2022).

A distinctive element of Poland's response to the crisis was the extensive practice of hosting refugees in private homes, on a scale previously unseen. As indicated by national and international reports, this form of assistance benefited up to 600,000 refugees at its peak (Fundacja To Proste and IOM 2024). Although private hosting practices have been observed in other countries as well (see Burrell 2024; Daoust and Dyvik 2025), the spontaneity and magnitude of this phenomenon in Poland were unprecedented. In contrast to the British 'Homes for Ukraine' scheme, which involved the formal registration of hosts and the provision of financial support (Burrell 2024), the Polish approach relied for a long time on *ad hoc* subsidies and weakly institutionalised forms of assistance (Czepil and Jańczak 2024; Jarosz and Klaus 2023).

Parallel to the private accommodation arrangements, numerous reception points were established across Poland – temporary shelters located primarily in sports halls, dormitories, holiday centres and schools. At the peak of the crisis, their number reached several hundred, varying significantly in terms of standards, organisational structures and sources of funding (Fundacja to Proste and IOM 2024). These centres fulfilled multiple functions: registration and first-aid provision, accommodation and meals, the distribution of clothing and other basic necessities, as well as psychological and logistical support. Despite their undeniable importance during the initial months of the crisis, reports began to emerge over time regarding serious issues: substandard conditions, staff and volunteer fatigue, financial opacity and even deviant behaviour and abuse, both towards and among refugees.

The aim of this article is to analyse irregularities – understood as patterns of institutional behaviour arising from unclear, contradictory or constantly changing policies and resulting in normative chaos as they deviate from the model of a transparent non-profit organisation – observed in one of the large reception points in Poland, located in a major regional city. Drawing on qualitative data – interviews and participant observation – we offer a theoretical interpretation of the observed behaviour through the

lens of organisational crisis theory, supplemented by insights from anomie theory and the volunteer coordination literature. Building on these perspectives, we argue that mass-scale, volunteer-based organisations operating under a market logic (Bourdieu 1993) – in which social institutions such as the family, education and the state lose their regulatory capacity – become particularly vulnerable to normative disintegration and various forms of deviant behaviour. We hypothesise that the operational conditions of the reception centre under study – perceived by volunteers as marked by ambiguous responsibility structures, resource scarcity, high emotional tension and undefined normative frameworks – contributed to the emergence of practices perceived by participants as abusive, emotionally manipulative or based on double standards.

The following section outlines the theoretical framework. In the subsequent analysis, we demonstrate how this framework helps to clarify the underlying logic of the behaviour – shaped by a ‘marketised mentality’ – observed in the reception centre and we discuss the implications this has for the future design of humanitarian aid systems.

Literature: defining, identifying and preventing the ‘organisational crisis’

One possible approach to analysing organisational crises in volunteer-based organisations is the Multilevel Governance (MLG) Framework, which considers the involvement of various actors engaged in complex formal and informal relationships at different levels of government policy implementation. In this paper, MLG is understood in the classical sense as

a specific mode or instance of policy-making that results from the simultaneous occurrence of collaborative relations between different governmental authorities (vertical dimension of policy-making) and between public and non-public actors (horizontal dimension) (Caponio and Ponzo 2022: 220).

However, rather than studying the policy-making arrangements themselves, we focus on their practical effects – specifically, everyday practices. Our data allow us to address the broader issue highlighted by Tiziana Caponio and Irene Ponzo (2022: 220), who argue that asylum-seekers’ reception constitutes a classical MLG challenge – ‘one that brings a multiplicity of interdependent actors into play, questioning state-based hierarchical implementation processes’.

The everyday operation of the reception centres we investigate may lead to ‘organisational crises’, often defined as ‘organisationally-based disasters which cause extensive damage and social disruption, involve multiple stakeholders and unfold through complex technological, organisational and social processes’ (Shrivastava, Mitroff, Miller and Miglani 1988: 285). This definition was later adopted by Tracey Rizzuto and Laura Maloney (2008) in their analysis of organisational responses to Hurricane Katrina. They employed a three-stage model of crisis management developed by Denis Smith (1990) to explain the processes they observed. Smith’s model consists of three phases. The first is the ‘crisis of management’, a period leading up to the crisis event during which the organisation fails to recognise or adequately prepare for an impending situation. In this phase, ‘the actions (or inactions) of management can promulgate the development of an organisational climate and culture within which a relatively minor triggering event can rapidly escalate through the system and result in a catastrophic failure’ (Smith 1990: 270). The second phase is the ‘operational crisis’, when ‘the human face of management’ becomes critical to mitigating negative outcomes but often dissolves into a search for culpability (Smith 1990: 271). The third phase, the ‘crisis of legitimation’, follows the catastrophe. As Smith (1990: 271)

noted, 'time is of the essence during this phase as the organisation, often in collaboration with others, attempts to cope with the implications of the crisis event'. This so-called 'post-crisis' period – which, somewhat misleadingly, suggests a resolution or the obvious end of the crisis – often involves ongoing painful consequences, attempts to assign blame and efforts to legitimise organisational procedures and management styles (Smith 1990: 271).

