



ISSN: 2543-6821 (online)

Journal homepage: <http://ceej.wne.uw.edu.pl>

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## To cite this article

Bryan, T.K., Lea, M., Hyánek, V. (2023). Resilience, Ambiguous Governance, and the Ukrainian Refugee Crisis: Perspectives from NGO Leaders in the Czech Republic. *Central European Economic Journal*, 10(57), 35-49.

DOI: 10.2478/ceej-2023-0003

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.2478/ceej-2023-0003>



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# Resilience, Ambiguous Governance, and the Ukrainian Refugee Crisis: Perspectives from NGO Leaders in the Czech Republic

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## Abstract

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in late February of 2022 caused a humanitarian refugee crisis on a scale unseen since World War II. The scale and speed at which refugees surged into other European countries required significant resources to respond to this influx. This study explores the perspectives of those working in NGOs about the resilience of their organisations in responding to the Ukrainian refugee crisis in the Czech Republic. Drawing on interview data collected at the beginning of the refugee response in the Czech Republic between February and June of 2022, our findings suggest that NGOs face capacity and governance challenges, and these system-level barriers inhibit NGO resilience and their ability to respond effectively to the Ukrainian refugee crisis in the long term. These lasting effects influence NGO resilience in the face of the unprecedented Ukrainian crisis. Despite these barriers, NGOs acted with flexibility and agility in delivering humanitarian assistance to Ukrainian refugees in the first few months of the crisis. The findings from this study indicate NGOs engage in organisational resilience strategies within a policy and governance system that lacks the adaptability and coordination needed to be resilient.

## Keywords

NGOs | resilience | capacity | migration | Ukraine

## JEL Codes

H12, Z18

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## 1. Introduction

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in late February of 2022 caused a humanitarian refugee crisis on a scale unseen since World War II. As of the writing of this paper, 6.9 million Ukrainian refugees have entered Central European countries, including Poland, Hungary, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic. The scale and speed at which refugees surged into other European countries required significant resources to

respond to this influx. However, scholars have found that governments struggle to adapt to turbulent, uncertain, and complex environments in forced migration events. Conversely, nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) respond quickly to provide needed humanitarian, social, and cultural assistance to incoming refugees (Garkisch, Heidingsfelder & Beckmann, 2017; Valentinov, Bolečeková, & Vaceková, 2017). The responsiveness of NGOs is especially critical in the beginning days and weeks of crisis when

the ability to respond quickly is most needed. Thus, the resilience of NGOs in providing needed services to refugees is a critical factor in any country's initial response to a crisis.

Increasingly, organisational resilience is a concept receiving more scholarly attention in NGO and civil society literature at large (Herrero & Kraemer, 2022; Searing, Wiley & Young, 2021; Witmer & Mellinger, 2016) as well as in the NGO refugee and migration literature in particular (Grassi & Nicole-Berva, 2022; Mescoli & Roblain, 2021; Waerder et al., 2022). *Organisational resilience* is the organisational capacity to adapt quickly to adverse disturbances. It emphasises the importance of learning, improvisation, and innovation to rebound from internal and external shocks (Meyer & Simsa, 2018; Witmer & Mellinger, 2016). Resilience is particularly relevant during times of refugee crisis because of the nonroutine character of governance arrangements in crisis environments. For example, recently published work on the response to the 2015 Syrian refugee crisis employed resilience as an essential variable in understanding NGO practices in delivering services to refugees in ambiguous institutional environments (Mescoli & Roblain, 2021; Waerder et al., 2022). Our work builds on this line of inquiry by exploring the perceptions of those working in the NGO sector about the resilience of their organisations in responding to the Ukrainian refugee crisis in the Czech Republic.

We argue that examining Czech NGOs' responses to the crisis is compelling for three reasons. First, the Ukrainian refugee crisis is the most significant migration wave in the Czech Republic's modern history. For example, since February 2022, over 420,000 refugees have entered the Czech Republic, representing 4 percent of the country's population. Second, the Czech Republic has traditionally been reluctant to accept refugees, even in much smaller numbers. For example, the Czech Republic welcomed less than 9,000 refugees during the Syrian refugee crisis in 2015 and 2016. Furthermore, during this period, the head of Czech diplomacy stated that the priority of the Czech Republic was to assist Syrians' ability to return home rather than providing refuge to the incoming population of Syrian refugees in Europe (Klang & Novák, 2014). Third, migration policy in the Czech Republic is highly centralised, with the Ministry of the Interior serving as the central state actor. However, the changing political environment over the last decade has made the Ministry's policies on refugees and asylum seekers inconsistent, fluctuating

between liberal and restrictive tendencies (Baršova & Barša, 2005). This context provides an interesting opportunity to explore how Czech NGOs navigate these dynamics during the first weeks and months of the Ukrainian refugee crisis.

