

# Pro bono collaboration within the legal community's response to displacement from Ukraine

Anna Kalinichenko, Jasmine Simperingham and Philip Worthington

**Lessons about collaboration and refugee inclusion from the legal community's response to the needs of people displaced from Ukraine could help inform future responses.**

The private sector legal community, other actors within the legal ecosystem and people with lived experience of displacement have collaborated, to an unprecedented level, to address the diverse legal needs of those fleeing Ukraine. The impact of these efforts demonstrates the value of greater engagement with non-traditional refugee response actors.

The authors of this article represent different actors within the legal ecosystem. They have all been involved in collaborative initiatives

responding to the needs of people displaced from Ukraine. One of the authors, Anna Kalinichenko, is a Ukrainian lawyer who fled Ukraine and now works as a pro bono lawyer at the international law firm DLA Piper, where she leads initiatives to address the legal needs of refugees from Ukraine and other countries:

“I know from personal experience that when you are completely lost and frustrated, legal and informational support can be as important as humanitarian help. Fleeing your home

country to start a new life in a new place comes with legal challenges. Often, people don't have access to legal advice or a lawyer and that's where different pro bono players can step in."

### **The rise and evolution of refugee rights pro bono**

In recent years, 'refugee rights pro bono'<sup>1</sup> has become a priority for many private sector law firms. In a global survey in 2022, 42% of law firms ranked immigration, refugees and asylum among their top five pro bono focus areas, up from 24% in 2014.

As refugee rights pro bono has grown, it has evolved. Many firms have shifted from providing indirect assistance only (for example, helping NGOs with legal compliance) to additionally offering direct assistance to displaced people. As many private sector legal actors are not experienced in asylum or immigration law, however, firms need to invest in new partnerships with specialist NGOs to train and supervise the law firms' staff. Pooling resources between firms can help to maximise their reach and impact. Law firms have also started working more closely with public interest legal organisations and networks, like PILnet, that can connect lawyers to pro bono opportunities.

Most recently, actors involved in refugee rights pro bono have explored different ways that refugee inclusion and leadership can be embedded in their work. For example, DLA Piper hires lawyers with lived experience of displacement to lead its Know Your Rights training programme, which aims to empower asylum seekers and refugees to better advocate for themselves.

### **Collaborative legal projects**

The legal community has developed numerous collaborative projects in response to the mass displacement of people from Ukraine. Here we reflect on three initiatives:

#### **Country-level legal information factsheets:**

With the activation of the EU's Temporary Protection Directive (TPD), temporary protection arrangements were put in place throughout Europe to enable displaced Ukrainians to access legal stay and certain minimum rights.

However, many people urgently sought information about how the TPD would be applied and what protection was available in countries where it was not activated. To address this, PILnet and DLA Piper developed a collaborative project. Private sector lawyers – from the national offices of DLA Piper and other firms – prepared general legal information about rights and entitlements. The multi-stakeholder, multi-country initiative was coordinated by PILnet, which published and disseminated the factsheets. Experts from local refugee-led and other community-based organisations provided practical input. The project required coordinated effort from a variety of legal and refugee actors to achieve its goal of addressing information gaps within a very short timeframe. The first information sheets<sup>2</sup> were published within weeks of the invasion and were downloaded by tens of thousands of people within the first year, including via UNHCR's Digital Blue Dot<sup>3</sup>.

**Know Your Rights training:** After Anna was displaced from Ukraine DLA Piper hired her to co-design and deliver legal education workshops for Ukrainian refugees in Romania, Poland and Hungary. Anna worked with local non-profit organisations and UNHCR, which supported the project by conducting pre-event research, disseminating information and identifying participants. In each country, locally qualified legal experts delivered the training alongside Anna. She applied her knowledge and lived experience of displacement to shape the workshops and connect with the participants culturally and linguistically. Approximately 100 participants learned about their rights and opportunities. They were also able to build their confidence and personal networks through meeting other displaced individuals and members of their host communities.

#### **Direct legal information and assistance:**

Following a request from UNHCR to explore how the private sector legal community could help respond to the pressing legal needs, PILnet worked with the legal assistance NGO European Lawyers in Lesvos (ELIL) to develop a collaborative pro bono model

based on their experience assisting asylum seekers in Greece.<sup>4</sup> The resulting Ukraine Pro Bono Collaborative (UPBC) sees Polish and Ukrainian lawyers providing one-on-one legal information and assistance to people from Ukraine arriving in Warsaw. The purpose is to provide high-quality, individualised support to help people resolve their legal queries, access their rights and navigate the legal procedures in Poland. The assistance covers a wide range of legal issues, with a particular focus on those with complex legal situations, such as third-country nationals, undocumented individuals and unaccompanied and separated children. Six international law firms participate in the project,<sup>5</sup> providing volunteer lawyers who are trained and supervised by local ELIL staff. In the first eight months, over 30 lawyers participated and assisted over 2,250 people. The lawyers work closely with Polish Bar Associations and local legal actors to ensure that specialised cases are referred as appropriate.