In the case of our research, Phase 1 corresponds to the period leading up to 24 February 2022, when little was done by the state to prepare reception facilities for the anticipated wave of war refugees. Consequently, our focus is primarily on the 'operational crisis' and 'crisis of legitimation' phases, both of which contributed to what many scholars refer to as 'organisational chaos'. Research on two reception centres in Warsaw by Mateusz Trochymiak and Nina Wróblewska (2025: 281) defined 'organisational chaos' operationally as a situation where 'there was a problem with defining who is responsible for what'. Their comparative analysis of two centres revealed several irregularities. In this paper, we build on a more extensive dataset, focusing on a single case study to investigate the processes underlying individual actions across multiple organisational levels. In a different socio-economic context, Vincent Roscigno, Randy Hodson and Steven Lopez (2009) observed that 'organisational chaos', defined as the poor organisation and coordination of labour processes, was a significant factor in nearly all forms of 'workplace incivility' within the organisations they studied. Thus, the concept of organisational crisis offers a valuable framework for identifying and naming the social problems we observe.

Linking organisational crisis and chaos with the theory of anomie traditionally rooted in sociological thinking can substantially enrich the existing literature, offering a more nuanced understanding of both the micro-level processes affecting individuals and the structural conditions that shape these dynamics. Classical anomie and strain theory, as developed by Robert Merton (1957), seeks to explain why certain individuals, social groups or cultures display stronger tendencies towards deviant behaviour. Institutional Anomie Theory (IAT), developed by Steven F. Messner and Richard Rosenfeld (2001), extends the basic Mertonian model. Its core assumption is that a society functions properly only when economic and non-economic institutions remain in balance. In capitalist societies, however, this balance is disrupted in favour of the economy, thereby undermining the regulatory capacity of institutions such as the family, education and religion (Messner and Rosenfeld 1997). The resulting anomic condition is characterised by individuals acting according to the logic of instrumental effectiveness and utilitarian rationality, irrespective of prevailing moral norms.

Although IAT – typically used to analyse the erosion of norms within long-established institutions rather than institutions still in formation – is not the main theoretical frame of this analysis, one of its central insights remains useful: deviance is rooted in the institutional structure of society rather than solely in individual characteristics. Market values – individualism, achievement orientation, universal success metrics and the fetishisation of money – form a dominant cultural pattern often described as the 'American Dream ethos' (Messner and Rosenfeld 2001: 89), which gradually displaces non-economic values (Hövermann, Messner and Zick 2015). Adapting IAT to the Polish context, Bieliński and Hövermann (2021) introduced the concept of a 'marketised mentality' as an analytical tool for examining anomie at the micro-social level (Bieliński 2013; Hövermann *et al.* 2015).

Moreover, in the data analysis we draw on insights from human resource management (HRM) in the context of volunteer coordination. A literature review by Studer and von Schnurbein (2013) demonstrates that, in successful organisations, volunteers cannot be managed in the same way as paid staff. As they note, 'volunteers and paid staff constitute different resources for the organisation and different perceptions exist about the nature of the relationship between them (e.g., with respect to work quality standards and the balance of power)' (2013: 414). Furthermore, 'role ambiguities and conflicts

lower the contribution made by volunteers to the organisation, as shown by many empirical studies' (2013: 414). These findings have informed the development of various models of volunteer involvement (2013: 415). The model the most relevant to our analysis corresponds to what Rochester (2007) terms the member/activist model, which focuses on how volunteers become involved, what motivates them, how organisations are structured and managed and how governance systems operate. This stands in contrast to the service delivery, support role and co-worker models. This perspective, combined with selected insights from anomie theory, enables us to engage more deeply with the empirical material, which suggests a blending – and, at times, tension – between market-oriented and volunteer-based logics of practice (Bourdieu 1990).

Summing up, the phenomenon we study can be referred to as an instance of organisational chaos, which runs away from control. Although the Polish reception centres played an important role in the first weeks of the full-scale invasion, we focus on a case study which showcases what kind of processes and actors operating on different levels were responsible for the anomic situation in this particular place. We do not claim, however, that this was a typical model, as other studies prove it otherwise (Kalinowska, Kuczyński, Bukraba-Rylska, Krakowska and Sałkowska 2023a; Kalinowska, Krakowska and Sałkowska 2023b; Szpargała 2024). The aim of this study is to provide a detailed analysis which may help to avoid similar mistakes in other socio-cultural contexts.

Our findings resonate with recent scholarship in migration studies that highlights the informal, emotionally charged and politically ambivalent character of grassroots refugee assistance. Cantat (2021) and Sandri (2018) both demonstrate that volunteer-led initiatives often arise in response to state inaction, enacting alternative forms of solidarity that may challenge, supplement or inadvertently reproduce existing humanitarian regimes. These insights enrich our application of anomie theory by contextualising individual and organisational behaviour within a broader ecology of crisis-driven aid.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design aimed at capturing the dynamics of grassroots humanitarian practices that emerged in Poland after 24 February 2022. Three primary qualitative techniques were used: participant observation, reflexive self-interviews conducted in the evocative style (Ellis 1997) within the research team and comprehensive interviews with individuals engaged in humanitarian work. Before conducting interviews with aid workers, the researchers – all of whom had been involved in various forms of support for displaced persons from Ukraine prior to the study – responded in writing to the same interview questions later posed to participants. This reflexive exercise served both ethical and analytical purposes, enabling researchers to critically reflect on their own positionalities and experiences of engagement, while also generating additional contextual material for team discussion and analysis. One of the co-authors worked in the reception centre discussed in this article. The project was conducted during an unfolding refugee crisis and followed the concept of 'methics' (van Brown 2020), which emphasises the integration of methodological and ethical reflection in research under exceptional circumstances. In the initial weeks – when humanitarian work absorbed most volunteers – field observations were initiated, whereas interviews were conducted only once the intensity of frontline activities had partially stabilised. The project developed gradually in the spirit of 'hot sociology', grounded in ongoing engagement with rapidly evolving social processes during a moment of crisis.