Drawing on interview data collected at the beginning of the refugee response in the Czech Republic between February and June of 2022, our findings suggest that NGOs face capacity and governance challenges and that these system-level barriers inhibit NGO resilience in responding effectively to the Ukrainian refugee crisis. Despite these barriers, NGOs acted with flexibility and agility in delivering humanitarian assistance to Ukrainian refugees in the first few months of the crisis. Our findings also identify several resilience strategies NGOs utilise to grow their capacity to respond quickly to crises in an uncertain governance environment.

We build upon the existing literature on NGO resilience in migration events by contributing new knowledge about how this plays out in the Ukrainian refugee crisis in the Czech context. The ability to collect data at the beginning of the crisis allows us to observe the dynamics of NGOs' resilience during the first significant peak of arrivals and provides an opportunity to gather novel insights about how socially relevant goals can be achieved despite an ambiguous governance environment. Our approach also allows us to understand the issue of organisational resilience in the broader context of recurrent severe crisis periods. By focusing on NGO leaders' perceptions of their organisations' resilience in responding to the Ukrainian refugee crisis, the pandemic crisis, and the more temporally distant Syrian refugee crisis, we can present a narrative of NGO capacity-building during crises within a relatively hostile and non-cooperative institutional environment.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Multi-Sector Governance During Crisis

Acting efficiently to manage crises is a core issue for public governance and the many public, voluntary, and private actors who compose networks that respond to crises. Kapucu and Hu (2020) define network governance as "the use of formal and informal institutions to allocate resources and coordinate joint

action in a network of organisations” (p. 5). There is a general agreement that cooperation and collaboration between sectors are ideal when formulating effective responses to many crises, including migration, natural disasters, and pandemics (Ansell, Sørensen & Torfing, 2021; Fehsenfeld & Levinsen, 2019; Waugh & Streib, 2006). For example, Ansell et al. (2021) emphasise the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in highlighting the need for robust systems of governance in response to complex problems in turbulent times. Robust systems of governance consider a systematic approach to addressing the various actors, institutions, and processes required to respond to an unexpected public issue or threat. When challenges or stressors occur, robust systems can respond quickly to develop their agenda, craft new strategies, revise existing strategies, and assess threats. During crises, the need for robust governance becomes more apparent with the disruption of standard governance processes and increased turbulence (Anderies & Janssen, 2013). Howlett, Capano, and Ramesh (2018) emphasise the value of robustness in the ability to design policies that value “agility, improvisation, and flexibility” to adapt to unexpected crises (p. 407). Other effective governance response strategies include implementing political and administrative processes alongside policy for a systematic approach, adaptation of existing institutions to new contexts, and cross-sector collaborative governance (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Ansell et al., 2021; Novalia & Malekpor, 2020; Schomaker & Bauer, 2020).

NGOs are vital collaborators that engage in governance during crises, often serving as immediate responders and service providers. Traditional theories of the voluntary sector interpret the emergence of NGOs as a response to the absence of necessary social welfare and support not provided by public or private institutions during times of non-crisis (Sandberg, 2015). As Weisbrod (1975) explains, both public institutions and NGOs are responsible for the allocation of public goods; however, the market in which the provision of these goods and services operate is uniquely different. As a result, government failure theory asserts that NGOs are utilised to fill gaps in the market where public goods and services do not exist. This response to absence is further exacerbated during times of crisis during which responses and aid cannot be limited to traditional bureaucratic delegation methods. NGOs serve as frontline responders during refugee crises because of their ability to act quickly and reactively through the provision of humanitarian aid and other social support, as well as engagement in the public

sphere on behalf of refugees (Garkisch et al., 2017; Kluknavská, Bernhard & Boomgaarden, 2019).

## 2.2. Institutional Ambiguity in Migration and Refugee Crises

While collaboration and cooperation between sectors are understood to be the ideal response to emerging crises, it is rarely the reality. Based on research related to the Syrian refugee crisis and governance in Lebanon, Stel (2016) develops the concept of “institutional ambiguity” to further explain and understand informality, liminality, and exceptionalism (Nassar & Stel, 2019). First, *informality* in this regard highlights the utilisation of informal systems of governance that arise in contexts where government interventions lack “the capacity or will to govern” (Nassar & Stel, 2019, p. 46). While this informality makes governance more personalized and context-oriented, it is unpredictable and is based on the unclear boundaries between public and private interventions. Second, *liminality* refers to the time-sensitive nature of these governance responses. In the cases of refugee crises, short-term arrangements are made that place migrant communities in unstable conditions. As Stel (2020) explains, “liminality captures the simultaneous processes of stasis and transformation” seen in institutional ambiguity (p. 9). Lastly, *exceptionalism* refers to the often arbitrary actions and applications of government processes in migrant contexts. It can also be understood as a “state of exception” where refugee communities are considered outside traditional legal and political processes but within other state-sanctioned actions (e.g. surveillance; Stel, 2020). Consequently, institutional ambiguity spotlights the lack of concurrence with traditional norms of politics and law that arise in governance during times of migration crisis.

