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# **From Solidarity with Solidarity to Solidarity: Western Humanitarian Aid to Poland in the 1980s and Ukraine since 2022 – Case Studies of Two Polish Actors**

## **[Od solidarności z „Solidarnością” do Solidarności: zachodnia pomoc humanitarna dla Polski w latach 80. XX w. i Ukrainy od 2022 r. – studia przypadków dwóch polskich świadków wydarzeń]**

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### **Abstract**

This article examines humanitarian aid from Western Europe to Poland in the 1980s and to Ukraine since 2022. Drawing on interviews with two representatives of the Polish diaspora, it highlights both continuities and differences in motivations and mechanisms of assistance. The authors contend that humanitarian aid not only addresses urgent material needs but also communicates political commitments, strengthens civil society, and shapes collective identities.

### **Abstrakt**

Artykuł analizuje pomoc humanitarną z Europy Zachodniej udzieloną Polsce w latach 80. xx w. oraz Ukrainie od 2022 r. W oparciu o wywiady z dwoma przedstawicielami polskiej diaspory autorzy ukazują zarówno ciągłość, jak i różnice w motywacjach oraz mechanizmach udzielania wsparcia. W artykule wykazano, że pomoc humanitarna nie tylko zaspokaja pilne potrzeby materialne, lecz także wyraża zobowiązania polityczne, wzmacnia społeczeństwo obywatelskie i przyczynia się do kształtowania tożsamości zbiorowych.

### **Keywords**

Poland, Ukraine, Solidarity, Polonia, humanitarian aid, interviews

### **Słowa kluczowe**

Polska, Ukraina, Solidarność, Polonia, pomoc humanitarna, wywiady



## 1. Introduction

In the context of Russia's full-scale aggression against Ukraine since 24 February 2022, the question of international support in addressing the resulting humanitarian crisis has become especially pressing. The Polish experience of navigating the hardships of the 1980s, together with the significant role of Western assistance at that time, is therefore of particular relevance. Examining how Poland coped with its crisis may offer valuable insights not only for improving the humanitarian situation in contemporary Ukraine but also for understanding and fostering the integration of the Ukrainian state into the broader European humanitarian sphere.

The aim of the article is to analyse the involvement of individual Polish-diaspora actors in grassroots humanitarian aid to Poland in the 1980s and to Ukraine since the beginning of the full-scale Russian invasion, from a comparative perspective. The research hypothesis is that the Polish diaspora has played a significant role in providing humanitarian assistance to both Poland in the 1980s and Ukraine since 2022, grounded in enduring forms of transnational solidarity. At the same time, the motives, scale, and organisational forms of this aid differ due to the distinct historical, political, and geopolitical contexts of the two cases. The parallels are examined through the testimonies, subjective experiences, and narratives of the individual actors involved.

The research is grounded in the personal experiences of the leading members of the Polish diaspora – Bożena Laskiewicz<sup>1</sup>, British (though she identifies as Polish), and Henri Dudzinski<sup>2</sup>, French, president of the Medical Aid for Poland Fund, former honorary consul of the Republic of Poland, and one of the most active figures of the Northern French–Polish diaspora, interviewed between October 2023

- 1 Born in Tel Aviv on 18 September 1942 to Polish parents, Alfred Laskiewicz and Władysław Strumieńska, she left Israel with the last British transport and arrived in Liverpool, subsequently moving to London. Coming from a long line of doctors, she studied medicine in Dublin and trained as a laryngologist, practising as an ENT surgeon from 1968 to 2007.
- 2 Born in Liévin on 18 July 1955, all of his grandparents were Polish. He worked as a journalist for the Northern French publication “La Voix du Nord” (French: “Voices from the North”) and served as Honorary Consul of Poland from 2013 to 2018. He has also acted as an expert for the Council of Europe on Central and Eastern Europe and the Balkans, and served as an expert in the international department of Lille's prestigious school of journalism. His professional experience includes work in Poland, Bulgaria, Bosnia, Georgia, Russia, and Ukraine.

and August 2025<sup>3</sup>. Both were involved in humanitarian aid to Poland in the 1980s and subsequently to Ukraine after 2022. They were selected as narrators almost immediately due to their prominence within their respective diaspora networks, their commitment to Polish issues in their activism, and their willingness to share spontaneously detailed personal experience without guidance during the pre-interview stage. A list of questions was prepared in advance, categorising the interviews as “semi-structured”, which allowed for explicit points of comparison between the two trajectories. Several exchanges used for the article nevertheless remained informal, with some information retrieved and/or confirmed solely through written correspondence. The interviews were intended not merely to document testimony but to situate the participants’ humanitarian activism within the broader context of their diasporic lives.

In the research process, we employed a range of methods, including periodisation, case-study, analysis and synthesis, comparative, content analysis, and forecasting approaches (the experience of Poles can serve as a useful guide for the implementation of the national formation of the European Ukrainian state). Of particular value, however, was the oral history method, which allows the voices of those who shaped history to be heard and enables the confirmation or refutation of past interpretation<sup>4</sup>. As Marta Kurkowska-Budzan and Marcin Stasiak emphasise, “the beginnings of oral history in Poland and Central and Eastern European countries were initiated in the 1980s within oppositional circles, which registered the accounts of people politically marginalised or persecuted.”<sup>5</sup>

3 Each of them was interviewed three times, several months apart. The first interviews were the longest, averaging approximately 1 hour and 20 minutes, allowing the narrators to address guideline questions in depth, while the second and third sessions, each lasting no more than 25 minutes, focused on clarifying missing elements. These interviews were conducted via video meetings and phone call by Anna Lefèvre. The main criteria guiding the selection of narrators: their prominence in diaspora circles and the length and diversity of their activism; direct experience, as both participants personally witnessed and participated in the humanitarian aid process to Poland in the 1980s and Ukraine since 2022; ethnicity, as neither respondent was born in Poland, but they both have Polish roots and were raised in Western European Polish communities – albeit in different countries (Bożena Laskiewicz was naturalised in 1954, while Henri Dudzinski was born French); demographic diversity, encompassing age, gender, nationality, socioeconomic background, and different roles in society; and the importance of practical experience, as the activities of both interviewees had a significant impact on the organisation and course of the humanitarian aid process. For the interpretation of qualitative data collected through the interviews, the authors employed a range of methods, including thematic, content, narrative, discourse, interpretative, and conversation analysis. The use of these methods facilitated the identification of patterns, meanings, and insights emerging from participants’ responses.

4 P. Thompson, *The Voice of the Past: Oral History*, New York 1998.

5 M. Kurkowska-Budzan, M. Stasiak, *Oral history / oral sources – Polish historians’ dilemmas*, “Bulletin de l’AFAS,” no. 46 (2020), pp. 168–179.

During the interviews, we frequently drew on the biographical method, exploring identity, family background, and childhood education, as well as the work of Bożena Laskiewicz and Henri Dudzinski, including their major life events, relationships, and social changes. We also employed thematic and community methods, focusing on the involvement of Polish-diaspora actors in the humanitarian aid process and the preservation of collective memory among members of the diaspora. Through narrative analysis and examination of textual features, it was possible to identify eyewitnesses' feelings and their perceptions of the events as significant episodes in their lives. Considerable attention was given to their subjectivity, including political perspectives; accordingly, the authors accord importance to the concept of situated knowledge in cases where participants' political and historical interpretations diverged from their own.

