A glimpse of humanity: How Romanians have mobilised to help Ukrainian refugees

Many Ukrainians have fled to Romania since the start of the Russia-Ukraine war. They have been met with support from volunteers and organisations across the country, while civic action groups have been established to raise funds and send aid to those still in Ukraine. **Remus Gabriel Anghel** *and* **Ruxandra Trandafoiu** *argue that the mobilisation of ordinary citizens to help those in need offers a glimpse of the potential of Romanian civil society.*

On the morning of Thursday 24 February 2022, many Romanians were woken up by the thunder of explosions coming from neighbouring Ukraine. Rolling news confirmed that the war had broken out and this sent a shockwave of unprecedented intensity throughout the country. After all, Romania shares a 649 km (403 miles) border with its largest neighbour.

By sundown, large scale mobilisation of individuals and organisations was ongoing, including public protest against the Russian invasion, fund-raising, setting up Facebook groups for the coordination of the aid effort, convoys taking supplies to border crossing points, and endless offers of transportation and shelter. The national press reported that the first 72 hours saw the arrival of 43,000 refugees in Romania.

Clujul Civic, a civic action group based in Cluj-Napoca, a city less than 200 km from the Romanian-Ukrainian border, directed its 13,000 Facebook members to post messages of solidarity and start fundraising for refugees. Young people, including medical students carrying first aid kits, travelled to the border to provide help and assistance for those in need. Offers to host Ukrainians or help them on their journey poured in. These actions replicated thousands of other similar initiatives from all over the country. While just and necessary, community mobilisation on this scale is unusual in Romania.

Generosity carries a high price in a country where people still struggle to make ends meet in a difficult and still ongoing post-socialist transition to a market economy. Romanians are living under a neoliberal political regime that despite EU accession, has not delivered on its promises. The country has the highest emigration rate in the region, with over three million Romanians out of a population of just under 20 million taking advantage of EU free movement rights and leaving since 2007.

Romania's socio-economic conditions mean that Romanians usually lack trust in each other, and community mobilisation is patchy. Despite losing part of the territory of Bukovina (a historic region that included parts of modern Romania and Ukraine) to the Soviet Union in 1940, and despite the continued existence of pockets of Romanian speaking communities across the new border, Ukraine has essentially been an 'invisible' big neighbour. Romanians know it is there, but they have had no clear image of it and little attention has been paid to Ukraine in public discourse, unlike other neighbours, such as Hungary, Moldova, and Bulgaria.

The civic mobilisation we have seen in Romania since Russia's invasion is all the more surprising when we look at civil society's record in the country since the fall of communism in 1989. A report published by the Multimedia Foundation in 2013 found that a majority of Romanians considered the work of civil society to be limited by low trust capital, citizens' focus on individual needs, and social alienation, leading to passivity and a lack of mobilisation.

The report underlined that there was a reduced understanding among participants of the role of the social and the potential impact of political activism at the community level. In particular, there was rudimentary knowledge about the role of civil society in correcting the state's undemocratic tendencies. Participants thought that the main barriers to community or civic participation were rumours, self-interest and envy, as well as the belief that civil society lacked structure and maturity. The report argued for new community-oriented values, better communication and leadership, noting also that Romanians' low trust in state institutions compounded citizens' feeble involvement in community action.

At the level of state institutions, USAID (the United States Agency for International Development) [criticised](#) the Romanian government in 2018 for undermining the work of civil society organisations through complex registration procedures and unfair financing legislation. These obstacles have limited the work of such organisations and fostered a lack of trust in their activities.

In December 2021, a [Eurobarometer survey](#) conducted on behalf of the European Parliament revealed that the main right Romanians valued and considered to be worth protecting was freedom of movement, ahead of democracy or freedom of speech, values that a majority of other EU countries respected above all others. Only eight per cent of those interviewed in Romania thought that the right to seek asylum from persecutions should be defended as a matter of priority.

Civil society mobilisation in the defence of freedom and democracy for people that until last month were invisible strangers is difficult to explain. And yet, it may not be entirely surprising that Romanians, who suffered one of the most oppressive communist regimes in Eastern Europe and paid the heaviest price for freedom in 1989, feel any threat to democracy most acutely. Many Romanians may wonder whether Moldova, a former Romanian territory that was also occupied by the Soviet Union in 1940, is next on Putin's war agenda.

The occupation of Crimea and now Snake Island in the Black Sea, extends Russian control to an area of strategic importance to Romania and NATO. Many Romanians have memories, actual or inherited, of the Russians' (Soviet) arrival in 1945 and their stay until 1958, while grandparents still remember the rumbling of Soviet tanks towards Hungary in 1956. Romanians' high mobility in Europe and first-hand experience of established democracies may also play a part.

As images of a large-scale humanitarian disaster continue to flicker on our screens, a certain empathy with 'distant others' is not uncommon. Yet the speed of mobilisation, the role of young people in offering humanitarian aid, and the unprecedented magnitude of civil society action in Romania offer a glimmer of hope for the future that civil society can uphold the values of freedom and peace as we hopefully move beyond the current Russia-Ukraine war. Human solidarity needs to infuse a better partnership between civil society and government institutions in Romania. The events of the last two weeks offer the strongest indication yet of the maturation of Romanian civil society. This is a glimpse of what is possible, let it be a watershed moment.

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