

## Progressive Person of the Year

Unexpectedly for most Europeans, the year 2022 became overshadowed by Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The war has not only devastated Ukraine but also affected every country in Europe and many others in the rest of the world.

In one way or another, nearly one third of the Ukrainian population became displaced in 2022, and millions decided to flee to Poland, the largest EU member state sharing a border with Ukraine. It is not an exaggeration to say that the shock of the war electrified Poland, and the whole country came to have just one priority – to provide military as well as humanitarian assistance to Ukraine, almost without limit. However, the work of local actors – municipal leaders and volunteers – is often hindered not only by the shortage of financial resources but also by disinformation on migration – a topic FEPS has studied in various contexts in recent years.

Poland is a country under the Article 7 procedure of the EU for violations of the rule of law, and it is often mentioned as the country that could drift away from the EU. This does not mean, however, that Polish people are cynical about or indifferent to our shared EU values. Moreover, we have reason to believe that the Polish left will be part of the great project to replace Poland's current populist-nationalist government. Without doubt, the left should certainly capitalise on its performance during the war effort and the refugee crisis.

In the first edition of the Progressive Yearbook, we introduced the tradition of choosing a Progressive Person of the Year in order to focus the limelight on a hardworking progressive who can show the way for others. The Progressive Person of the Year can be a political leader, an academic, or an activist – but it must be someone who has delivered an outstanding achievement (in politics, publication or otherwise) and who can be of inspiration to our readers. This person must also be someone who can motivate progressives, young and old, to renew and reinforce their commitment to our common cause.

This year we have chosen Grzegorz Pietruczuk, Mayor of Bielany in Poland, as our FEPS Progressive Person of the Year. Grzegorz is a champion of local political leadership and humanitarian assistance. He has been at the forefront of supporting refugees (mainly women and children) from Ukraine, ensuring that those who arrive feel the solidarity of fellow Europeans and keep their faith in the possibility of a better life, in the community of European nations.

In choosing Grzegorz, FEPS wants to highlight not just an outstanding example of behaviour within Poland but also an example that should serve as a model when we want to find the meaning of selfless support to those escaping the tragic conditions created by Vladimir Putin's cruel and unprovoked war. Our political family badly needs the examples of

composure, solidarity and sacrifice that Grzegorz embodies, far away from the high offices of Brussels.

Mayor Grzegorz Pietruczuk kindly welcomed the FEPS delegation in Warsaw and showed us his work in support of Ukrainian refugees. Our readers can learn about his experience and perspective in the interview that follows.



LÁSZLÓ ANDOR  
interviews GRZEGORZ PIETRUCZUK

## “Please, do not leave Ukraine and Ukrainians on their own”

**László Andor:** *Let’s go back to 24 February 2022. What were your first thoughts that morning?*

**Grzegorz Pietruczuk:** My first reaction was disbelief. I couldn’t imagine that in the 21st century there could be a war happening in the country we share a border with. All we had known about war until then was from books or from the stories that had been told to us by our grandparents or war veterans. But then, very quickly, this instinctive reaction was overpowered by other thoughts on whether we, ourselves, had been prepared in the months leading up to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. We had spent time devising very different crisis scenarios. We had had several drills – with some that involved testing defence and civil defence capacities. But we had perceived these as training exercises, and as training exercises only. So that morning, 24 February, I made a quick summary of what we had accomplished through these drills and what remained our weak points. On the way to work, I organised an emergency meeting with my closest co-workers. And within just a few minutes of arriving at the town hall, we set up an Emergency Council – which, by the way, has kept meeting ever since. We spent the first few hours evaluating our preparedness. We then rolled up our sleeves, driven by the one single thought of what we could do to help people. At first, it was of course about providing aid to those in Ukraine. But we very soon started asking ourselves how we could get ready for those who might seek refuge in Poland. At that point we didn’t really consider how many would arrive – we just expected that they would. We couldn’t possibly anticipate what would happen later, nor predict the vast number of refugees.

**LA:** *The media reported that Bielany was the first district in Warsaw, and possibly the first in the country, to pick up the challenge and start organising for the welcome of Ukrainians. How did you manage, given that you said that any scenarios considered before were purely hypothetical?*

**GP:** Life has taught me that you must be prepared for very different scenarios, even if they seem implausible. Even if personally you believe they are surreal, there always has to be an emergency plan in the back of your head. So, once we had called the Emergency Council, we decided to start from what we believed would be needed instantly – namely funds to help Ukraine and the Ukrainians. Within just a couple of hours, we had contacted UNICEF Poland, which agreed to take patronage over a concert that we proposed organising. I think the event took place within something like 30 hours after the news of the invasion broke. Hundreds of inhabitants of Bielany passed by and gave a donation, leaving us with a substantial sum of money. We also made a spontaneous decision to start fundraising via Facebook.