Among the various works addressing the global phenomenon of transnational humanitarianism and seeking to theorise it,<sup>6</sup> Michael Barnett proposed a periodisation upon which the study relies.<sup>7</sup> His *Empire of Humanity* offers a pioneering chronology of global humanitarianism that is particularly relevant to this case study.<sup>8</sup> Barnett suggests that 1989 marks the transition from Neo-Humanitarianism to Liberal Humanitarianism. This distinction is especially pertinent, as concern for "human rights" constitutes a key driving force for humanitarian groups involved in aid to Poland in the 1980s<sup>9</sup> and to Ukraine after 2014, and especially since 2020.<sup>10</sup> Although numerous academic studies have attracted scholars' attention<sup>11</sup> and addressed these cases<sup>12</sup>, there remains a lack of comparative research based

6 J. Dobrowolska-Polak, *Pomoc humanitarna*, "Przegląd Zachodni," no. 69 (4/2013), pp. 161-182; *Komisja Europejska. Pomoc humanitarna w świetle prawa i praktyki*, in P. Grzebyk, E. Mikos-Skuza (eds.), *Prawo konfliktów zbrojnych. Wybrane zagadnienia*, Warszawa 2016, p. 367.

7 M. Barnett, *Empire of Humanity. A History of Humanitarianism*, Cornell University Press 2011, p. 296.

8 M. Barnett, *op. cit.*, p. 296.

9 See the archives of the Association France-Pologne that drew considerable attention to the fate of political prisoners; M. Heruday-Kiełczewska, *The archive association Solidarité France-Pologne in the Polish library in Paris*, "Folia Toruniensia," no. 17 (2017), pp. 175-189, <https://doi.org/10.12775/FT.2017.010>.

10 OON: Sytuatsiya iz pravamy lyudyny pohirshuyet'sya na okupovanykh Rosiyeyu terytoriyakh Ukrayiny, <https://www.holosameryky.com/a/human-rights-plummet-in-ukraine-russian-occupied-territories/7921859.html> (accessed: 26.08.2025).

11 A. Kyrydon, S. Troyan, *Humanitran dopomoha Ukrayini z boku Pol'shchi v umovakh povnomasshtabnoyi rosiys'koyi ahresiyi*, "Mediaforum: analityka, prohnozy, informatsiynyy medzhment", no. 16 (2025), pp. 161-179; O. Morozova, *Rosiiska ahresiia v Ukrainu y problema ukrainskykh bizhentsiv: humanitarnyi aspekt (na prykladi dopomohy ukraintsiam u Polshchi)*, in S. Stępień (ed.), *Wojna na Ukrainie a Polsko-Ukraińskie partnerstwo strategiczne. Analizy-refleksje-kalendarium*, Warszawa-Przemysł 2023, pp. 165-184.

12 G. Doherty, *Ireland, Europe and the provision of food aid to Poland 1980-81*, "Irish Studies in International Affairs," no. 24 (2013), pp. 291-309; M. Frybes, *Ruch wsparcia dla „Solidarności” i Polski w latach 80. jako ruch społeczny*, "Acta Universitatis Lodzensis. Folia sociologia,"

on oral history that examines the role of humanitarian aid in supporting human rights in Poland and Ukraine.

The article is organised chronologically and is divided into three main periods. The first covers the 1980s, from the emergence of Solidarity to Poland's first partially free elections in 1989. The second part analyses the evolution of humanitarian aid to Poland during the subsequent democratic consolidation and the country's integration into the Western world from the 1990s onwards. The third part focuses on solidarity with Ukraine following the onset of Russia's full-scale invasion. A more detailed presentation of the context and the actors involved is provided prior to the chronological analysis.

## 2. International humanitarian aid and its Polish-diaspora actors

International humanitarian aid represents an expression of solidarity and empathy towards people affected by disasters. Beyond providing donations to the victims of armed conflicts and humanitarian crises, it has been defined as “the mobilisation of people in response to the unnecessary suffering of other people carried out for the sake of common humanity.”<sup>13</sup>

“People of goodwill who sent us their gifts from abroad...”<sup>14</sup> – this is how Father Jerzy Popiełuszko, one of the most prominent opponents to the Polish People's Republic, expressed his gratitude to Laskiewicz's charity<sup>15</sup> and the Medical Aid for Poland Fund during an interview for the BBC recorded just one month before his murder in October of 1984<sup>16</sup>:

no. 47 (2013), pp. 51–71; J. Plachecki, *The Poles in Ireland against martial law in Poland 1981–1983*, “*Studia Polonijne*,” no. 43 (2022), pp. 81–91; P. Quigley, *The Irish Polish Solidarity Campaign (1981–1984)*, “*The Irish Polish Society Yearbook*,” no. 9 (2022), pp. 97–112.

13 A. Davies, *The challenges to humanitarian action*, “*Humanitarian Exchange*,” no. 3 (2002), p. 42.

14 *Interview with Popiełuszko for BBC on September 1984* (conducted in Polish, translation of the extract by Anna Lefèvre), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t574Qeip2lk> (accessed: 18.02.2024).

15 This charity is based in London and was created in 1981 to send material aid to Poland, especially medical goods. Laskiewicz considers the association to be purely Polish (Interview with Bożena Laskiewicz, 23.04.2024, London [conducted by A. Lefèvre], researcher's private archive).

16 Born in 1947, Father Popiełuszko's “*Mass for the Homeland*,” held in his Warsaw church between 1982 and 1984 and retransmitted on *Radio Free Europe*, had a major impact on the Polish opposition, positioning him as a spiritual leader for *Solidarność*. His murder, allegedly on 19 October 1984 (the exact date remains debated), provoked widespread indignation across Poland. He is therefore regarded as a major figure of the Martial Law era and of the violence directed against the opposition. Academic debates regarding the circumstances of his death continue. *Nauka w Polsce. Konferencja naukowa w 25. rocznicę śmierci ks. Popiełuszki*, 17 October 2009.

In August 1981, in the midst of the Polish People's struggle against communism, the Federation of Poles in Great Britain received a letter from Solidarity Chairman Lech Wałęsa appealing for medical aid. In September, Dr. Bożena Laskiewicz and her colleagues sent the first container of supplies from London to Poland. The Medical Aid for Poland Fund was founded shortly afterwards.<sup>17</sup>

British Bożena Laskiewicz reported that her association sent up to 90 trucks to Poland during Martial Law,<sup>18</sup> between December 1981 and July 1983, and 335 in total, the last in 1996.<sup>19</sup> This “urge to help” mobilised trade unions, Polish-diaspora communities, and charities alike, as well as “little hands” who simply wished to assist people in need.<sup>20</sup>

In the 1980's France, a young girl interviewed about her middle school's humanitarian involvement in Strasbourg simply argued that Poles “are people who are unhappy, those are people who need to be saved.”<sup>21</sup> The expression “It is Poland” entered common usage, describing the scarcity of food.<sup>22</sup> France distinguished itself through the mobilisation of its civil society to support the Poles, providing both material and political aid.<sup>23</sup> Some researchers, such as Marcin Kula, have even noted that no cause had mobilised so extensively in France since the Second World War,<sup>24</sup> despite London serving as an important centre for the Polish diaspora (sometimes described as “in rivalry with Paris”).<sup>25</sup>

Among those actors was the Frenchman Henri Dudzinski.<sup>26</sup> The involvement of Laskiewicz and Dudzinski in humanitarian aid is intrinsically linked to their Polish identity and to their activism within their respective local Polish communities. Bożena was born in Tel Aviv in 1942 to Polish parents<sup>27</sup> and immigrated

17 Website of Medical Aid for Poland Fund, <http://www.mapf.org.uk/> (accessed: 04.04.2024).

18 Interview with Bożena Laskiewicz, 23.04.2024, London (conducted by A. Lefèvre), researcher's private archive.

19 Website of Medical Aid for Poland Fund, <http://www.mapf.org.uk/> (accessed: 04.04.2024).

20 A. Szczepańska, *Une histoire visuelle de Solidarność*, Paris 2021, p. 287.

21 Archives de l'Institut national de l'audiovisuel (INA), in A. Szczepańska, *Une histoire visuelle de Solidarność*, Paris 2021, p. 241.