Participant observation

Participant observation was conducted between March and June 2022 in a variety of humanitarian settings, including two large reception centres, a railway station, a volunteer aid point in a major urban centre and two rural local communities organising support for displaced persons from Ukraine. Parishes, community cultural centres, rural women's associations and local entrepreneurs were all involved. The observations took the form of complete participation, as researchers initially became involved in humanitarian activities as volunteers rather than entering the field as external observers. Throughout the fieldwork, researchers produced fieldnotes containing elements of analytic autoethnography (Anderson 2006). These notes documented not only the course of events but also emotions, interpersonal tensions, moral dilemmas and organisational dynamics observed during humanitarian work.

Conducted in the second month of the war, the reflexive interviews within the research team served to deepen their reflection on humanitarian experiences and refine the interview guide. Since the formation of the research team, regular analytic seminars were also held to exchange field experiences, discuss emerging interpretations and critically reflect on any methodological and ethical dilemmas arising during the study.

Subsequently, between April and August 2022, comprehensive qualitative interviews (Kaufmann 2007) were carried out with individuals actively involved in assisting displaced persons from Ukraine across the different humanitarian settings included in the broader project. Interviews were conducted with volunteers, coordinators and organisers engaged in grassroots support initiatives operating in both urban and rural contexts. In total, approximately 40 hours of recorded material were collected.

Across the broader research project, a purposive sampling strategy was used, combined with volunteer networks, personal contacts and snowball sampling. Participants were recruited primarily from urban middle-class environments and local civic elites in Central Poland. The sample included individuals representing diverse forms of engagement in humanitarian support, including: (a) first-time volunteers, (b) irregular volunteers, (c) everyday activists, (d) professionals working in support roles and (e) long-term residents in Poland of Ukrainian origin who were involved in assistance activities. Theoretical saturation was achieved at the level of the broader multi-site research project rather than within this individual case study (Kvale 2007).

This article focuses on one particular reception centre that became an important site of humanitarian coordination during the first months following the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The case was selected because of the intensity and continuity of volunteer engagement observed there, as well as the researchers' prolonged direct involvement in everyday activities at the site. The analysis presented here draws on participant observation, fieldnotes and approximately four hours of interview material related specifically to this reception centre. Interviews concerning the site were conducted with three volunteers who were not members of the research team but belonged to the core group of the most consistently involved participants in the reception centre's activities. The interviews were conducted by a researcher who had previously volunteered at the site and were carried out either in person or online, each lasting approximately one hour.

The material on which we build represents only one snapshot of the vast landscape of refugee assistance described elsewhere based on the same material (Kalinowska *et al.* 2023a, 2023b; Krakowska 2023a, 2023b, 2024; Krakowska and Kalinowska, *in press*). Although the picture that emerges is clearly negative, we believe that researchers have a moral obligation to reveal such irregularities. We therefore

treat this case study as a contrastive case to analyses highlighting the positive forms of social mobilisation demonstrated by Polish society in 2022.

Our reliance on purposefully selected material stems from the fact that interviewees are generally reluctant to disclose the negative aspects of humanitarian assistance, for reasons ranging from shame and a sense of inadequacy to a lack of knowledge about the broader organisational context. Such a research strategy was unavoidable, as it was impossible to confront these accounts with managers or to juxtapose our findings with other written sources discussing the same institution without risking the anonymity of the interviewees.

One limitation of this approach is that the resulting picture reflects the interpretation of the situation from a particular perspective, one that is also informed by the experience of one of the co-authors, who actively participated in the activities of the centre. Consequently, this paper should not be understood as a comprehensive policy evaluation. Rather, it offers a sociological analysis of an organisational crisis from the perspective of selected activists. This requires us to acknowledge that other activists may have been less informed or may have interpreted the situation differently. Conducting research during an ongoing humanitarian crisis involved several methodological challenges. The inability to establish even an approximate number of volunteers was itself symptomatic of the organisational conditions under study. No formal registry was maintained and participation remained highly fluid, involving private individuals as well as representatives of municipal institutions and private companies who entered and left the reception centre on an ongoing basis.

Given the limited number of interviews conducted specifically for this article and the case-oriented character of the analysis, the study does not aim to produce statistically representative conclusions regarding humanitarian mobilisation in Poland more broadly. Rather, the reception centre is treated as an analytically significant case that enables an in-depth examination of organisational mechanisms, interpersonal dynamics and ethical tensions emerging during grassroots humanitarian responses in conditions of crisis. The value of the analysis therefore lies in its interpretative and contextual insights rather than in empirical generalisability.