Conceptions of ambiguity have shaped previous literature on governance during migration, including the concepts of “grey zones” (Mescoli & Roblain, 2021) and dysfunctional institutions (Fakhoury, 2017). Much of the current literature about governance during migration crises focuses on the Syrian refugee crisis as a focusing event for understanding the impacts of migration on political and administrative institutions of the 21st century (Boustani et al., 2016; Coen, 2015; Fakhoury, 2017; Nassar & Stel, 2019; Nedergaard, 2019) as well as the Rohingya refugee crisis in Bangladesh (Ansar & Khaled, 2021; Quader

et al., 2021). Institutional ambiguity can be applied to other contexts of migration crisis where we see similar patterns of informality and uncertainty in governance, including the migration of Ukrainian refugees in the Czech Republic – the focus of this paper. As Mescoli and Roblain (2021) argue when discussing migration in Europe, “citizen actions emerge in time-spaces in which institutional bodies have not assumed responsibility for addressing pragmatic issues faced by forced migrants” (p. 1). Consequently, NGOs serve as institutions and outlets to meet refugees’ demands through formal and largely informal governance.

### 2.3. Czech NGOs in the Grey Zone of Migration and Refugee Crises

In the migration and refugee integration field, the roles of Czech NGOs are largely limited to delivering needed social services to migrants and refugees. Since its inception over twenty years ago, Czech integration policy has been carried out primarily by NGOs and then by integration centres, established in individual regions over the past decade (Valentová, 2018). Three integration centres are operated by NGOs, one by a regional authority, and the other nine by the Ministry of the Interior of the Czech Republic. Centres are also supported by EU funds. The role of NGOs is limited to service delivery in that NGOs facilitate the implementation of state migration policies, but they are not considered partners in discussions of policy direction (Szczepanikova, 2010). Regarding implementing policies defined by the government, NGOs are formally portrayed as better positioned than the state because of their flexibility and efficiency: “the state’s expectation of NGOs’ role in the refugee system is that of flexible and efficient subcontractors with limited decision-making power” (Szczepanikova, 2010, p. 9).

Traditionally, migration policy has been highly politicized in the Czech Republic. This has resulted in experts and NGO representatives “who are potentially able to make informed statements on the topic” being “marginalised in the discourse” (Pospěch & Jurečková, 2019, p. 11), with migrants themselves holding a completely marginal space in the media. Nevertheless, advocacy and lobbying activities by NGOs on behalf of migrant communities continues. Szczepanikova (2010) points out that some NGOs have been lobbying the parliament and trying to prevent restrictive moves in asylum legislation. They have criticised conditions

in refugee accommodation and detention centres and actively cooperated with other European NGOs and structures to promote policy changes at the EU level. As Szczepanikova (2010) asserts, “without their relentless efforts, many cuts of refugee rights would pass smoothly, and there would be less control of the uses of state power over refugees. At the same time, these activities often put them in a difficult position when accessing the EU funding channeled through the state administration” (p. 10).

In their role as service providers, NGOs serve as first-line responders when migration crises occur, with NGOs working to facilitate housing, language and education, and employment-related services (Valentová, 2018). During the beginning days and weeks of the Ukrainian crisis, Czech NGOs were on the ground helping refugees immediately after the outbreak of the Russian invasion, while the central government was slower to respond. For example, the Czech government did not pass official policy and legislation in support of temporary protection of forced migrants from Ukraine until March 17, 2022, almost a full month after the start of the Russian invasion. As Andrea Krchová, director of the Migration Consortium, stated, “from the beginning of the [Ukrainian] conflict, member organisations were on the ground and fully represented the role of the state during the initial onslaught” (Koutská, 2022).

### 2.4. Resilience for NGOs as Responders to Crisis

In these ambiguous governance environments, resilience is required from NGOs to respond to these conditions. Organisational resilience is the capacity for organisations to develop response strategies and opportunities in adverse circumstances and situational pressures (Grassi & Nicole-Berva, 2021). Resilience is also understood as the capacity for organisations to adapt to sudden disruptive changes in the environment compared to standard operating contexts (Witmer & Mellinger, 2016). Resilience for NGOs is developed through several strategies, including financial management, organisational adaptation, and strategic planning before crises occur (Hutton et al., 2021). However, once initial disruptions occur, NGOs utilise other strategies to continue to build capacity to remain resilient.