22 *Ibidem*.

23 A. Chwalba, F. Georgii, *France: Exceptional Solidarity?*, in I. Goddeeris (ed.), *Solidarity with Solidarity: Western Europe Trade Unions and the Polish Crisis 1980–1982*, Amsterdam 2010, pp. 191–218.

24 M. Kula, *Niespodziewani przyjaciele, czyli Rzecz o zwykłej ludzkiej solidarności*, Warszawa 1995.

25 A. Friszke, *Solidarność podziemna 1981–1989*, Warszawa 2006.

26 Interview with Henri Dudzinski, 15.10.2023, Angres, France (conducted by A. Lefèvre), researcher's private archive; Interview with Bożena Laskiewicz, 09.11.2023, London (conducted by A. Lefèvre), researcher's private archive.

27 Radio broadcast by Paweł Kęska, *Z Tel-Awiyu przez Londyn do Polski. Kupowałam materiał na sutannę Ks. Popiełuszki. Wywiad z Człowiekiem*, Radio Warszawa, 11 September 2023, <https://soundcloud.com/radio-warszawa/londyn-bozena-laskiewicz-2023-09-12> (accessed: 28.11.2025).

to England as a child. Dudzinski, a former journalist and diplomat, is the grandchild of four immigrants who arrived in Northern France during the major post-First World War wave of Polish migration to the Northern French coal mines.<sup>28</sup> Between 2018 and 2023, he toured with the theatre play *Stanis le Polak*, inspired by his grandfather's experience of immigration and the creation of a *Ch'ti ski* culture.<sup>29</sup> In the play, Henri recounts the ties he maintained with Poland and depicts his humanitarian trips to the country. Both Dudzinski and Laskiewicz sent full trucks across this continental border, one of the main means of transporting goods.<sup>30</sup> Today, Henri and Bożena are at the forefront of efforts to help the victims of Russia's war against Ukraine, providing aid to the millions of Ukrainian refugees who have arrived in Poland. Unlike Dudzinski, Laskiewicz appears never to have given interviews about the Ukrainian war and the aid she sent to its victims (a gap to be addressed, highlighting the enduring links between the two countries).<sup>31</sup>

Therefore, how do these actors of humanitarian aid perceive the political evolution of Eastern Europe through their own experience? To what extent do they consider that their experiences of humanitarian involvement in Eastern Europe are comparable? And to what extent did their belonging to the Polish diaspora shape their experiences differently from the broader French and British engagement with this wave of humanitarian aid?

### 3. The 1980s: humanitarian assistance to Poland

#### 3.1. The importance of historical background and socio-economic context in humanitarian aid involvement

The 1980s represent a particularly significant period in Polish political history, as they constituted both the final decade of the Soviet Union – whose collapse *Solidarność* is often credited with influencing<sup>32</sup> – and a time of acute humanitarian crisis. This crisis manifested in widespread shortages of food and essential goods, long queues, and the reinstatement of the rationing system, among other

28 See J. Ponty, *Polonais méconnus: Histoire des travailleurs immigrés en France dans l'entre-deux guerres*, Sorbonne 2020, p. 819.

29 *Ch'ti* is a popular nickname for northern French people, while the suffix *-ski* indicates their Polish background. This neologism, created by Dudzinski, thus represents "creole" immigration culture; the term was popularised by Dudzinski himself.

30 P. Augustynek, *Les Camions de l'Espoir*, Paris 2015.

31 Interview with Bożena Laskiewicz, 23.04.2024, London (conducted by A. Lefèvre), researcher's private archive.

32 See V. Kmicik [et al.], *Solidarność i upadek komunizmu*, Gdańsk 2009; J. Tischner, *Etyka Solidarności oraz Homo Sovieticus*, Kraków 1992.

measures, resulting from economic stagnation, national debt, and dependence on the USSR, as the Polish economy remained tied to the Soviet market. Political tensions escalated with the imposition of Martial law in Poland in December 1981 by General Wojciech Jaruzelski, which entailed severe restrictions on individual freedoms and the arrest of opposition figures. The distinctiveness of Poland's humanitarian crisis lay in the intersection of economic deprivation with mass public resistance, the active involvement of the Church, and international support, factors that ultimately contributed to the acceleration of the collapse of communist power.<sup>33</sup>

In the 1980s, communicating the broader crisis in Poland formed an integral part of both Dudzinski's and Laskiewicz's activism, but their efforts were not confined to the immediate situation. Dudzinski emphasised the need to "go back to 1945,"<sup>34</sup> which is precisely what Laskiewicz did on her website, dedicating a section is dedicated to the Yalta Conference, and neither sought to conceal their disdain for Soviet politics.<sup>35</sup> Explaining the country's history, the Solidarity movement, and the adversary it faced was a crucial aspect of engaging potential humanitarian volunteers.<sup>36</sup> The situation in Poland resonated with them personally, as their Polish identity had long been a central element of their socialisation in their home countries, heightening the need to make Poland understandable to others and to cultivate empathy among people in France and Great Britain unfamiliar with the country. Whether consciously or not, this strategy proved effective: empathy for the Polish people is frequently cited by historians as a major motivation for assistance. In her *Histoire visuelle de Solidarność*, Anna Szczepańska devoted a substantial portion of the book to the contributions of these "little hands" from France and the sympathy they expressed towards Polish citizens.<sup>37</sup>

### 3.2. Little hands in history

Laskiewicz and Dudzinski were not merely narrators of history; they were active participants in its making and had contacts with prominent historical figures. Following the imposition of Martial Law in Poland in December 1981, Wałęsa was

33 A. Paczkowski, M. Byrne, G. F. Domber, M. Klotzbach, *From Solidarity to martial law: The Polish crisis of 1980–1981*, Budapest 2007, p. 602.

34 Interview with Henri Dudzinski, 15.10.2023, Angres, France (conducted by A. Lefèvre), researcher's private archive.

35 *Medical Aid for Poland Fund's website*, <http://www.mapf.org.uk/history.html> (accessed: 18.02.2024).

36 Interview with Henri Dudzinski, 09.11.2023, Angres, France (conducted by A. Lefèvre), researcher's private archive

37 A. Szczepańska, *op. cit.*

arrested alongside thousands of other activists.<sup>38</sup> Humanitarian involvement in aid to Poland intensified: “In January 1982, Medical Aid for Poland sent its first three trucks of aid, and in February 1982, another two. On 10 March 1982, a *Declaration of Trust* was signed creating *The Medical Aid for Poland Fund*, which was then registered with the Charity Commission of England and Wales.”<sup>39</sup>

The association worked closely with the Food for Poland Fund, established by the Tybulewicz couple.<sup>40</sup> In 1988, Wałęsa travelled to London to personally thank Laskiewicz’s group for their assistance. Dudzinski also met the famous leader; on 18 October 1981, Wałęsa visited the Bollaert Stadium in Lens, a major centre of the Polish diaspora, having been invited to France by French trade unions, specifically the French Democratic Confederation of Labour.<sup>41</sup> This visit is commemorated by a monument in front of the local Polish church.