Researcher positionality

The research team emerged from individuals who had been deeply involved in solidarity-based humanitarian action since the beginning of the war. The research project itself was secondary to ongoing practical engagement and developed gradually from experiences gathered during humanitarian work. This created both analytical opportunities and methodological challenges related to proximity, emotional involvement and the dual role of researchers as both participants and observers (Nikulkin and Zvonareva 2024).

One of the researchers – and co-author of this article – was strongly involved in various forms of assistance, including direct support for refugees, administrative tasks and the long-term provision of home-prepared food and basic goods to the reception point discussed here. She also conducted interviews concerning the reception point, speaking exclusively with individuals with whom she had no prior personal relationships or interdependencies in the division of labour within the facility. The second author was not involved in this particular form of refugee assistance but he privately hosted two refugee families in his home.

Throughout the project, considerable attention was devoted to reflexive methodological work concerning researcher positionality, emotional engagement and the influence of personal experiences on interpretation. Regular analytic seminars within the research team played an important ethical and

methodological role in the development of the study. These discussions enabled the researchers to collectively examine field experiences, confront interpretative assumptions, identify potential biases and critically reflect on the tensions arising from their dual involvement in both humanitarian action and academic analysis.

For the authors, who were themselves participants in the Polish humanitarian mobilisation, working on this article was emotionally demanding. While we do not question the legitimacy of humanitarian assistance itself (see Shephard 2011), we argue that the irregularities and organisational problems observed during the refugee response require critical scholarly examination in order to improve future institutional support systems. We also consider it our responsibility to complement earlier publications with a more reflective analysis of the mechanisms underlying the problems revealed in the operation of the reception point. At the same time, the researchers' embedded position within the field provided access to processes, interactions and moral tensions that would have been difficult to capture through detached observation alone.

Research ethics

Interview participants were informed about the aims of the study, the principles of confidentiality and the voluntary nature of participation. They gave explicit consent to audio-recording. All data were anonymised and – at the request of interviewees – we refrained from disclosing any information that could reveal the location of the reception point. In the absence of an institutional ethics committee, the project underwent ethical assessment within the university's grant review system.

One of the authors' involvement in the reception point preceded the formal start of the research. Therefore, the initial observations stemmed from practical humanitarian work rather than explicit research intention and were not conducted as overt observation. After the project was formally designed and informed consent obtained, she changed her mode of participation, reducing her daily on-site work in favour of supplying goods from outside. This shift enabled greater analytical distance and ensured compliance with ethical standards.

Data analysis

All empirical materials were transcribed and subjected to qualitative content analysis. The first analytic round involved open and theoretical coding (Gibbs 2011; Glaser and Strauss 2017[1967]), which enabled the identification of categories emerging from the data and their alignment with the study's research questions.

For the purposes of this article, the selected material was re-analysed using open coding focused on the specific functioning of the reception point, the identification of problems and the reconstruction of their underlying mechanisms. Coding categories addressed: (a) ethical stances and volunteer–refugee relations; (b) interpersonal tensions among volunteers and in their interactions with facility managers; (c) abuses and irregularities; (d) emotional labour; and (e) signs of fatigue and burnout. This approach resulted in analytic categories capturing the relationships between work organisation, volunteer practices, institutional structures and the emotional experience of both volunteers and displaced persons.

Results

The big reception centre: space and people

The object of analysis in this paper is a temporary reception centre established by a local government unit under the authority of a decision issued by the Prime Minister, based on the National Crisis Management Plan (Rządowe Centrum Bezpieczeństwa 2022). The plan envisaged the establishment of centralised reception centres providing essential social infrastructure and support in cooperation with civil society organisations. Its day-to-day management was delegated to a commercial entity.

The reception centre served as a short-term shelter, offering accommodation, meals, medical care and assistance with refugee relocation. Its operational structure was based on cooperation between public administration, non-governmental organisations and volunteers. However, the absence of a clear division of competences and responsibilities among the actors involved led to coordination difficulties and tensions in the centre's daily operations, thus exhibiting symptoms of an 'operational crisis' (Smith 1990).

During periods of peak influx, the centre accommodated more than 4,000 individuals simultaneously. Although it was initially designed for short-term stays, many people – particularly the elderly, the sick, persons with disabilities and large families – remained for weeks or even months, unable to make decisions about further relocation. This situation, though stemming from unavoidable circumstances, still left room for actions that could mitigate the negative consequences of the organisational crisis (Smith 1990). For reasons which we discuss later, however, the crisis only deepened as time passed.

The centre's infrastructure, initially configured for brief occupancy, included a registration area, an information point (providing details on available support, registration for international transport, housing and employment assistance), a dining facility, a medical station, a distribution warehouse for essential items (clothing, hygiene products, chargers, suitcases, etc.) and dormitory-style halls equipped with camp beds for women, men and children. Over time, the centre underwent intensive adaptation to meet residents' needs. The medical and dining facilities were expanded (including a snack bar and refrigerators for refugees) and new spaces were created: a recreation room with a piano, a playroom, a computer lab and a Covid-19 vaccination point. Psychological, spiritual and legal support services were introduced, alongside cultural events and educational activities. The staff came to include translators (including sign-language interpreters), educators, facilitators and assistants supporting sick people. This means that the problem did not lie in the absence of crisis management – since the aforementioned adjustments were indeed necessary – but, rather, in the sphere of volunteer management.