In times of crisis, NGOs’ resilience can be beneficial to governance systems and address socially relevant

goals. When examining the response to the 2003 SARS outbreak in Singapore, Teo, Lee, and Lim (2017) assert that “relational activation” was implemented by organisational leaders to build resilience. In crises, during the initial period of disruption, NGO leaders can appeal to existing and new relational connections to develop resilience. This creation and use of networks can further expand NGOs’ limited capacities by forming the social and practical resources needed for organisations to remain resilient in crisis (Teo et al., 2017). Hutton and colleagues (2021) further emphasise the significance of prioritising capacity-building interventions for NGOs during times of crisis to build resilience. Migration NGOs specifically demonstrate resilience in their ability to navigate conversations in the public sphere as allies to forced migrants (Bado, 2016; Kluknavská et al., 2019), as well as to further develop organisational capacities to serve a sudden influx of clients (Mason & Fiocco, 2017), provide basic services and humanitarian aid for migrants where resources may be limited (Sezgin & Dijkzeul, 2014), and build upon existing relationships with other NGOs to serve migrants better (Teo et al., 2017). Our study adds and builds upon this literature as we address how migration NGOs and non-migration NGOs in the Czech Republic respond and demonstrate resilience in the context of the Ukrainian refugee crisis following the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

### 3. Methods

#### 3.1. Data

The data presented here focuses on NGO leaders’ perceptions of their organisations’ resilience in responding to the Ukrainian refugee crisis in the Czech Republic. The lead author collected the data as part of a broader mixed-method research study examining the capacity of NGOs in the Czech Republic. The data for the broader study was collected beginning in January 2022. When the invasion of Ukraine began in February 2022, the existing question about NGO resilience to crises was expanded to include the war in Ukraine. The lead author conducted the final interview in June 2022. Therefore, the perspectives of NGO leaders reflect the first three months after the invasion began and may not depict the current understanding of the impact of the crisis on Czech NGOs.

#### 3.2. Participants

This study utilised 13 interviews, all conducted after 25 February 2022, when the Russian invasion began. Interview participants’ roles included leaders of refugee-serving NGOs as well as foundation and field-building organisational leaders (see Table 2). A purposive sampling strategy was utilised in which interview participants were identified based on their knowledge and expertise in the NGO sector, social service delivery, and refugee-serving activities. All interviewees were in management positions within NGOs. A vast majority of interviewees had at least 15 years of experience working in the sector so that they could provide a historical perspective on the development of the sector and specifically on refugee services in the Czech Republic.

**Table 1.** Individual Demographics

Individual Demographics	# of Participants
<i>Age</i>	
30-39	4
40-49	4
50-59	3
60+	2
<i>Gender Identity</i>	
Female	8
Male	5

**Table 2.** Organizational Demographics

Org Demographics	# of Participants
<i>Primary Area of Activity</i>	
NGO Field-Building	3
Foundations	4
Refugee Services	6
<i>Org. Position</i>	
Upper Management/Executive Director	7
Middle Management	3
Program-level	3
<i>Region</i>	
Brno	3
Prague	8
Rural	2

### 3.3. Procedure

The purpose of the interviews was to ascertain participants' perspectives on Czech NGO capacity and facilitators and barriers to building the capacity of the NGO sector. After the invasion of Ukraine, we asked participants specific questions related to NGO resilience in the Ukrainian refugee crisis. For example, we asked participants what impact the war in Ukraine had on their organisation's resilience. As a follow-up to this question, we asked interview participants to assess how much power they feel to change their community or country in responding to the crisis. The interviews lasted 30–60 minutes. All interviews were conducted and recorded using Zoom. The interview transcription process included uploading the recorded interviews to Otter, an AI transcription software, for the initial development of the interview transcript. The transcripts were then reviewed independently by two research team members for accuracy. Subsequently, we entered the transcripts into MaxQDA for coding and analysis.

### 3.4. Data Analysis

Search terms for the sections of interview data examined in this study included “Ukraine, crisis, refugee, migrant, and immigrants.” Data analysis for this study used a grounded theory approach. Through an open-coding strategy, data was analysed line-by-line to identify categories and develop emerging themes. Initial codes were developed by two authors of the paper as part of a joint-coding session, followed by a single coder reviewing the rest of the data based on the initial coding logic established. Categories of codes and their relevant dimensions were then examined based on frequency and relations with other codes. As the coding process continued, emergent codes were reassessed across interviews, and some categories became subcategories due to their specificity related to a broader phenomenon. Coding concluded once saturation was achieved with the developed categories.