Their contacts with Polish opposition figures also extended to prominent religious leaders. For instance, members of the Medical Aid for Poland Fund sent materials directly to one of the most significant figures of *Solidarność*, Father Jerzy Popiełuszko. Described as “a great friend of their fund,” he was later murdered while wearing the cassock that Bożena had helped provide by purchasing materials in London.<sup>42</sup> Both Laskiewicz and Dudzinski became involved with him because Church networks served as the primary channels for the distribution of financial and material aid from Western Europe to Poland.

### 3.3. Church as logistics hub

The Charity Commission of the Polish People’s Conference served as the primary channel for the circulation of humanitarian aid, while Caritas Poland was liquidated and only re-established in 1990.<sup>43</sup> Laskiewicz and Dudzinski emphasised that communication with the Church was vital, as aid distribution operated on a diocese-by-diocese basis.

Although medical goods were often delivered to the St Marcin convent near Warsaw, which functioned as an aid centre used by dissidents for the Primate’s

38 Interview with Lech Wałęsa, “International review of the Red Cross,” vol. 87 (857/2005), pp. 9–14.

39 *Medical Aid for Poland Fund’s website*, <http://www.mapf.org.uk/history.html> (accessed: 18.02.2024).

40 J. Kowalska, *Food for Poland Fund. Historia działalności 1980–1993*, Lublin 2010.

41 *Journée polonaise avec Lech Walesa à Lens*, “Mineurs du Monde,” <https://fresques.ina.fr/memoires-de-mines/fiche-media/Mineuro0221/journee-polonaise-avec-lech-walesa-a-lens.html> (accessed: 21.09.2025).

42 Radio Broadcast by Paweł Kęska, *op. cit.*

43 G. Kreihs, *Dobro Ukryte w Archiwach: Akcja dobroczynna Kościoła katolickiego w czasie kryzysu gospodarczego i politycznego w Polsce 1981–1990*, Katowice 2004.

Committee for Aid to People Deprived of Freedom and Their Families,<sup>44</sup> Laskiewicz's association did not send aid directly to the convent, as this could have led to their being perceived as a political group. Another partner organisation, Friends of Poland, did not hesitate to do so. Laskiewicz had to make strategic choices due to her professional and personal obligations, and for her, humanitarian aid always took precedence over political activism<sup>45</sup>. Questions surrounding aid distributed through Church networks were therefore central to the tension between the political and apolitical dimensions of humanitarian assistance.

### 3.4. Political dimension of humanitarian aid

The contrast between Laskiewicz's and Dudzinski's approaches to humanitarian aid in this regard is striking.<sup>46</sup> Dudzinski was a member of the collective *Solidarité with Solidarność*, which had a broadly leftist political orientation. Consequently, he took political positions, published political cartoons, and openly opposed the hesitation or lack of support shown by certain leftist groups.<sup>47</sup> One cartoon, published in 1982 by *Solidarité with Solidarność*, depicts both the Soviet and the American camps, represented by their respective soft-power figures (Mickey Mouse and Misha the Bear, the 1980s Moscow Olympic mascot), as equally aggressive, each with its own victims. The message is clear: "If you have compassion for Latin America, then you should also support Poland."

For Bożena Laskiewicz, by contrast, "it was just help."<sup>48</sup> She stated that she did not have time to concern herself with politics, which she felt could even be counter-productive for her activism,<sup>49</sup> whereas the structure of the interview implicitly treated humanitarian aid as inherently political. This difference in focus may be attributed to their respective professional backgrounds: Laskiewicz was trained as a laryngologist, while Dudzinski was a journalist. Although an apolitical approach to aid was entirely possible, it remained a geopolitical sensitive issue and had a direct impact on the assistance Poles received from the West, whether via grassroots movements or state institutions.

44 The convent was attacked at the end of April in 1983, see *Church disturbed by Convent attack*, United Press International, 04 May 1983.

45 Interview with Bożena Laskiewicz on 22.08.2025, London (conducted by A. Lefèvre). Researcher's private archive.

46 Interview with Henri Dudzinski on 15.08.2023, Angres (France, conducted by A. Lefèvre). Researcher's private archive.

47 *Ibidem*.

48 Interview with Bożena Laskiewicz, 09.11.2023, London (conducted by A. Lefèvre), researcher's private archive.

49 *Ibidem*.



Fig. 1. Cartoon from the collective *Solidarité with Solidarność*, published in the Polish publication *Narodowiec* by Roubaix in France 1982.<sup>50</sup> Artist unknown (possibly Seweryn Blumsztajn<sup>51</sup>).

50 Interview with Henri Dudzinski, 15.10.2023, Angres, France (conducted by A. Lefèvre), researcher's private archive.

51 See S. Blumsztajn, *Je rentre au pays: Polonais, Juif, Membre du Kor et de Solidarité*, Calmann-Lévy 1985, p. 206.

### 3.5. Important humanitarian aid in both France and the UK

Both Laskiewicz and Dudzinski emphasised that humanitarian assistance was significant in their home countries, a view supported by the numerous studies dedicated to this topic.<sup>52</sup> Archival sources, whether in the United Kingdom (The National Archives, Polish Library POSK archives), France, or Poland (Historical Archives of the National Commission of the Solidarity Trade Union (NSZZ “Solidarność”), Central Archives of Modern Records (Archiwum Akt Nowych), European Solidarity Centre (ECS) archives, which contain at least 11 boxes of documents on aid from France), attest to this involvement. Medical Aid for Poland Fund maintained special links with the Sue Ryder Foundation and the Food for Poland Fund, alongside other charities such as Friends of Poland or the Ockenden Venue. Archival evidence indicates that Medical Aid for Poland benefited from state funds, although not all of its requests were fulfilled.<sup>53</sup> Laskiewicz reported no sense of a lack of societal support.<sup>54</sup> This contrasts with Dudzinski’s experience: in interviews, he emphasised feeling a lack of state support. He cited André Delelis, Minister of Commerce and Craft Industry (1981–1983), who, during a Ministerial Council meeting, reportedly stated that “we won’t have a dispute with Brezhnev over Poles.”<sup>55</sup> The contrast with the solidarity expressed in October 1981 left a lasting impression on Dudzinski, which he highlighted in his testimonies. He explained that they then had to “give up the idea of working with politicians” and instead act on what he termed a “lower political level.”<sup>56</sup>

A new stage in the implementation of humanitarian aid to Poland began with the rapid development of democracy in the country after 1990.

## 4. Western humanitarian help to Poland after 1990

### 4.1. A different approach to Poland’s needs after the end of “Socialism”

After 1990, in Poland entered a continued process of post-communist transformation aimed at full integration into Western institutions. Humanitarian aid was still required, yet its scale steadily diminished. The vast majority of charities

52 P. Pleskot, *Za naszą i waszą Solidarność. Inicjatywy solidarnościowe z udziałem Polonii podejmowane na świecie (1980–1989)*, Warszawa 2018.

53 The British National Archives, sig. FO 28, *Aid to Poland from Private Organisations and Charities. 1949–195*, “Foreign Commonwealth Office,” items 4998–4999.