It is clear that it was the volunteers – both individuals and those delegated by public institutions and private companies – who made the development of the infrastructure and the provision of services possible. Their efforts encompassed not only direct assistance but also the initiation of partnerships with national and international organisations, as well as local educational institutions. Each day, dozens of volunteers were engaged in on-site and remote tasks, supporting a small team of permanent staff employed by the managing entity and a local government representative. The phase of 'operational crisis' (Smith 1990) was often narrated in a way that aligned with the widely publicised media image of the 'refugee miracle' (Łuczaj, Leonowicz-Bukała and Krasko 2024). One volunteer described the large-scale grassroots mobilisation in these terms:

I feel like this just confirms what I've always thought about Poles – that when something bad or difficult happens, we pull ourselves together and people show that we're incredibly united, incredibly organised. You've got volunteers who are far-left, far-right, religious, atheist, Hindu – really, from every political camp – and everyone's working side by side. No one's going around saying, 'I hate Tusk' or 'I hate Kaczyński'. We just help, together. And I think we're actually a pretty great society – not one that's constantly digging holes under its own feet or looking for problems where there aren't any (P1).

The volunteers interviewed for this study, as well as those who collaborated with one of the authors during participant ethnographic fieldwork, had joined the centre in response to urgent calls for support. Their engagement was part of a broader wave of activist mobilisation in Poland during the initial months of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine (Kalinowska *et al.* 2023b). One of the volunteers described how 'ordinary people from the street' found their way into the centre and the concerns that accompanied this process:

It was totally by accident – somewhere on (a social media platform), a post popped up... the fan page of (this reception centre), which had been set up by volunteers. And there was this message saying they had nothing – no food, no clothes – that everything was needed and that if anyone could bring anything or help in any way, they should come. And since the centre was really close to my house... I spent a few days – I think three or four – going back and forth, thinking about it, kind of torn, whether to go or not. And I'll be honest, I was just scared. I was scared of what I'd find in the thick of it (P2).

These words illustrate how the reception centre became a space for individuals who responded to urgent appeals for action, as well as for those seeking to fulfil a personal need to help people affected by injustice and violence. At the same time, they had to navigate a series of challenges. Within a compressed time frame, they had to establish ways of working together in a team that was constantly expanding to include anyone motivated to engage. The volunteers were often strangers to one another and found themselves tackling tasks that were entirely new to them. All activities occurred under crisis conditions and amid significant informational disarray, ultimately culminating in an organisational crisis.

The crucial circumstance, worth emphasising, was that the facility was managed by a private business owner – an actor embedded in market logic and oriented towards profit and loss (Bourdieu 1993). The same volunteer who praised the grassroots mobilisation was highly critical of the entity managing the centre, echoing the uncontrollable tension between marketised mentality (Bieliński and Hövermann 2021) and what we might refer to as an activist mindset (see Rochester 2007).

And you know what? The owner [of the hall] – at first he seemed like a wonderful guy, a golden-hearted man with the heart of a lion... but I guess I can say it now – he turned out to be a swindler, someone who really just cared about the money. Meanwhile, we were holding things together, we gave so much of ourselves... and honestly, running around on a Sunday night at 8 p.m. trying to find toilet paper and soap wouldn't have been necessary if the money that was supposed to go to the refugees had actually gone to the refugees (P1).

This perspective, supported by numerous ethnographic observations, led us to consider the interactions – and often clashes – between business logic and the logic of helping. Operating at the intersection of two distinct orders – the altruistic motivations of the volunteers and the economic

interests of the managers – emerges as one of the core structural tensions underlying the deviant dynamics explored in the following section.

The logic of profit

The operation of the reception centre relied heavily on the around-the-clock work of volunteers, who organised themselves into shifts and handled all the areas of activity described earlier. Their efforts brought direct benefits to the private entity managing the facility, which did not need to hire a large staff to maintain its day-to-day operations. There was also a group of volunteers working remotely, providing support at a distance. Without their contributions, the daily functioning of the centre – though perhaps technically feasible – would probably have been significantly less effective and the living conditions of the displaced persons considerably worse, unless these responsibilities had been assumed by the management (Krakowska 2023a).

Among the many responsibilities, the volunteers were in charge of managing the centre's social media presence, regularly posting updates about current needs. These appeals mobilised spontaneous responses from the local community, both individually and collectively – for example, through schools and workplaces. Volunteers and supporters organised group meal preparations (e.g., sandwiches and snacks), as well as charitable sales. At the same time, they engaged in negotiations with major actors in the humanitarian field, coordinating large-scale deliveries of water, food, hygiene supplies, toilet paper and other essential items.

The financial dimension of these activities – and the economic benefits accrued by the facility's manager – was addressed directly by one of the interviewees:

[The manager] made several good millions off this whole operation. We're talking about funds... they're [managing entity] in debt to the tune of something like 90+ million and, in the beginning – during the first two and a half, maybe three months – they didn't pay for anything, except utilities. Because yeah... they treated us like free labour. They had maybe five people on the staff, not counting the security. All the catering was paid for by [the local authority] and then by [the NGO providing food for displaced persons], which is still there and that's free too, even though the contract says they're supposed to provide food themselves... The food came from donations, the extra stuff, I mean – coffee, tea and so on and all the hygiene stuff, all that... all the 'luxury' that [this reception centre] had compared to [the nearest major reception centre] – that was all... that was all from donors. On top of that, at the very beginning, when we had the most people – even up to 5,000 – there were about 70 volunteers during the day and only around 10 paid workers, so if you calculate how much they saved on labour costs... we're talking millions. At one point [the manager] even said to one of our volunteers – this was maybe after three months: 'Great, because for two months we didn't pay a thing'. Meaning just utilities – they didn't put in anything of their own (P2).