### 3.5. Limitations

Some limitations of this study should be taken into account. First, the findings should be interpreted cautiously in terms of generalisability. Due to the sample size, it is impossible to represent all NGO leaders' perspectives. The purpose of this study is not

principally about generalisability; it is an opportunity to learn how NGO leaders responded to the Ukrainian refugee crisis in the days and weeks after the Russian invasion. Because most of these interviews were scheduled well in advance of the invasion, the authors were able to collect unique data from the start of the refugee crisis. This data allows us to understand the perceptions of those on the frontline in the direct aftermath of the invasion. In addition, there is a temporal limitation in that we interviewed individuals during the first three months of the crisis. Because of the fast-moving nature of the refugee crisis, these perspectives may not reflect current understanding.

## 4. Findings

Interview participants described two broad dynamics that affect their resilience in response to the unprecedented refugee crisis. In their descriptions, interviewees directly linked these dynamics to specific crises of the recent past: the Syrian refugee crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic. While the findings may not encompass the entire Czech Republic NGO sector response to the Ukrainian refugee crisis, these findings illustrate how various NGO actors perceived and reacted to the crisis. In each of these examples, interviewees described how the country's responses to these crises affected NGOs' resilience in adapting to the Ukraine refugee crisis.

### 4.1. Systemic Barriers to NGO Resilience: Lack of Trust and Governance Challenge

The first dynamic was discussed by all interview participants and focused on the negative effect the Syrian refugee crisis had on refugee and migration NGOs. The interview participants described politicians' efforts to call into question the legitimacy of refugee-serving NGOs that advocated on behalf of the needs of Syrian refugees. The interviewees also stated how the effort to discredit NGOs had a lasting impact on the reputation of the NGO sector in Czech society. As one interview participant from a refugee-serving NGO described it:

During the Syrian crisis, when the topic was taken up by the Populists and also the media, lots of disinformation started to appear. And at the same time, [there] was a dislike of NGOs by the population. And since then, it

has been very difficult for us because we basically had to defend our work, which was not the case for the 20 years before. Up until the Syrian crisis, for example, organisations advertised working the migrants, and we were somehow invisible, it was very difficult for us to get the attention of the media about the topic. It was not interesting for anyone. But when it became interesting to the media, the public discourse, and the general public, it was immediately negative.

Interview participants who did not work in refugee-serving NGOs described how the response to the Syrian refugee crisis negatively affected the sector as a whole. Many interview participants stated that the term “political nonprofits” is used to denigrate NGOs’ work with marginalized populations. As one interview participant stated, “political nonprofits”:

is a label for the civil society organisations who try to advocate some minority interests, for example. And this labeling was instigated by the so-called refugee crisis, visible in 2015. From then, the attacks on the civil society organisation as a welcomer of refugees and political nonprofits are continually repeating. And they were successful in these attacks because the trust in civil society organisations continually decreases.

For interview participants, the legacy of the Syrian refugee crisis on Czech NGOs was a loss of reputation for NGOs within the larger populace, and there was uncertainty about how this will play out in the Ukrainian refugee crisis. The extensive assistance to Ukrainian refugees stood in direct contrast with the response to the Syrian refugee crisis. While solidarity with Syrian refugees had been generally absent, solidarity with Ukrainian refugees was celebrated. Augustová and Pavlásek (2022) provide a rationale for this difference by stating that empathy with people from Ukraine can be explained by geographical proximity and the resulting fear of their own danger. Augustová and Pavlásek (2022) also recall reminiscences of the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968. However, they also remind us that it must be openly stated that, in addition to these sources of empathy for Slavic “near others,” it is accompanied by an unacknowledged assumption of shared skin colour and culture (Augustová & Pavlásek, 2022).

Given the disparity between responses to refugee crises, interview participants describe mixed perspectives about the resilience of NGOs in overcoming the lack of trust amidst the Ukrainian crisis. On the one hand, they expected challenges to

their legitimacy. As one interview participant stated, some NGOs are viewed sceptically by citizens and government actors:

Who voted for you (NGOs)? Who do you (NGOs) represent? What is your legitimacy? As opposed to the government, you know, we are the government; we were voted in by the people. Who are you to tell us what we should do?

Other interviewees described how the response to this crisis differed from the negative reaction to the Syrian refugee crisis. For example, an NGO leader questioned the new attitudes of government actors and whether this more cooperative attitude would continue:

It’s always like NGOs, “you are just getting [public] money you are not making any value.” Two or three months ago they (the government) were asking us, “so many Ukrainian people, could you please help our part to manage that?” Yes, we can; we should all handle this situation now. But you see how the attitudes of people are changing in some period they are like, “NGOs, we are against you, you are just eaters of money,” and when they need us, they are, “oh please, could you help,” and so, we don’t know what to do with it. And this can shift again to the other side very soon. So, I’m a little bit afraid of that. I hope there will be no problems, at least with the funding of the civic sector.