And in the midst of all this, it became apparent that this was to be a full-scale, long-lasting war. The pictures that we were receiving from Ukraine were terrifying. It wasn't just a threat, it was real. It was a military conflict, which would have grave consequences. Already at the concert, our Bielany inhabitants started bringing some essential items to donate to refugees. We felt we needed to act, and this was what a group of active citizens called 'Pomocne Bielany' (Helpful Bielany) took care of, with help from several District Council members, one of whom was Monika Szatkowska. This group had been connecting over 1,000 people, and it brought them, and others, together to continue collecting clothes, food, anything really. That is how the process began, although we believed we had to do more. We needed rooms, and we needed them nearby. We decided to adjust spaces inside the town hall. We started with the garage, which we emptied of its 60 cars and transformed into a pop-up workplace for hundreds of volunteers. It served that function for over six months.

There were around 600 people, who engaged in what was a profound effort. The pop-up workplace was where donations would arrive. They would come from individuals in Poland, but also from abroad – from Portugal, the United States, Malta, the Scandinavian countries, Ireland... In fact, it is easier to name the countries from which we did not receive anything, because the list of those countries from which we got so much is incredibly long. And this is how we also became a kind of a hub, where packages would be received and then repacked and sent on to their recipients. We were welcoming some really large transport lorries, with very, very diverse loads. Evidently, there were many needs.

So, the volunteers would repackage the parcels, and they were supported by members of the city guards and firefighters. Their work would continue round the clock because we needed to deal with the massive donations, and sometimes with enormous lorries arriving all at once. But more importantly, because the first trains with the refugees started arriving.

Now, that was an entirely new kind of experience for us. And I will never forget the pictures of how these people looked, and how the situation was at the railway stations. The memories that I have from those days are comparable to the pictures of the second world war that one sees in history books. And again, we took a very quick decision to do more. These people had no place to go, no place to sleep and nothing to eat. And we felt that it was our responsibility to provide them with shelter. So we took two sports halls and transformed them into dormitories. It took us a day or so to get them ready. We succeeded

thanks to an enormous effort from the many individuals that kept helping. People really were giving and doing whatever they could. And then there was also a third dormitory established by the Catholic 'Good Place'. This was where over 100 families could move in quickly.

Soon afterwards, we developed a new operational model. And here, I want to underline that this model was possible thanks to the massive contribution from our young people, especially high school students. They were so incredibly committed and they kept working non-stop, 24 hours per day, not going home from school but sleeping there too.

I myself moved to the town hall, to be on the spot, to be continuously available, to work as much as I could and to be closer to everyone and everything. I slept just a few hours a day because there was always so much to do. The transport with the refugees also kept arriving in the middle of the night, at one or two o'clock in the morning; the donations needed repackaging; and the district issues were there too, of course. So, I would grab some sleep probably between 11 o'clock and whenever the buses with the refugees arrived.

We needed to take care of those people. And they were arriving in very different shape. Those from the first wave were in much better shape, physically and psychologically. Some of them managed to bring some personal belongings with them and some documents. In the second wave, the refugees were already from the areas directly affected by the war. And a large percentage of them found shelter in our district. They were from areas such as Kharkiv. And they told us terrible stories. And later, several of them also decided to testify and to state on record what had happened. They were extremely traumatised. Especially children who had been forced out of their homes by the Russian Army. Even today, recent surveys show that about 40% of the Ukrainian children currently residing in Poland are suffering from PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder).

Consequently, our volunteers and our young people have all been working to help those children feel a sense of safety. The moment the transport with the refugees arrived, people would be offered clean clothes, children would be changed and offered the possibility to shower or take a bath – if they were in a condition that would allow them to do so. They were offered meals. All of them were incredibly exhausted, as they were fleeing and had been on the move for several days. Some of them reached the Polish border by foot, as that was the only way they could hope to escape. They were suffering from incredible cold, as it was February and March, which are usually still very cold months. Many had terrible frostbite and thus wounds. So we needed to provide additional medical points to help those we could, and also to provide transfers to hospital for those who needed them. That meant we had to mobilise more doctors, medical personnel and other members of care services.