54 Interview with Bożena Laskiewicz, 09.11.2023, London (conducted by A. Lefèvre), researcher’s private archive.

55 From French: “*On va pas se fâcher avec Brezhnev pour des Polonais!*” Interview with Henri Dudzinski, 15.10.2023, Angres, France (conducted by A. Lefèvre), researcher’s private archive.

56 Interview with Henri Dudzinski, 15.10.2023, Angres, France (conducted by A. Lefèvre), researcher’s private archive.

dedicated to Poland had simply lost their *raison d'être*, including the close partner organisation Food for Poland Fund, which ceased activity in 1997. As a result, although humanitarian aid assistance persisted – often compensating for shortcomings in the government's social policies – it no longer resembled the mass operations of the 1980s. According to Bożena Laskiewicz, humanitarian aid became “individual and interpersonal,” “answering to precise needs and demands,”<sup>57</sup> and no longer relied on dispatching convoys. Donations shifted from supplying hospitals and sending truckloads of goods to meeting specific requests, with wheelchairs being the most frequently sought items.<sup>58</sup> She remarked that she and her colleagues would “go on as long as they had money for it.”<sup>59</sup> She also observed that many were surprised she continued her work after Poland joined the European Union in 2004, asking her: “Why do you continue? Poland is European [Union] now.”<sup>60</sup> Henri Dudzinski, by contrast, ended his humanitarian involvement after the fall of the USSR, that is, once the principal geopolitical tensions had subsided.<sup>61</sup> In the biannual journal of the charity, Laskiewicz emphasised poverty and the persistent lack of resources, whereas Dudzinski focused on the political dimensions of the humanitarian crisis. This divergence in approach to politics may be seen as reflected in their subsequent cultural activism, which became increasingly prominent in the decades that followed.

#### 4.2. Switching to cultural activism

A central aspect of organizing humanitarian aid for Poland was the question of memory and national identity. Although Bożena has never lived in Poland, she openly acknowledged that she never felt truly British; she considers herself Polish, and it was in this capacity that she assisted Poland.<sup>62</sup> Laskiewicz recalls vividly, in interviews, her encounter with Jerzy Popiełuszko,<sup>63</sup> and she is a member of the Jury of the Polonian contest *Być Polakiem* (Be a Pole), whose objective is to “raise awareness and strengthen national identity and shape patriotic attitudes.”<sup>64</sup>

57 Interview with Bożena Laskiewicz, 09.11.2023, London (conducted by A. Lefèvre), researcher's private archive.

58 *Ibidem*.

59 Interview with Bożena Laskiewicz, 23.04.2024, London (conducted by A. Lefèvre), researcher's private archive.

60 Interview with Bożena Laskiewicz, 22.08.2025, London (conducted by A. Lefèvre), researcher's private archive.

61 Interview with Henri Dudzinski, 21.08.2025, Angres, France (conducted by A. Lefèvre), researcher's private archive.

62 Interview with Bożena Laskiewicz, 09.11.2023, London (conducted by A. Lefèvre), researcher's private archive.

63 *Ibidem*

64 *Konkurs „Być Polakiem”*, Stowarzyszenie Wspólnota Polska, <https://wspolnotapolska.org.pl/bycpolakiem/> (accessed: 21.08.2025).

For Henri Dudzinski as well, identification with Poland shaped his approach to humanitarian engagement. In 2018, after completing his term as Honorary Consul of the Polish Republic, he created the play *Stanis le Polak* (Stanisław the Pole) and founded the association PolKabaret.<sup>65</sup> The production began immediately after his dismissal, as a way to independently commemorate the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 1919 French–Polish agreement that allowed Polish workers to settle in France,<sup>66</sup> and he used the opportunity to take explicit political stances against the French far right.<sup>67</sup>

Their engagement extended eastwards, though in different ways: for Laskiewicz, it remained closely connected with Polish communities, whereas for Dudzinski, it acquired a broader European dimension. In the 2000s, Dudzinski worked in Russia, particularly in Novosibirsk, and was present in Ukraine during the Orange Revolution of 2004–2005. Laskiewicz, by contrast, although she also provided humanitarian assistance to parts of the former USSR in the early 1990s, directed her efforts primarily towards Polish minorities; correspondence with the Association of Polish Medics in Lithuania was kept in the Central Archives of Modern Records (Archiwum Akt Nowych) in Warsaw.<sup>68</sup> *Stanis le Polak* performances concluded with the projection of a European Union flag, while Laskiewicz expressed in an interview her scepticism toward the EU.<sup>69</sup> Poland's accession to the European Union, therefore, paradoxically highlights the differences between its approaches to identity: Dudzinski identifies not only as Polish, but also as “ch’ti,” and as European.

Over the years, both developed their own humanitarian networks, which they were able to remobilise following the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2014. Trucks heading through Poland and Germany were once again organised. However, in the last decades, the means of communication have changed profoundly – most notably with the emergence of the Internet and of social media – and the geopolitical landscape itself has shifted.

65 Interview with Henri Dudzinski, 22.04.2024, Angres, France (conducted by A. Lefèvre), researcher's private archive.

66 B. Sagna, *100ème anniversaire de la convention relative à l'immigration polonaise*, “Gallica,” 13 November 2019, <https://gallica.bnf.fr/accueil/fr/html/100e-anniversaire-de-la-convention-relative-a-limmigration-polonaise> (accessed: 20.04.2024).

67 *Lancement de champagne à Marseille avec Marine le Pen et Jordan Bardella*, <https://rassemblementnational.fr/videos/marine-le-pen-au-salon-de-la-pologne-a-henin-beau-mont-02102016> (accessed: 18.02.2024).

68 Archiwum Akt Nowych w Warszawie (AAN), sig. 2299, *Spuścizna Stanisława Grocholskiego*, p. 738.

69 Interview with Bożena Laskiewicz, 23.04.2024, London (conducted by A. Lefèvre), researcher's private archive.

## 5. Solidarity with Ukraine after the beginning of the full-scale Russian invasion in 2022

Ukraine had already been in a critically difficult humanitarian situation since the very beginning of the Russian aggression in 2014, marked by the annexation of Crimea and the war in Donbas. The country required humanitarian assistance even then (according to the 2014 Legatum Prosperity Index<sup>70</sup>). However, the situation deteriorated drastically after 24 February 2022, when Vladimir Putin launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Massive destruction of housing and infrastructure, disruptions in access to water, electricity, and medical care, as well as urgent needs related to shelter, clothing, food, employment, the collapse of the hryvnia, and inflation, placed the country in need of large-scale humanitarian support.<sup>71</sup> Providing help became, once again, a political stance in itself: an act of resistance against a strategy of terror.