Non-transparent employment rules

Over time, some individuals who had previously worked at the centre as volunteers – and thus subscribed to the activist model (Rochester 2007) – were hired by the managing entity. However, this process lacked transparency – both the recruitment criteria and the terms of employment remained unclear, often even to those directly involved. Among the volunteers were individuals who made deliberate efforts to stand out, hoping to be noticed by the manager and viewing employment as an

opportunity for professional advancement. Others – especially those who were displaced themselves – saw paid work as a pathway to minimal financial stability. There were also individuals who treated the employment primarily as a temporary income source but who hesitated to admit this openly out of fear of being judged by other volunteers:

I'll be honest, I really don't know what the recruitment system [at the centre] is, because it's always been a mystery to me. But what I can say is that, very often, the people who had been our volunteers – and I mean some of the strongest ones – they were actually ashamed and didn't want to say that they'd been hired by [the manager], because they felt like we wouldn't accept them anymore, that they weren't 'ours', that they weren't one of us anymore (P3).

The ambiguous and informal nature of the employment arrangements with selected individuals introduced tensions and a sense of disorder among volunteers. In addition to the non-standard remuneration of 'workers' (discussed later), this aspect of organisational chaos was particularly evident among displaced persons who juggled voluntary work at the centre with childcare responsibilities and the urgent search for paid employment. One such situation was observed during participant fieldwork, when one of the researchers was assigned a task that other volunteers deliberately avoided, knowing it was typically carried out by salaried employees rather than unpaid staff. The task involved entering the personal data of centre residents into a digital system. The researcher, who was still familiarising herself with the centre's operations, agreed to take on the assignment after being persuaded of its critical importance for the continuity of the facility's work – the data were to be reported to local authorities as a basis for securing further funding.

This situation, in which displaced persons were performing identical tasks either with or without remuneration, was described by the researcher in a fieldnote:

When I came in to input data, two Ukrainian women were sitting at the desks next to mine. Both in their 40s. They said they had also fled the war. They were urgently looking for permanent jobs because, soon, they would have to support themselves and their children here. In their free time – when they weren't job hunting and when the kids were still in school – they came to the reception centre to help out.

At the computers on the other side of the desk, facing us, sat a young Polish volunteer and two young (30-ish) Ukrainian women who were there for the first time. My neighbours were chatting with each other about job-hunting. Eventually one of them, who used to be a regional manager for a large furniture store chain in Ukraine, asked the two across the desk whether they had found a job. The other women replied that they had come here for work. The volunteer women were surprised – nobody had told them they could get paid. The 'employees' said they had found an advert, although they couldn't recall where. They didn't know any details about the job – not even the salary or how long they were supposed to be there. They had come just to earn something. The 'volunteers' said that this wasn't fair – they were working for free. They didn't blame the 'employees' but said that the manager should give everyone the same opportunity. The 'employees' replied that they couldn't work for free – they had children. The woman from the furniture chain said, 'I have children too' (R1).

This account illustrates not only the precarious and unequal nature of employment within the centre but also the erosion of solidarity under conditions of opacity and competition. The absence of transparent criteria for recruitment, along with inconsistent communication regarding employment

opportunities, created an environment in which individual volunteers – particularly those in vulnerable situations – had to navigate uncertainty, frustration and informal hierarchies.

Accounts provided by volunteers suggested that the facility's manager exercised authority in ways perceived by participants as abusive, particularly in relation to displaced persons who depended on him in various ways. Repeated testimonies pointed to delayed wage payments, underpayment and discretionary changes to previously agreed terms – all at the manager's behest:

We often had to intervene because the girls working in the warehouse or in the 'lower distribution point' – some of them weren't paid for a very long time. Then, for example, he told one of them – she was doing twelve-hour shifts, seven days a week – that he would pay her only for eight. So, the rates kept changing, and we... the girls would often have to step in (P2).

Hot water as an employee privilege

Another controversial and ethically questionable practice reported by volunteers was the application of double standards in the treatment of displaced persons – specifically, a distinction between those employed by the manager and those who were simply residents of the centre. A form of informal compensation came in the shape of so-called 'non-wage bonuses', such as access to a private hot-water shower – unavailable to the rest of the residents – preferential access to donated 'luxury items' such as branded clothing or tacit permission to engage in legally dubious activities. These clear profits were incompatible with the views of selflessly motivated volunteers, who strongly opposed both this marketised logic and the divisions it generated.