Let me come back to the young people who engaged as volunteers because for them this was a tremendous effort to bear and very intense work. They were 16, 17 and 18 years old. And they were not only helping but soon took over bigger responsibilities of organising help themselves. What is more, they did so in an incredibly professional manner. This was a very formative experience for them, and a life lesson of what civic society is about and what citizenship means. They saw firsthand that the world could turn into turmoil at any

time really, that things we take for granted may be gone in a mere moment. And the only way to persevere is through common action that is based on solidarity and responsibility for one another.

**LA:** *Let's speak further of the people whom you met and helped. Are there any particular personal stories you would like to share?*

**GP:** There are so many pieces that make this story... But there's one that I would like to share here. It concerns the young people in my district, whom I have already mentioned. Among the high schools in my district, there is one named after Domejko, which is very strong in teaching mathematics and physics. It is one of the best in the country. Its students organised a reception centre in the school, transforming the sports hall into a dormitory. Step by step, the whole school became a refugee centre, and within a couple of days, these young people themselves put in place a system to manage arrivals, relocations etc. They developed software to assist them, thanks to which they were able to collect addresses for relocation and check the safety criteria of these places. This was more sophisticated than what many cities came up with. I have been there many times, and it was humbling to observe them. They were so incredibly hard-working, intelligent, empathetic, open and always there to offer a helping hand, an ear and a shoulder to the refugees. At a certain point, their parents arrived at the town hall. I had very little time for any meetings back then, but I was told this was an emergency. So, I received them. They entered and said "Mr Mayor, you have to come and talk to our children now". I was not sure I understood them properly, so asked what they wanted me to talk to their children about. These were young people of 16, 17 or 18 years old, already with voting rights themselves. Their parents replied that these young people had stopped listening to their parents and had told them not to disturb them while they were helping refugees. The young people had also said that when the crisis was over, they would resume their education – which they had temporarily laid aside. For these young people, the most important thing was what they were able to do at that very moment. I agreed to go to their school and meet these young people. But before I left, I told the parents that they should be proud to see what kind of incredible, responsible and engaged citizens their offspring were becoming. As promised, I went and talked to these young people, who assured me that they would work hard to pass their end-of-year and final high school exams. And they did – incredibly well. Many were able to choose whichever further course of study they wanted to pursue, and others went abroad. But all in all, they also showed how much of an awakening the situation was for them. This taught me something too. There are so many complaints about how apathetic this new generation is – that they do not care and do not engage – but that simply is not true. The heroism, creativity and passionate engagement I have seen in my district are the best proof of that.

**LA:** *You spoke about the two waves and how quickly you needed to get ready. But did you realise that there would be so many people?*

**GP:** I don't believe that anyone in Poland was prepared for such a huge number of refugees. Without the support and engagement of individual citizens, we would never

have been able to welcome them. In my district, Bielany, I have people who have very much been focused on building a community that would be strong thanks to the mutual relations between inhabitants – a community that would forge a sense of civic duty among one another. And this is very important because, in the contemporary world, we work so intensely and we live so intensely that often there is a lack of space and of time for personal relations, or even for neighbourly relations. People who have lived next to each other for years remain strangers to one another. So, we have actually been working for many years to make sure that people not only exist alongside each other, but that they feel they belong together, that they engage with one another and find ways to bond. This can be achieved through small steps, through small things. And this all led to a situation last February, in which hundreds of inhabitants declared readiness to open their houses and receive Ukrainians into their households. This was a grand gesture, and we then followed up on it. The social care centres have been working tirelessly, including on checking the apartments that have been made available. They also took charge of establishing connections between Polish families and the Ukrainian families who were directed to them.

And this was really an immense wave of incredible, positive energy. I have never seen anything like it in my life. The kindness and generosity were in such contrast to the backdrop of all the terrible things that were happening. And it was so genuine, so humane, so natural. There was no calculation behind it, no speculating. It was clear that from helping people in need, one couldn't possibly draw any personal benefits. And it was important to work hard to help those people, who were in shock, who had just lost everything and couldn't stop thinking about their normal lives, their homes and the jobs they used to have. All those things that had been taken away from them.