“The humanitarian catastrophe in Ukraine is an element of Russia’s military strategy,” declared Serhiy Kyslytsia, Ukraine’s Permanent Representative to the United Nations, during a UN Security Council meeting in March 2022.<sup>72</sup> He emphasised that Ukraine demanded the immediate and unconditional implementation of the recently adopted UN General Assembly resolution *Humanitarian consequences of aggression against Ukraine*, which called for a ceasefire, the withdrawal of Russian troops, and the provision of humanitarian assistance. “I regretfully have to state that Russia does not demonstrate readiness to abandon its strategy of deliberately worsening the humanitarian situation on the ground,” Kyslytsia noted. “This plan involves causing a humanitarian catastrophe throughout the territory of Ukraine [...] in order to intimidate the Ukrainian political leadership and people and persuade them to surrender,” he added. He referred to “a wide and extremely cruel set of tools,” including the kidnapping of the local leaders, activists, and journalists, as well as ballistic, cruise, and hypersonic missile strikes on residential areas. Kyslytsia described Mariupol as “a bloody wound in the heart of Europe,”<sup>73</sup> with at least 5,000 civilian deaths according to local authorities.<sup>74</sup> According to the Office

70 The World Bank stated in 2019 that it would take Ukraine more than 50 years to reach the income level of today’s Poland (B. Kalymon, O. Havrylyshyn, *Why is Ukraine still so poor?*, Atlantic Council, 26 August 2018).

71 *Na Donbasi zahostryuyet’sya humanitarna sytuatsiya, boyovyyku rozkradat’ use*, <https://translate.google.com.ua/?hl=ru&sl=auto&tl=en&text=На%20Донбасі%20озагострюється%20гуманітарна%20ситуація%20С%20з%20бойовики%20орозкрадуть%20усе&op=translate> (accessed: 18.08.2025).

72 *Humanitarna katastrofa v Ukraini – tse element rosiyskoyi voyennoyi stratehiyi*, <https://www.ukrinform.ua/rubric-ato/3443472-gumanitarna-katastrofa-v-ukraini-e-elementom-rosijskoi-voennoi-strategii-kislca-v-radbezi-oon.html> (accessed: 18.08.2025).

73 *Ibidem*.

74 *Ibidem*.

of the Prosecutor General of Ukraine and the National Police of Ukraine (data as of 21 September 2025), 19,546 children have been deported or illegally displaced by Russia,<sup>75</sup> 654 children have been killed, 2,158 injured, 2,158 returned, and 20 have been confirmed as victims of sexual violence.<sup>76</sup>

### 5.1. Poland as a humanitarian hub for Ukraine

After the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, Poland – already home to a large Ukrainian diaspora even before 2022<sup>77</sup> – became the main logistical centre through which most humanitarian aid was organised and delivered. For former activists involved in humanitarian assistance to *Solidarność*, the impulse to help was immediate, and many began cooperating with Ukrainian organisations. However, although communication channels have expanded exponentially since 1990, travelling to Ukraine in order to deliver aid has become considerably more dangerous.

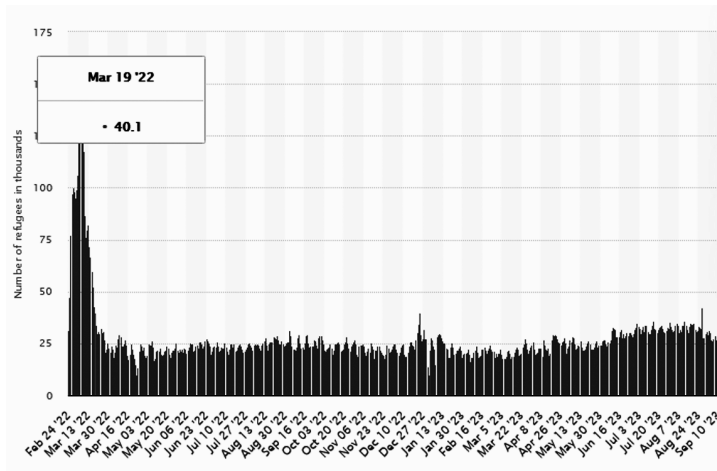


Fig. 2. Graphic representation of the arrival of Ukrainian refugees through Polish borders from February 2022 to November 2023 (Statista).<sup>78</sup>

75 *Ukrayina povernula z Rosiyi vzhe 1 223 deportovanykh ditey*, <https://www.ukrinform.ua/rubric-society/3963621-ukraina-povernula-z-rosii-vze-1-223-deportovanih-ditej.html> (accessed: 18.08.2025).

76 Data provided by the website *Dity viyny*, <https://childrenofwar.gov.ua> (accessed: 18.08.2025).

77 Poland took in Ukrainian refugees since the onset of the war in 2014: in 2021, 300,000 Ukrainian citizens were living in Poland. Source: *Obywatele Ukrainy w Polsce - raport*, 14 December 2021, <https://www.gov.pl/web/udsc/obywatele-ukrainy-w-polsce--raport> (accessed: 18.02.2024).

78 Number of people who crossed the Polish border from the war-stricken Ukraine from February 2022 to September 2023, by date of report, *Statista*, retrieved in November 2023.

### 5.2. Dudzinski's motivation to help Ukrainian brothers and sisters

As early as the week following the invasion, humanitarian goods were sent directly to the PolKabaret association, such as hygiene products from the Flemish city of Steenvoorde, which were transported directly to the Polish-Ukrainian border via humanitarian convoys. Local farmers also sent money to Dudzinski about a month later.<sup>79</sup> Several initiatives were conducted by Dudzinski across the region, particularly through the cultural sphere and not exclusively within Polonia networks. In 2022, in Saint-Jean-Cappel, Flanders, 600 euros collected by the association Reuze Maman during the *Les Guillerettes* festival for Ukraine were handed directly to Dudzinski. Perhaps most significant, however, is the intercultural and transnational dimension of his collaboration with the Ukrainian diaspora, especially the Lille-based association Portail de l'Ukraine (Ukraine's Gate)<sup>80</sup> (established in 2014 after the outbreak of the Donbas War). On 17 September 2022, members of the association joined Henri on stage in Lens, alongside Étienne Mourmant, Honorary Consul of Ukraine.<sup>81</sup> Iryna Lampeka, president of the association, highlighted the country's role as a crucial link in humanitarian chains. Conversely, in interviews, Dudzinski emphasised his deep respect for the Kyiv native Iryna and noted that they share the same objectives.<sup>82</sup> The cultural association St Omer en Toutes Lettres (St Omer in Letters) described him as:

A former journalist for *La Voix du Nord* and former Honorary Consul of Poland, he has a fairly detailed knowledge of the Poles, Ukrainians, and Russians. PolKabaret convened a solidarity movement toward Ukraine in the Lens region and in Steenvoorde by personally bringing donations to the Ukrainian border, thanks to a contact: Father Jan Domanski, who resides at the monastery in the town of Koden in Poland and on the Belarusian border.<sup>83</sup>

It is therefore worth noting that humanitarian assistance continues to circulate through Church networks, a channel also privileged by Bożena Laskiewicz.

### 5.3. Laskiewicz's declared goal: helping Polish minorities abroad

Like Dudzinski, Laskiewicz maintained humanitarian networks in Ukraine prior to 2022. On the Medical Aid for Poland Fund website, the association's treasurer,

79 G. Leclercq, *Solidarité Ukraine*, "Steenveorde à Pas de Géants," no. 60 (2022), p. 28.

80 *Portail de l'Ukraine et PolKabaret unis pour l'Ukraine*, <https://uaportail.fr> (accessed: 18.02.2024).

81 *Stanis le POLAK au Colisée à LENS - FIN SPECTACLE et solidarité pour l'UKRAINE - Extrait N° 5*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hPPFHxoma6c> (accessed: 14.08.2025).