Other interview participants described a loss of NGO capacity after the Syrian refugee crisis and how this was currently affecting the ability of NGOs to respond in the early weeks of the Ukrainian crisis:

I think we are slowly returning to the previous model that government needs us. The government needs us at this moment after COVID and the Ukraine crisis. They need our cooperation. But we as a sector do not have enough capacity to be partners as the government would need. Because there was some period that was not very supportive for NGOs. And now we do not have enough capacity to be partners as we would like to be and what would be needed.

An interview participant on the front lines of responding to the Ukrainian refugee crisis described how this lack of capacity impacted staff morale:

But I’m afraid I will lose my key people because of this. And they are doing a great job; they just put everything they can into it. But it’s really, really



hard because there is a huge pressure on services like ours [immigration NGO] to do more, and now they (government) say we need you because “you will solve the situation.” “No, we will not, but you can help us this way. Please do that.” “We don’t have time. We have to solve many other things.”

Another challenge the NGOs discussed was at the policy level. NGOs served as first responders to the crisis, especially in the first weeks before the government passed legislation to address the refugee crisis. However, NGOs shared that though they were the experts on the ground, government actors did not treat them as partners, and there was limited cooperation between NGOs and government. These quotes from two refugee-serving NGOs describe their perspectives on working with government actors on Ukrainian refugee policy: One interview participant stated,

We started to provide services at the time when the government was not ready yet, let’s say during the first days, then, of course, they started to go to operate as well within their structures, but at the same time, our relationship with the Ministry of Interior which is responsible for migration issues in the Czech Republic has been quite ambiguous for many years. It is not obvious to say that we cooperate with them because, for example, they didn’t want to invite us at the beginning of their coordination meetings (about Ukraine), and we had to intrude into these meetings.

Another interviewee noted,

I met the Ministers of Labor and the Minister of Interior twice. But then they let you talk, but then they always approve the strategies on policies without your input. So very often, we see zero of our input in the strategies, so the meeting was nice, but the result is not so good.

## 4.2. NGO Resilience Strategies Within a Dysfunctional Governance Environment

Within the context of significant capacity and governance challenges, many interview participants discussed a second dynamic: how the agile and quick response of NGOs to the Ukrainian refugee crisis revealed their ability to serve vulnerable groups innovatively. A majority of NGO leaders interviewed

were also able to speak to the specific strategies utilised during this period of crisis. This is, in part, because of the proximity of NGO leaders to the Ukrainian refugee crisis. Refugee-serving NGOs were able to speak most directly about their strategies as front-line responders, and some non-refugee-serving NGOs discussed how they worked with other NGOs to address the crisis. Interview participants described that the COVID crisis required NGOs to act quickly to serve those in need and that NGOs used this new capability in the Ukrainian crisis. This ability to adapt to the crisis was viewed as a distinctive competence of NGOs that was absent in the government. As one interviewee stated:

I think the flexibility of the sector to be able to solve the current problems that appears in society, so for example, pandemic crisis, like first big crisis in society. It was evident that without NGOs, our society wouldn’t be able to solve the problem.

Interview participants whose organisations were on the frontline of responding to the crisis described how they were the first responders to the Ukrainian refugee crisis:

We actually became a first-line service. We received many phone calls. Many people asked for different types of advice, particularly regarding their legal status and accommodation. So we started from the first weekend after the attack started, we launched emergency accommodations, in some hostels and hotels here in Prague, in cooperation with other NGOs or volunteers. And we are continuing with this emergency accommodation up to date.

An interviewee also described the limitations of their capacity as it relates to their efforts to respond in the early days of the crisis.

And when it comes to our responsiveness to the crisis, we started to operate from the first day and providing services that the government couldn’t provide yet, but at the same time, we are a very small organisation of around 15 people, but not everyone is working full time. And now, this current situation, like is overwhelming, and it surpasses our capacities by far. So this is very difficult, but we decided, “Okay, we will continue in our job, and we can do our best, but we are at maximum, but we definitely will not be able to save all the Ukrainians coming to our country or Prague, and it’s not in our capacities, so we have to work quite a lot. We must assess what is realistic for us and what’s not.”

Given the obvious capacity issues for dealing with such an unprecedented crisis, interview participants identified several resilience strategies that they used. In particular, they described how these strategies help build capacity, albeit small, to adapt to an unfavourable governance environment. It is important to note that many NGOs employ multiple strategies in their activities; strategies are not mutually exclusive, although it is likely that individual NGOs may not be equally committed to all strategies.