And what made things more difficult for us was the emergence of this... kind of 'kapo' system. It developed fairly quickly – after about three or four weeks. Mostly it involved Azerbaijanis, people who theoretically weren't supposed to stay longer than 15 days, right? But then they were somehow hired by a subcontractor [of the manager], so officially they weren't [the manager's] employees. Instead, they were assigned to this so-called main coordinator [from the manager's side]. And, for instance, they opened their own currency exchange desk, with a pretty poor exchange rate – but you couldn't exchange hryvnias anywhere else. I actually reported this [to the representative of local authorities] and said that you probably need a special permit to run a service like that. This guy would just show up, open his laptop, check something and so on. Besides that, these men surrounded themselves with young women, saying they were their 'wives' and so on. We didn't like that at all. Plus, they yelled at Ukrainians and were treated really well, unlike everyone else. For example, they had a separate bathroom set aside just for them and only they could use it – while the rest of the people, nearly 2,000 of them, had six showers with cold water. Right? (P3).

The lack of clarity surrounding employment conditions and resource distribution, coupled with the absence of transparent procedures, led to internal conflicts and deepened divisions – both among volunteers and between the volunteers and the manager. One participant described this mounting tension:

We were constantly clashing with the manager – because of all the double standards and stuff disappearing from the warehouse. And the constant arguing... about the things we brought in, the things we arranged. I understand none of us had... we couldn't say we were experienced in deciding who should

get what; but I also know it shouldn't be like this – that people supposedly volunteering [at the centre] should be the ones getting the better stuff. Either you pay them or you don't but it can't be both (P2).

These testimonies reveal how the absence of oversight and institutional safeguards not only undermined trust but also fostered informal hierarchies and inequities, particularly among vulnerable groups. The coexistence of market-based logic with loosely regulated humanitarian action generated conditions that facilitated opportunistic behaviour, favouritism and moral ambiguity, ultimately distorting the mission and functioning of the centre.

Missing aid, inflated numbers

Another problem extended to spatial arrangements, with frequent relocations of service points – especially storage areas – and their contents. Volunteers emphasised that such moves often led to the disappearance of entire pallets of valuable items, triggering so-called 'warehouse wars'. In response to the risk of further losses, some volunteers began hiding donated goods from the manager which, in turn, led to accusations of theft.

Yet, the greatest uncertainty within the centre's operations concerned the number of people actually accommodated. Newly arrived individuals – often transported by buses organised by local authorities – were required to fill out arrival cards themselves. Departures were recorded in the same informal manner. These data were then entered into the computer system with significant delays and by *ad hoc* personnel. As described earlier, this system allowed the manager to inflate the reported number of residents, thereby increasing the budgetary subsidies allocated to the centre.

One informant recounted the situation as follows:

And everything was always being moved around – there was this one place, then another, then something else, then they'd say 'We'll do this here and not do that over there' and it was just chaos. At first, I thought: 'My God, how are these people managing multi-million złoty operations and letting things like this happen?' But then I realised – this was the perfect setup for them. In all that chaos, they could... well, there was always chaos. The moment you introduce rules and start enforcing them, then if someone makes a mistake, you must hold them accountable, right? But they left the chaos in place so that, if anything went wrong, they could always blame the volunteers – and that's exactly what happened. If you read all the press articles – about the daily over-reporting of 1,000 people and the letters sent to the voivode – it's always the volunteers' fault. They were tired, something got misplaced – 200, 300 different files – and no-one reported it anywhere (P2).

From both field observations and interviews, it became evident that the intersection of two conflicting rationalities – grassroots humanitarian mobilisation and the economic interests of the manager – created situations that were not only ethically questionable but also potentially unlawful. The conflation of these two domains led to fundamental ambiguities regarding which logic – humanitarian or market-driven – should take precedence in the governance of the reception centre.

Muddy waters: normative disarray and emerging competition

The normative chaos that prevailed at the reception centre fostered the infiltration of market-like behavioural patterns into the activities of the volunteers themselves. Although many arrived with the

genuine intention of providing assistance to those in need – and some were displaced persons who chose to volunteer rather than remain passive – certain participants began to adapt to the logic of competition that emerged amid organisational disorder. These individuals exploited ambiguities in responsibilities and information flows to engage in actions of questionable legitimacy: bypassing distribution protocols to obtain branded donated clothing or enhancing their own comfort within the centre at the expense of fairness:

And when I saw Mirek wearing a Tommy Hilfiger T-shirt one day, I honestly thought I was gonna tear him apart. I walked up to him (...) and I said, 'Mirek!' And he goes, 'Oh, hey', and whatever. And I see he's got this Tommy T-shirt on and the main coordinator's there too, talking... and I go, 'Where'd you get that T-shirt?' And he says, 'Oh God, listen, it's just that I spilled coffee on myself and Paweł gave me another one'. And I go, 'Really? You spilled coffee and couldn't wear a dirty T-shirt anymore, so: you could've gone home and grabbed a clean one, cause you don't live far, you could've taken literally any of the other used ones we've got. You just had to grab the Tommy?' And he's like, 'No, it's not like that...' or something and I said, 'Take it off, come on, that's for the refugees!' (P3).

Unregulated status wars

Simultaneously, more-or-less overt struggles over status, influence and the right to organise key operational domains began to unfold. These conflicts emerged both between different groups of volunteers – for example, municipal institution staff versus individually recruited helpers – and between long-term volunteers and those newly arriving from recently closed centres. One participant described such tensions as follows:

There was a situation where the animal care girls from [Centre Delta] came to us – because they no longer had anyone to help over there – so they came here and tried to impose their own rules. It was really unpleasant. It was all: 'Everything here is wrong, this is terrible, it needs to be done differently...' And I said to their coordinator: 'Look, I'm sorry, but you had maybe 500 people max and we've got 5,000 – adding a zero makes a huge difference. It's not going to be like it was at your place, okay?' And 'No, you're not going to keep animals as part of some programme here' – this just isn't the context. And stop trying to kick in the doors – we've been here for three months and we know how this place works' (P3).