Then we also had people from places like Mariupol and Kramatorsk. And all of them had their stories. We created a sort of map where our friends, our brothers and sisters from Ukraine had come from. And we put pins on the map of Ukraine and those pins covered the whole country. But the biggest waves were from eastern Ukraine, with refugees coming from very small villages and towns. It was heartbreaking to see – especially the elderly people who had lived a very calm life, just from one day to the next, somewhere in the countryside. They included Russian-speaking people, who also had been displaced and pushed out. They came to seek refuge, and they were sitting in these large dormitory rooms of ours, on their beds, unable to move. They were in a state of absolute apathy and depression. They wouldn't eat. They wouldn't speak. They were unable to function. Because only a week ago, they had still been leading a normal life back on a farm somewhere, and now they were in a foreign country. Yes, our district may be very beautiful – but it is unlikely that in any other conditions they would have taken a journey to Warsaw or to Poland. And instead, they were here, unable to understand what had happened and why; why people whom they considered friendly, even brothers – the Russians – could treat Ukrainians in such a manner. What they saw was brutal, and it is only now perhaps that we realise the scale of their terror – now that we see the reports from the territories liberated by the Ukrainian army. But even so, it is still hard for us to grasp the barbaric things that have happened.

**LA:** *Would you say that different waves had different destinations in mind?*

**GP:** There were groups of refugees who would come to us and say that Poland was a transit country. When asked where they would like to go, their answer would be “as far away as possible from Russia and from Putin”. This is how they chose Spain and Portugal, and we tried to ensure that they had these relocation possibilities. In this particular context, I would wholeheartedly like to thank all countries of the European Union for their support and help because their cooperation in giving refugees an opportunity to relocate was incredibly important for us.

Those refugees who were willing to flee a long distance warned us that we should not feel safe and that we should get ready to seek refuge soon as well. They said: “when the Russians are done with us in Ukraine, they will come to get you”. The refugees who asked to be placed as far away as possible were really afraid that Putin’s army would follow them and could get them beyond the Ukrainian borders. Because let’s not forget that within the first weeks of the invasion, the Russian army conquered many places and was quickly moving forwards in the direction of Kyiv and central Ukraine. And this kind of awareness, this kind of feeling of anxiety is still present in Poland, among the Polish. We had never trusted the Russians, and we had never believed Putin. But these warnings, which Poland and other countries in Central and Eastern Europe had been giving at the EU level, were ignored and seen as simple Russophobia. In 2022, the expectations became a true scenario. This is an incredible tragedy for the entire continent. But for our region, it’s of course being felt even more intensely. We do not know how this is all going to end. It is a war that the Ukrainian nation is very bravely fighting in defence of the country, and during war different things happen and it can end in many different ways.

But while some asked to be relocated to as far away as possible, others had reasons to stay closer to home. Many had their family members somewhere in Central, Eastern Europe or Western Europe and wanted to be able to go and stay with them. So, for some, Poland was indeed a stopover, while for those who knew someone here, it was their destination.

But we, as a district or as the city of Warsaw, were not able to receive such an incredibly large group of refugees. We couldn’t provide the help that was needed, as there were hundreds and thousands of people arriving, even just in Bielany. We could not assist or offer a more permanent shelter to all of them, so we needed relocation somewhere else in Poland. This was another thing we needed to organise, first only using our direct personal contacts with other town halls, mayors and alderpersons across the country. There were no legal provisions, so we had to improvise – and thanks to the solidarity and prompt reactions it worked. Imagine, 70-80% of all the refugees reaching Poland’s borders came to Warsaw, which quickly turned into a hub and a relocation centre.

We therefore had another responsibility, which was to make sure that at every reception point, every destination was checked and secure. There were criteria, and we were very firmly committed to them, to prevent any further dramatic situations. We never sent refugees to any place that had not been verified, that was under any suspicion of any kind – this would have been inadmissible.



That said, there were also many people, who arrived in a shape that would not allow them to go any further. They thought Warsaw could provide them with stability and safety, and they wanted to stay. And we also needed to find a way to accommodate them.

To illustrate the current numbers, in December 2022, I have over 1,200 Ukrainian children in nurseries and schools in my district. During the absolute peak, we had 1,500 children. For a while, we had 1,000. Now, we are seeing trends of growth, and we expect them to continue, depending partly on the temperatures in January and February. Winter in Ukraine can be very tough and very cold. But now we feel prepared. We have reception places, stores with essential supplies, and effective relocation mechanisms. We are in a position to send cargos to Ukraine, knowing how dire the situation is there.