The first strategy was to directly collaborate with other non-refugee-serving NGOs within their network that could assist them in their response. For example, two interview participants described how they collaborated with other NGOs to increase the capacity of NGOs to respond effectively to the crisis:

The Czech Women's Lobby, an umbrella for women's rights organisations. . . . So we are sharing experiences with them. And they help us, those who are not on the first line. So they help us with the advocacy work, writing common statements about the situation of refugees and migrants. Some organisations even offered their social workers to work with us.

So in [Ukraine crisis], we partner with other NGOs, like Caritas, because we were very actively partnering during COVID. So everybody in the city expected us to start working with the housing for the refugees. So we agreed with Caritas and a few other NGOs that would be helping them with some system of finding a roof above their heads. . . . It's [aiding with the Ukrainian crisis] not our usual job.

A second strategy was for NGOs to mobilise supporters. At the beginning of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, individuals chose to donate to organisations to support refugees and demonstrate solidarity with Ukraine. As a result, significant donations were being received by NGOs during this time. Some interviewees expressed hope that the Ukrainian crisis may provide an opportunity for NGOs to experience reputational gains in the eyes of the public after years of disparagement. For example, individuals and corporations donated two billion crowns (approximately USD 78 million) in the first 14 days after the Russian invasion from individuals and corporations (České Noviny, 2022). Interview participants expressed surprise at the level of support from the Czech people.

One director from a refugee-serving NGO stated, "And now, with the Ukrainian crisis, there is also the opportunity for NGOs to be again considered as

important partners. And I am shocked by the level of solidarity. And how many Czechs contributed to NGOs."

Other interview participants also described how the donations from corporations and individuals were notable and different from past events. A number of interview participants stated that they expect these to be "short-term support," not consistent over time. One interviewee described this effect as "emotional giving":

Regular giving is not so usual. So they mostly they give it just one time and is more or less emotional giving.

When most of the people that I have heard say that they were donating, they said they donated to People in Need (large humanitarian aid NGO), and they are kind of happy to say that they (donated) because they know that the organisation will use that money well. So, there is that constituency, right? That basically people have (donated), and they are vocal about contributing to activities of this particular organisation, or actually to propel them too.

A third strategy was to provide direct financial and material assistance support to humanitarian aid organisations. One interview participant from a foundation in the Czech Republic described their efforts to support NGOs' work:

After the conflict, the war in Ukraine, the founders decided to give 5 million Czech crowns to Ukrainian ill children. We organized humanitarian aid also for this cause. . . . we also sent a shipment with medicine because medicine was really difficult to get.

## 5. Discussion and Conclusion

This study explores the perspectives of those working in NGOs about the resilience of their organisations in responding to the Ukrainian refugee crisis in the Czech Republic. We find that NGOs face significant capacity and governance challenges in responding effectively to the Ukrainian refugee crisis in a systematic way. Our findings indicate the negative response to the Syrian refugee crisis and its aftermath have had a detrimental effect on the trust of NGOs in society. These lasting effects influence NGO resilience in the face of the unprecedented Ukrainian crisis. Despite these barriers, NGOs acted with flexibility and agility

in delivering humanitarian assistance to Ukrainian refugees in the first few months of the crisis. Our findings also identify a number of resilience strategies that NGOs utilise to grow their capacity to respond quickly to the crisis. The findings from this study indicate that NGOs engage in organisational resilience strategies within a policy and governance system that lacks the adaptability and coordination needed to be resilient.

Throughout interviews with refugee- and non-refugee-serving NGO leaders, participants identified greater public distrust due to social and political influences related to the Syrian refugee crisis. Consequently, a lack of trust can be identified as a notable barrier to resilience for NGOs during times of crisis. This finding supports existing literature on the importance of trust to NGOs that rely on public trust for legitimacy and support (Becker, Boenigk & Willems, 2020). Distrust or a lack of trust can significantly impact NGOs' public perception, funding, and the reputation of organisations and the sector at large. While some research has been conducted on the social trust of NGOs in other central and eastern European countries (Waniak-Michalak, Perica & Leitonienė, 2020), this study contributes to the literature by exploring the impacts of distrust from the perspective of Czech NGO leaders. As NGO leaders discussed, an initial wave of distrust and negative media coverage not experienced by NGOs prior to the Syrian refugee crisis prompted perceptions of NGOs as being untrustworthy, illegitimate, and "bloodsuckers" of state funding. Public opinion polling supports these conclusions, as data from the Our Society public opinion survey demonstrates a break in trends in 2015 (Public Opinion Research Center, 2022a). In March 2015, the trust toward nonprofit organisations was 45 percent, with distrust at 40 percent of respondents. By October 2015, opinions had flipped, to 37 percent trust and 47 percent distrust. The level of trust in NGOs has never again exceeded the stated distrust.