These dynamics reveal how, in the absence of clear structures, the reception centre became a contested space in which informal hierarchies, territoriality and competitive behaviour flourished. The collapse of a coherent normative order and the blending of humanitarian and organisational logics gave rise to ambiguous social fields, in which solidarity was often eroded by rivalries over symbolic capital, control and resource access. Rather than functioning as a unified humanitarian structure, the centre increasingly resembled a fragmented arena, governed by micro-politics and shifting alliances.

Beyond disputes over symbolic status within the volunteer structure, the reception centre also became, for some, a potential springboard for personal advancement. Certain volunteers sought to gain the favour of the facility manager, impressed by his ability to turn the humanitarian crisis into a business opportunity. This was facilitated by the anonymous nature of volunteering: newcomers entered with a 'clean slate' – no one knew their previous achievements, social status or failures, nor were they aware of their actual competencies. This anonymity enabled individuals to construct strategic personas, as noted by one of the participants:

When no one knows anything about you, you can shape your personality – create your new persona, right? And I think some of the volunteers saw it that way. They would craft this image, show themselves from a certain angle but it wasn't always real, right? And that for us... like with Bartek, for example. I get the sense – though I never asked, because I thought he was kind of reserved – I get the sense that he sells underwear at different bazaars. Young, entrepreneurial guy, full of energy. And the story was always that he was the one who got us, I don't know [a large retail company], that he had the contact, that he arranged this or that. But later it turned out that he hadn't actually done any of that – it was two other girls who had arranged everything but who always stayed in the background. I only found out when I started doing supply logistics seriously – and then I realised that there was no point in even talking to him... And people who didn't have much experience dealing with people like the manager and others like him – those were the ones who would focus a lot on constructing their self-image. They would show up enthusiastically, make themselves visible, talk a lot, and so on (P3).

Discussion

Our study suggests that the absence of clear operational rules and the blurring of normative frameworks created a space conducive to deviant behaviour – not only on the part of the private entrepreneur managing the facility but also among some volunteers and displaced persons who capitalised on the ambiguity to pursue their own interests. This context underscores a fundamental tension between the logic of solidarity and the logic of profit under conditions of crisis-driven aid management.

During the phase of 'organisational crisis' (Smith 1990), when the organisational structure was still being developed and refugees were arriving in large numbers, we observed significant irregularities due to the lack of clear employment standards and procedures. As a result, volunteers often worked harder and longer than their paid counterparts. The same applied to some refugees, who were able to secure employment under unclear circumstances. This led to a decline in team morale and the eruption of tensions regarding solidarity.

In parallel, concerning initiatives – such as illegal currency trading – were tolerated within the centre. The uncertainty surrounding cooperation rules and the ambiguous legal and organisational status of the involved actors contributed to the organisational chaos, which was particularly distressing for female volunteers. Allowing such initiatives to continue acted as a form of non-monetary compensation for those supporting the centre's core management. However, this pursuit of profit was highly risky symbolically, as trust in the management effectively disintegrated.

In Phase 3 – the 'crisis of legitimation' (Smith 1990) – phenomena that had been previously observed, such as status wars between volunteers, became more pronounced. Although such conflicts seem endemic to every organisational culture, the lack of clear operational rules and clearly defined objectives (as business logic began to conflict with the logic of selfless help) fostered an environment conducive to symbolic competition. The case of Bartek illustrates a clear clash between two value systems within the same organisation. Like a corporate worker, Bartek tended to overestimate his individual impact, rather than subscribing to the collective culture of collaboration. This behaviour aligns with Bieliński and Hövermann's (2021) concept of a 'marketised mentality', which leads to opportunistic behaviour. However, the crisis of legitimation also led to clearly deviant behaviour in this case, such as stealing and inflating the number of refugees hosted in order to gain material profit. This presents a serious challenge to the model of public–private collaboration, prompting us to reconsider the assumptions underlying multilevel governance.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the case of this large reception centre reveals clear manifestations of institutional crisis – understood as the destabilisation of balance between cultural goals and the institutional means to achieve them. The lived experiences of volunteers highlight that, from their perspective – which happens to be the perspective of those who made the system work – under conditions of weak normative regulation, unclear organisational rules and poorly defined responsibilities, the humanitarian logic of aid was penetrated by market rationality, which came to dominate everyday practices within the centre. This adaptive space gave rise not only to accommodation – where volunteers and refugees adjusted to situational demands – but also to deviant behaviour, driven by the absence of institutional mechanisms for accountability and oversight. The tensions were not addressed in time due to the lack of confrontation with volunteers whose expectations did not align with the marketised mentality. Ambiguous power relations, selective privileges, a lack of transparency and the marginalisation of certain actors demonstrate how, under conditions of emergency relief, organisational crisis can not only undermine the enactment of solidarity norms but also reproduce inequalities, tensions and subtle forms of exploitation.

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