82 Interview with Henri Dudzinski, 15.10.2023, Angres, France (conducted by A. Lefèvre, researcher's private archive).

83 J. P. Dufour, *Guerre en Ukraine*, <https://www.sotl.fr/ukraine.php> (accessed: 20.08.2025).

Jan Ledóchowski, emphasised that “millions of poor in the countryside, the industrial suburbs, in closed factory towns and left behind in the poorest parts of today’s Ukraine [...] remain in need of our help.”<sup>84</sup> The website also reported that MAPF had already sent over £10,000 to Ukraine and was actively raising more funds,<sup>85</sup> stressing that Ukraine is a country where “many Polish people” still live:

We are doing everything we can to support Polish organisations sending medicines, medical equipment, food, and other urgent supplies to the needy in Ukraine, where there are many Polish people, and also those supporting refugees arriving in Poland [...]. When the Polish post-Second World War borders were moved west by the Allies at Yalta, over two million Poles were still left behind in regions which are today very poor, like Belarus, and Lwów in today’s Western Ukraine. We constantly receive requests from the Polish people.<sup>86</sup>

Laskiewicz engaged in activities organised by the British Polonia for Ukraine, including Easter markets previously employed to raise funds for MAPF.<sup>87</sup> However, in contrast to Dudzinski, she did not succeed in establishing collaboration with the Ukrainian diaspora in the United Kingdom. Although she extended an invitation to the chairman of the Ukrainian Medical Association of the UK, she deliberately refrained from exerting pressure, stating that she wished “not to force, not to push people to help too much.”<sup>88</sup> Laskiewicz did not speak spontaneously about her engagement with Ukraine, reflecting the fact that she does not have the same direct connections to the country as Dudzinski. Her approach appears motivated primarily by her Polish identity, rather than a broader “Central-Eastern European” one perspective, which is the identity Dudzinski explicitly embraced.

Laskiewicz continues to rely on the same structures as in 1981, such as the Polish branch of the Red Cross and the reactivated Polish branch of Caritas, and emphasised that she works at an individual level, much as she does in Poland, where poverty is not as widespread as in the 1980s, directly addressing specific requests for medical supplies.<sup>89</sup> She utilises different networks: Ukrainians in Poland (particularly in Kraków), Poles in Ukraine (especially in Lviv), and church

84 Website of the Medical Aid for Poland Fund, <http://www.mapf.org.uk/> (accessed: 27.04.2024).

85 *Ibidem*.

86 See on Medical Aid for Poland’s website, <http://www.mapf.org.uk/> (accessed: 18.02.2024).

87 K. Słodkowska, *Polski Wielkanocny Jarmark w Londynie*, TVP3, 5 April 2022. <https://lodz.tvp.pl/59454061/polski-wielkanocny-jarmark-w-londynie> (accessed: 28.11.2025).

88 Interview with Bożena Laskiewicz, 23.04.2024, London (conducted by A. Lefèvre), researcher’s private archive.

89 Interview with Bożena Laskiewicz, 09.11.2023, London (conducted by A. Lefèvre), researcher’s private archive.

organisations in Ukraine.<sup>90</sup> Both she and Dudzinski send goods to Ukraine goods purchased in Poland. While Laskiewicz adheres to the individual, case-by-case approach she now applies in assisting Poland, Dudzinski, together with members of Portail de l'Ukraine, loads trucks for delivery to Poland.<sup>91</sup> He travelled promptly to the Polish-Ukrainian border, where people from across Europe were already assembling to provide aid and organise themselves.<sup>92</sup> Coordination differed significantly, reflecting broader changes in the world, as noted by those born in the 1940s-1950s during the interviews: the emergence of new telecommunication technologies, the absence of border controls within Europe, and improvements in infrastructure and road quality.<sup>93</sup>



Fig. 3. Left: Current logo of the Medical Aid for Poland Fund (2023), prominently featuring the slogan “Solidarity with Ukraine!” Right: Ukrainian flag displayed during the play *Stanis le polak* at the Colisée de Lens on 18 September 2022.<sup>94</sup>

- 90 Interview with Bożena Laskiewicz, 23.04.2024, London (conducted by A. Lefèvre), researcher’s private archive.
- 91 Interview with Henri Dudzinski, 15.10.2023, Angres, France (conducted by A. Lefèvre), researcher’s private archive.
- 92 *Coordination of Humanitarian Aid for Ukraine* on 12 March 2022, <https://www.gov.pl/web/eu/coordination-of-humanitarian-aid-for-ukraine> (accessed: 18.02.2024).
- 93 Interview with Henri Dudzinski, 15.10.2023, Angres, France (conducted by A. Lefèvre), researcher’s private archive.
- 94 Picture provided to the authors by Henri Dudzinski, also published on Facebook, 9 September 2023, <https://www.facebook.com/lusy.dolia/posts/pfbidoDms3NPhuXqyV5pAKTdBnnvWfPbsoDFRE29XJjU1FCsbjtiaGrvARyazWoHnS92M1l> (accessed: 18.08.2025).

#### 5.4. The enduring question of common history and historical parallels

The Ukrainian tragedy, and the efforts they made to assist its victims, compelled Dudzinski and Laskiewicz to confront the question of Polish-Ukrainian relations. Their connections to the city of Lviv – referred to by both as Lwów – are particularly telling. Dudzinski produced a text about Lviv, “called Lwów when it was Polish,”<sup>95</sup> accompanied by a rendition of *Tylko we Lwowie* (Only in Lviv) by Eléonore Louis: the song was in Polish, yet the background images explicitly called for solidarity with Ukraine.<sup>96</sup> Laskiewicz, for her part, had family ties to Lwów, her father Alfred having been born in the region. In her perception, the city remained Polish. On the historical section of her website, she described Lwów as “today as big as Warsaw, and Vilnius, both with prestigious universities, beautiful architecture and numerous [...] institutions, [...] heart of Poland for centuries [...] taken away,”<sup>97</sup> while also noting the assistance provided by Ukrainian collaborators (aligned with the Nazis) in the massacre of city’s population.

#### 5.5. Refutation of historical parallels

Despite certain similarities in the means employed to gather humanitarian aid, and the idea that in both cases actors were confronting totalitarian regimes indifferent to human suffering, the two situations are not strictly comparable. This is not only because, for Dudzinski, Poland is a Central European country and Ukraine is an Eastern European one, but primarily because “forty years ago we knew that we would defeat the USSR.”<sup>98</sup> Laskiewicz did not engage with such geopolitical considerations,<sup>99</sup> although she observed that the surge in generosity from donors was unprecedented in decades, even as many questioned why her charity remained operational.<sup>100</sup> In neither of her interviews did she take the initiative to address Polish-Ukrainian relations.

By contrast, historian Catherine Gousseff, known to Henri Dudzinski from *Solidarité with Solidarność* and invited to Lens in February 2022,<sup>101</sup> did draw parallels. On the website *Desk Russie*, she published an article analysing the reactivation

95 Stanis le Polak, *op. cit.*

96 Stanis le Polak, *op. cit.*

97 *Website of Medical Aid for Poland Fund*, <http://www.mapf.org.uk/> (accessed: 04.05.2025).