Furthermore, in March 2022, during the beginning of the Ukrainian refugee crisis, distrust in NGOs polled 50 percent compared to 37 percent trust. NGOs remain among the least trusted institutions in the country, with even television, radio stations, and internet sources doing better (Public Opinion Research Center, 2022b). As a result, Czech NGO leaders' perceptions of distrust identified in this study align with broader public opinion polling and sentiments about the lack of trust citizens have in NGOs.

The significance of distrust for NGOs is multifaceted, as it impacts organisational capacities and perceptions of legitimacy for NGOs. From the general public, a lack of trust in NGOs can limit the capacity of NGOs to fundraise and gain public support for service provision. Furthermore, for NGOs that rely on state funding sources, government agencies can justify rejection or minimal funding to NGOs that are deemed "political NGOs." Consequently, distrust has notable financial consequences for organisations, which can further limit organisational capacities and resilience. However, NGO leaders interviewed in this study did express their ability to build capacity throughout the crisis through horizontal capacity-building strategies. Some scholars of network governance conceptualise the use of vertical and horizontal relationships or ties to other organisations and systems as a method to build nonprofit capacity and capital (Koliba, Mills & Zia, 2011). Through vertical relationships, which are more hierarchical and bureaucratic in nature, NGOs can work with government entities to build capacity through the distribution of public resources. Horizontally, NGOs can work alongside other NGOs to build capacity with one another as cooperative partners. In the absence of vertical capacity-building opportunities, NGO leaders relied on other NGO organisations to assist in capacity-building to address the Ukrainian refugee crisis, including utilising umbrella organisation members and working directly to provide aid. While encouraged by the increase in public support through giving during the Ukrainian refugee crisis, some NGO leaders still expressed hesitancy for the future with the understanding that the current support they have seen for their organisations is temporary.

At the sector level, a lack of trust can become a significant barrier to developing robust systems needed for future governance. As Ansell et al. (2021) discuss, robust systems responses require robust systems of governance to be in place prior to a crisis occurring. In order to develop robustness in governance, public and NGO organisations must develop adaptive institutions and policies. These actions require a degree of trust between partners in order to develop systematic approaches to addressing unexpected crises. Dostál (2015) highlights the value of cooperation demonstrated between Czech NGOs and governmental authorities during other emergency management issues (e.g. emergency firefighting and rescue missions); however, the presence of this cooperation appears largely absent from refugee-serving NGO leaders' perspectives in the context

of the Syrian and Ukrainian refugee crises. This difference in cooperation may be, in part, due to the perceived political nature of the migration crisis compared to other crises and emergency management situations. By not being involved in policy discussions and due to limited cooperation, NGOs continue to lack legitimacy in the political system. As a result, distrust will continue to be a barrier to developing robust governance.

In this less-than-ideal institutional environment, NGOs operate the best they can in the absence of robust governance systems. Without a systematic response, NGOs adapt by adopting resilience strategies that increase their capacity to cope with the need. NGOs collaborate with each other, mobilise supporters, and provide direct financial and material support to the refugee response. These strategies build capacity in the short term. The flexibility and agility of NGOs are linked to flexible management and the absence of bureaucratic mechanisms, but they may also be linked to value principles. The dedication of people who work in NGOs means they are willing to work quickly, selflessly, and significantly “overtime” because they hold pro-social values, which lead to pro-social behaviour, despite the lack of resources and rewards. While those that work in NGOs may be more willing to step out of their comfort zone to serve forced migrants in a crisis situation, a governance system can’t base systematic aid on that in the long term. Resilience strategies are temporary solutions to systematic problems. The findings strongly suggest that while NGOs can act resiliently in the short term, a more systematic response led by the government is required. As Ansell et al. (2021) state, “in turbulent situations, foresight, protection, and resilience are not enough. Instead, the public sector must meet turbulence with robust strategies where creative and agile public organisations adapt to the emergence of new disruptive problems by building networks and partnerships with the private sector and civil society” (p. 952).

## 6. Future Research

This study’s findings suggest several future lines of inquiry to more fully understand the resilience of NGOs in responding to the Ukrainian crisis. First, our data were collected at the beginning of the crisis. Additional research incorporating a longer time frame would allow us to better understand how perspectives shift and change as the crisis unfolds over

months and years. Second, studies that examine the role of government actors at different levels (national and regional) would provide a fuller picture of the governance challenges of the system. Third, this study’s analysis is limited to one central European country. To gain a broader perspective, studies of how NGOs responded to the crisis in different countries (for example, Poland, Slovakia, and Germany) would add to our understanding of how different governance systems interact with NGOs. Finally, more studies that consider NGO resilience strategies in the context of ambiguous governance systems will contribute to the field’s understanding of how to govern in uncertain environments effectively.

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