**LA:** *When we were sitting down for this interview you said you were loading a lorry last night.*

**GP:** Yes, indeed. We loaded a lorry with donations, and these parcels need to reach families in Stanislawow. The lorry had to leave at midnight to avoid the traffic. So we had a meeting of the District Council until about 9pm. After that, I went to work with some councillors and town hall colleagues. In Ukraine, there is a shortage of everything. We continue collecting various goods, then repacking them – just like at the beginning of the crisis – and sending them off. The donations come from individuals, but also from entrepreneurs who have their companies in my district. As the town hall, we are also involved in mobilising resources. Everyone helps as much as they can. More transport will set off soon thanks to our common endeavour. This time, it will be a convoy with a few hundred packages for Ukrainian children, which needs to reach them before Christmas. A little joy – especially for those who have been made orphans or half-orphans by this military conflict. In the end, this is about small gestures. It is about making sure that those kids, who have been so heavily impacted by the tragedy of war, have another kind of experience, at least this Christmas season.

In fact, we have never stopped and keep on working as we did in spring. The aid is now more directed to Ukraine. We know that there is a shortage of everything – of electricity generators; of pocket lights; of warm clothes; of food, especially food you can conserve. Remembering this is still very important, and we therefore keep on loading these lorries here in Warsaw.

We have not forgotten about those who arrived here and remain in a precarious situation, either. Here in Bielany, we take care of ‘our’ kids from an orphanage in Ustka. I say ‘our’, as we really see them as our kids – who came here, being moved from orphanages around Kyiv. There are a couple of hundred children who are very small, mostly one or two years old. It is a kind of a miracle that they were not kidnapped by the Russian army, as were many others. It is shocking to realise this, and to see the pictures in the media from the liberated territories in Ukraine, where Russians prepared a torture chamber for children. I cannot comprehend that anything of that kind can be happening, while the world is watching. I cannot understand what kind of a person would do such things. But then, I recall what happened in Bucha. And I remember that

there are many, many places that were drenched in Ukrainian blood. The horror of it makes me feel responsible for each and every child that is here, in search of safety. We promised the Ukrainian people that we would help and support them, and that those children would be safe and comforted. Our solutions are temporary, of course, as there can be no adoption procedures while the war is ongoing. But we will do what we can to provide help, to love and to protect.

**LA:** *Let us come back to the numbers again. When we visited you with the FEPS Ones to Watch Programme, there were 25,000 refugees in Bielany.*

**GP:** Back then, at the end of March 2022, we were hosting about 25,000 refugees (the population of the district itself is around 136,000 inhabitants). That was indeed a peak. We also ran out of space and could not, as we say in Polish, squeeze everyone in anymore. Whatever we could put together, every private apartment available, every sports hotel, every bourse, every extra bed in schools or in rest homes – everything was occupied. And the difficulty was, of course, that the refugees needed not only shelter but aid, clothes, food... It was incredibly intense.

I remember the moment when one of the families arrived here. They have remained in Bielany, and we continue to look after them. Back then, when they reached us, there were five of them – a mother and four children. The oldest is 15 years old now. He was holding his little brother and his little sister in his arms. And he was just incredibly exhausted. They came with absolutely nothing. And ever since then, they have been trying to rebuild their lives. Like the other families here, they will soon be able to move into the district apartments which we have managed to provide. The children go to school, but we try to do more for them, and for others too. We therefore try to find ways for them to do extracurricular activities as well, so that they can grow and regain what can be restored from their childhoods. Many of the children need contact with their peers, but they also need further support to persevere through trauma – and that is why at the town hall we also now employ Ukrainian psychologists who are specialised in helping children and young people.

**LA:** *Do you think that Polish people's attitudes towards Ukrainians have changed over these recent months? The two countries share centuries of common, complicated history and before the war began there had been many Ukrainians living and working in Poland...*

**GP:** You can certainly see a change, and sadly I have to admit it is a negative one. The shift has been caused by a couple of factors. The first one results from the impact of the incredible Russian propaganda. This is what the Russians neglected in the first month of the war, but has now intensified. You can see massive activity on the internet – it is a channel for many aggressive Russian messages. Personally, I am totally shocked by what you can find there, and by the fact that some Polish parties, like the Konfederacja Polska (Polish Confederation), publicise these messages and openly admit a pro-Russian attitude. I do not understand why we tolerate these parties' despicable activities – it is an absolute scandal. There should be no space in a democratic country for their lies and what they dare to claim about 'the real situation in Ukraine'.