98 Interview with Henri Dudzinski, 15.10.2023, Angres, France (conducted by A. Lefèvre), researcher’s private archive.

99 Interview with Bożena Laskiewicz, 22.08.2024, London (conducted by A. Lefèvre), researcher’s private archive.

100 *Ibidem.*

101 Interview with Henri Dudzinski, 21.08.2023, Angres, France (conducted by A. Lefèvre), researcher’s private archive

of humanitarian aid to Poland had been reactivated to the war in Ukraine.<sup>102</sup> The parallels indeed concern not only volunteer involvement but also broader debates on Europe, Ukraine, and identity. The sense of “catastrophe” and “historical regression” is attributed not solely to the political evolution in Ukraine, but also to developments in Russia. Dudzinski expressed his resentment towards Russia explicitly, whereas Laskiewicz deliberately “refused to confuse people with government,”<sup>103</sup> refusing to label the country as a “robber of history.”<sup>104</sup> Where *Solidarność* had been synonymous with hope, the war in Ukraine evoked the opposite sentiment. This is reflected in Dudzinski’s forthcoming cultural work – after presenting the story of his own family’s emigration from Poland, he intends to create a play centred on the history of a Ukrainian woman.<sup>105</sup>

One of the most pressing issues concerning humanitarian aid to Ukraine is how best to respond to Russian aggression, which methods of assistance should be employed, and the significance of cooperation between the Polish and Ukrainian diasporas is in this process. In this context, networks previously developed Polish diaspora were reactivated. This represents a particularly important moment in Polish–Ukrainian relations. The collaboration between *Portail de l’Ukraine* and the Northern French Polonia, where the Polish diaspora is more firmly established, is illustrative, though by no means unique. Refugees in contact with well-established Polish communities in countries such as Ireland and the United Kingdom benefited similarly from such support.<sup>106</sup> The aid provided by Polish civil society to Ukrainian refugees received widespread media praise. Catherine Gousseff highlighted the stark contrast with the treatment of Belarusian refugees, who have been stranded at the Polish–Belarusian border since 2021; for her, this demonstrated that Poles regarded Ukrainians as “their own.”<sup>107</sup> She further emphasised the clear rapprochement between the Polish and Ukrainian diasporas, which cooperate and hold joint

102 C. Gousseff, *Quand la guerre en Ukraine fait ressurgir le souvenir de nos élans de solidarité pour Solidarność*, “Desk Russie,” 27 May 2022, <https://desk-russie.eu/2022/05/27/quand-la-guerre-en-ukraine.html> (accessed: 04.05.2025).

103 Interview with Bożena Laskiewicz, 09.11.2023, London (conducted by A. Lefèvre), researcher’s private archive.

104 Interview with Henri Dudzinski, 15.10.2023, Angres, France (conducted by A. Lefèvre), researcher’s private archive.

105 *Ibidem*.

106 See G. Clifford, *We must reach out to Polish groups in Ireland to best help arriving Ukrainians*, “Irish Examiner,” 08 March 2022, <https://www.irishexaminer.com/opinion/commentanalysis/arid-40824024.html> (accessed: 04.05.2025).

107 We consider the anti-Ukrainian propaganda campaigns of 2024–2025 to be temporary and politically dependent, which do not demonstrate the general attitude of Poles towards refugees from Ukraine. See C. Gousseff, *Quand la guerre en Ukraine fait ressurgir le souvenir de nos élans de solidarité pour Solidarność*, „Desk Russie,” 27 May 2022, <https://desk-russie.eu/2022/05/27/quand-la-guerre-en-ukraine.html> (accessed: 04.05.2025).

events, alongside the broader organisation and consolidation of the Ukrainian diaspora in the West.

## 6. Conclusions

In this context, the humanitarian movement, while originating at the grassroots level, nevertheless played a significant role in supporting societies during times of crisis. It functioned not only as a mechanism for material assistance but also as an expression of transnational solidarity and as a political signal. The cases of Poland in the 1980s and Ukraine after 2022 demonstrate how aid can shape both internal resilience and the international image of a country, extending beyond its immediate material purpose. Despite this shared ground, direct parallels were not evident during interviews, given the substantial differences in context. In Poland, aid in the 1980s was primarily motivated by solidarity with the anti-communist opposition, especially the *Solidarność* movement, and was influenced by Cold War geopolitics, the Catholic Church, and expanding networks of transnational activism. In contrast, humanitarian assistance to Ukraine since the 2022 Russian invasion reflects broader humanitarian engagement in the context of war, mass refugee displacement, and a renewed European security discourse. Although the interviewees frequently rejected the notion that the two situations were directly comparable, their attention to historical context and personal motivations highlighted continuities between these two periods of their lives. In both instances, aid encompassed not only compassion but also geopolitics, values, and collective memory. Both interviewees emphasised that Polish involvement was not exceptional, underscoring instead the support they received from friends in France and England. This paradox is noteworthy: neither the political dimension of humanitarianism nor the distinctiveness of diaspora involvement was highlighted, as they considered their engagement largely indistinguishable from that of their fellow French and British volunteers.

Their humanitarian involvement in both Poland and Ukraine unfolded amid major political crises, ultimately connected to the same historical and political question: Russian imperialism. Rather than emphasising confrontation with Russia, however, what emerged more clearly was the evolution of East–West relations in Europe and the increasing rapprochement with Western actors. This, combined with their relatively consistent personal motivations, provided a more coherent throughline. These motivations resurfaced across contexts: the urge to “do something,” the demand for political justice, and the fostering of ties between the Polish and Ukrainian diasporas, reflecting broader dynamics between these two peoples.

Their testimonies illustrate how researching humanitarian aid from Western to Eastern Europe, as carried out by members of the Polish diaspora, can deepen

our understanding not only of political history but also of migration, transnational transfers, and the link between humanitarianism and identity. They demonstrate how reflections on one's transnational identity can shape broader transnational questions, including modes of humanitarian engagement. Both interviewees approached their Polish identity differently, which in turn shaped their relations with Ukraine and, consequently, their methods of humanitarian involvement. Only Dudzinski succeeded in establishing long-term cooperation, whereas Laskiewicz understood her identity as exclusively Polish and framed her engagement strictly from that perspective. In both the cases of Dudziński and Laszkiewicz, their activities were simultaneously humanitarian and cultural. Aid was not solely material but also informational, and comparing their cultural and humanitarian involvement allows their visions of Polish identity and of humanitarianism to be seen in perspective. Laskiewicz appears to have an apolitical, Christian vision of humanitarian aid, and her conception of Poland is relatively isolationist; she did not wish to link her work to political or geopolitical contexts, despite the directions taken by the interview narrator. By contrast, Dudzinski took the initiative to share his political analysis on the entire region and its history, and his identity is plural and deeply European. Therefore, their testimonies are invaluable for further study of the connections between humanitarianism, identity, and politics, both in the Cold War and in the context of the 2022 invasion of Ukraine.



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### **Summary**

This article offers a comparative analysis of humanitarian aid to Poland in the 1980s and to Ukraine following the 2022 full-scale invasion, drawing on semi-structured interviews and analyses of more informal conversations with two long-term humanitarian actors. Dr. Bożena Laskiewicz from London and Henri Dudzinski from mining regions in Northern France share engagement in aid initiatives and in their respective Polish communities spanning more than four decades. This shared ground enables an exploration of continuities and changes in diaspora-led humanitarian networks, as structures first mobilised during the Martial Law period in Poland were subsequently reactivated in response to the war in Ukraine. This article also contrasts their approaches to integration and Polish identity, as well as the tensions between political and apolitical aid.

The diachronic and comparative approaches demonstrate that, despite the revolution in communication brought by both the digital era and Poland's integration into the European Union, numerous patterns and points of comparison persist, often highlighted by the actors themselves. It also reveals new connections between older and newer diaspora networks. By situating individual experiences within the broader history of Eastern European crises, the study offers insights into the long-term significance of humanitarian solidarity.