The second factor is the financial and economic side of the refugee crisis, which the Polish have started experiencing more and more. People feel that their living conditions have deteriorated, that it is harder than it was only a year ago and that the prospects are gloomy. Inflation is already 17%. And with our healthcare and social security systems already being challenged before the refugee crisis, and then with further pressure caused by Covid-19, the Polish feel that they are lacking basic protection and care. There are massive problems across the welfare system. Our answer in Bielany is to continue providing public goods and services to all, Polish and Ukrainians, and it works here – but in times of shortage, many people elsewhere would see the solution as being to shift the focus and take care of Poles first.

And then another issue is exhaustion. Not everybody feels it, but there are a good number of people who feel drained by helping others. Yet this is where we need to stand together and keep on going. Here in Bielany, there were several Ukrainian families before the war. They had simply been part of our local community. And consequently, when the refugees started arriving, these families rolled up their sleeves and have been standing arm-in-arm with us ever since. They have been incredibly supportive and they continue to be engaged in the situation today.

Let us also not forget that according to official data from the Institute for Labour, there are now 65,000 refugees in Warsaw alone, who are fully employed and who have regular work contracts. They adhere to our system, they pay taxes and they are employed in different sorts of services. Many of them stepped into the job vacancies that had existed on the labour market before the refugee crisis – for example in domestic work and elderly care. I employ Ukrainian refugees in my Bielany town hall as well, of course. We have seven of them working here, and there are many others working in the different town hall agencies across the district. These people are truly hardworking, competent and lovely work colleagues.

But while some of these refugees are now settled here, many miss their country, and there are some who want to return to Ukraine. Those who can, travel back and forth, holding onto hope that the future will be kinder. Yet they know that they cannot plan seriously for anything at the moment. That is why they declare they would rather stay with us here in Poland. They believe that even if the situation changes, even if there is a ceasefire, the path to peace will be long. What is more, many Ukrainians I speak to say that a ceasefire will be used by the Russians to re-arm, to regroup and to buy time to prepare a final, terminal – one can say – blast. So, any temporary solution that may come will be met with disbelief, and this needs to be taken into consideration.

**LA:** *We have talked at length about what you have been doing on the local level. What about the national level? What did the government of Poland do to help?*

**GP:** I'm a left-wing person. And I am in opposition to the current government. But I have to say I appreciate what happened. I have already said that there were neither laws nor rules about how to organise the country in the face of this kind of situation. In other words, there were no guidelines for the government to follow. Consequently, most of the

activities at the beginning of the refugee flows took place outside what would be legally prescribed. This is yet further proof of how unexpected the war and the influx of so many refugees were.

The situation was dire, and help had to be organised instantly. So, we mobilised as self-government. The financial assistance we received in my district from the national government came on the 46th day of the conflict. Before that, we had relied entirely on ourselves. And more importantly, we managed to do this by ourselves too. But when funds eventually came, that made it a little easier.

Then a certain division of tasks came about. The government focused on providing military support for Ukraine, which was key to that country's capacity to fight. This was not only our perception, but also that of the Ukrainian army leaders, who acknowledged that they would have had to surrender and see their country conquered by Russians if it was not for the external aid – from countries such as Poland. And consequently, our self-government took responsibility to help Ukrainians here and abroad.

All in all, I really can only appreciate our cooperation with the government. Whichever issue I had and then signalled to the Voivoda (leader of the region) – like a shortage of beds or bedsheets, which we were always running out of far too quickly – I received backing. Often it came late, or fairly late, but it was there. I cannot complain that it was too small, or too whatever, because it was enough to ensure that kids could remain in the kindergartens and schools, that we could purchase additional food for those in need and cover some other costs. Of course, what we got was not even close to covering the overall costs, but it still offered relief.

But if you are speaking to me as a representative of the self-government, I have always acted according to the rules, as the saying in Polish goes: 'if you can count, count on yourself'. That is why we were not looking for anyone to help us in our actions or for anyone to blame. We were determined to manage, and any additional assistance would be welcome, not expected. I am a mayor, and as mayors, presidents, aldermen and alderwomen, we have been entrusted with a responsibility that we must uphold, not transfer. Self-governments need to be self-sufficient and resilient in such moments of crisis. We are part of the Polish state, and we have to act accordingly. That is why I repeat that the government should continue to do what it has been doing, namely providing military assistance to Ukraine. That is incredibly important. There needs to be an understanding that we must play a part in helping Ukraine and be part of the success of Ukraine, seeing it liberate itself from the Russian army.

**LA:** *And what about the European Union? Was it present? What should have been done differently?*

**GP:** I will speak very politically incorrectly, but the EU should unblock the resilience and recovery funds. We are waiting for these funds on the local level, too – but overall, there is an enormous need for them in Poland. Now, economically speaking, we are still this kind of locomotive that has been put in motion, and that continues pushing forward. But it is starting to break. And once this train stops, it will be incredibly difficult to put it in motion again.

Since the war began, international cooperation has intensified and we have been receiving a huge amount of support directly from the different countries in the European Union. It has come on the bilateral level, as I think the European Union and Brussels were also taken by surprise at the scale of what happened, by the number of people who suddenly entered the EU, and by the short time in which it happened. So, coming back to the question of cooperation, it was rather that different cities, provinces and regions contacted us, which has all been proof that European solidarity does exist. And this is something that is heart-lifting.

I want to thank everybody again for the fact that I have been able to count on so many among you. There has been material help, but also other kinds of support – trying to see with us how to deal with the situation further, for example. My counterparts in self-government in the different member states of the European Union shared their experiences with us on how to welcome refugees and to help them. To give an example, I recently welcomed a delegation from Germany, and they shared with me two ideas which I'm definitely going to try and implement in my district. The first is to have an Integration Council. This may be a very empowering body, especially as in my district, we have quite a lot of people who are not Polish by origin. This Integration Council could be an advisory body. It could help us consider and choose the best solutions to given problems, and it could let us work jointly towards improving the lives of everyone in the whole community.

**LA:** *Today, the media announced the Polish government's decision to block the next aid package for Ukraine. What are the reasons for this decision?*

**GP:** This is a game that I do not understand at all and I would prefer not to understand. I cannot imagine why or how the Polish government would block any aid, or any resources for Ukraine. The Polish task is to help Ukraine, so that it can defend itself, become independent, be a functioning state, and, in a longer-term perspective, become an EU and NATO member state. Vetoing any aid package is therefore simply absurd. I hope that this is a misunderstanding and that within the next couple of hours, this issue will be resolved.

I am also astonished that the government would proclaim such a direction for Polish foreign politics, when there are so many politicians also on the right-wing, within their own camp, who are very much engaged in helping Ukraine. This government's readiness to resort to blackmail similar to that of Viktor Orbán's corrosive veto, and this government's readiness to put Poland on a comparable level to that of Hungary's new law, is something I cannot accept.

**LA:** *And finally, is there any message that you would like to give the readers of the Progressive Yearbook?*

**GP:** This war will likely last a very long time. Of course, I hope not, but it seems that we must brace ourselves for the likelihood that it will. So, let me share one more telling story of a family who reached Bielany on one of those long, cold March nights. I was on duty and I of course met them, and we managed to secure their stay here – for a mother, two children and a grandmother. We tried to provide shelter and aid, and then step by step help

them to anchor here. It turned out that the youngest child (aged 3) had been suffering from autism, which made the already hard experiences even more challenging for him. He had a lot of trouble adapting to the new reality, as autism was affecting his cognitive and developmental capabilities. It was tough. Very tough. Thanks to the help of my fiancée, we managed after many, many, many attempts to enable this child's father to cross the border and come to visit for a very short time. And this boy, after 7-8 months of living in anxiety, finally saw his dad. After this visit, everything changed. Today, the boy is in a totally different condition. He can start anew and try to live a life here. He is returning to a developmental path that any other child his age, who is not affected by autism and war, would have – with a normal house, food, and a sense of safety. This shows how relevant it is to keep on taking care, and to keep on looking after the refugees. They may have reached Poland, and they may be safe and secure, but this is not by default a passport to a new life for them. This story shows what kind of a heavy burden these people are carrying, especially children, and that it will take years and much, much effort to bounce back. The dad of the child I just spoke about had to go back to Ukraine, where he is a driver of humanitarian aid convoys now. We hope that we will be able to ensure him a pass again soon. Because his visit was a bright sparkle in these dark days. And there are many families, each with a different story, who need to be recomposed and offered a future – here and hopefully one day also in Ukraine.

And this is my appeal to the European politicians: please, do not leave Ukraine and Ukrainians on their own.