### Lessons learned

While the three projects varied in the type of actors involved and the legal services provided, some common themes emerged:

**Build partnerships, collaboration and coordination:** One legal actor alone would not have been capable of rapidly developing such detailed country-level legal information factsheets. The ability to mobilise lawyers and firms from multiple countries was key and could be replicated in future situations of mass displacement. The UPBC was only possible due to multi-firm collaboration – by pooling resources and lawyers the firms were able to assist far more people.

**Develop replicable and flexible models:** All three projects drew on the participating organisations' previous experience of responding to the needs of displaced people and building collaborative legal projects. What worked in one crisis however, will not always work in another. For example, ELIL found that the model they used in Greece of lawyers from across Europe volunteering, was not feasible in Poland, where due to the context, participating

lawyers had to be either Ukrainian or Polish. Nevertheless, their model provided a basic blueprint on which to build, and which could be used in other mass displacement situations.

**Respond to the local context:** Non-traditional refugee response actors, such as private sector lawyers, may be eager to start providing assistance immediately without undertaking the necessary preparatory work, such as needs assessments and context analysis. These projects were most impactful when they were needs-driven and developed in collaboration with local actors. The UPBC was developed to provide additional capacity and triage cases. It worked closely with local actors to develop referral pathways for specialised cases and ensured their initiative was complementary to, and supportive of, those actors.

**Understand needs:** After the first Know Your Rights workshop, Anna realised she had not devoted enough time to evaluating needs and reviewing the existing information available. This led to gaps in coordination and some misunderstanding about the scope of the project. Running a survey about what information displaced people most wanted, and in what format, would have avoided some issues. These steps were built into the planning of the later workshops, leading to better outcomes.

**Involve lawyers with lived experience:** All three projects involved lawyers with lived experience of displacement and sought the perspectives of other displaced people in their design and delivery; this improved the efficiency and impact of the projects. Anna's knowledge, experience and language skills were valuable assets when deciding on the questions to be included in the factsheets and the content of the workshops. Her ability to define the problems and find effective solutions at the projects' initial stages saved considerable time and resources. She also built a rapport with the workshop participants and got frank feedback, which will inform the design of more effective programmes and improve future collaboration. ELIL also worked with Ukrainian lawyers. This helped build trust and ensured the assistance provided was appropriate and

relevant, including when responding to more complex legal questions.

### Ways forward

The diversity of actors, the breadth of collaboration, and the involvement of lawyers with lived experience of displacement increased the effectiveness of the legal community's response to displacement from Ukraine.

- The legal community could take steps to learn from this response in order to be better able to address the legal needs arising in other such crises:
- Develop robust modalities of collaboration and create replicable and flexible models that can be deployed quickly to start responding immediately in future situations of displacement.
- Centre the expertise of displaced lawyers and other displaced people in the development and implementation of future collaborative pro bono projects.
- Build relationships with NGOs, refugee-led organisations and other actors from the refugee response sector to expand the pool of potential pro bono partners.
- Create platforms for knowledge sharing to improve the efficiency of future responses.

- Develop coordination mechanisms to enhance collaboration.
- Work with local legal actors to understand barriers and provide support to strengthen refugee rights pro bono.

#### Jasmine Simperingham

*jsimperingham@pilnet.org @Jjsimperingham*

Global Coordinator - Forced Displacement, PILnet

#### Anna Kalinichenko

*anna.kalinichenko@dlapiper.com*

Senior Pro Bono Associate, DLA Piper

#### Philip Worthington

*pworthington@elil.eu @ELIL\_LegalAid*

Managing Director, European Lawyers in Lesbos (ELIL)

1. The free legal services provided to advance access to rights, justice or solutions for refugees and other forcibly displaced, or to address legal needs of refugee-led organisations or other organisations supporting refugees (PILnet definition).
2. Available, together with other resources created by PILnet and law firm partners, at: [www.pilnet.org/resource/cso-resilience-resources/](http://www.pilnet.org/resource/cso-resilience-resources/)
3. [bluedothub.org/](https://bluedothub.org/)
4. Since 2019, ELIL has been running the Greece Pro Bono Collaborative (GPBC), a joint initiative with six international law firms (Dentons, White & Case, Allen & Overy, Orrick, Ashurst and Charles Russell Speechlys) to provide free legal assistance to refugees in Greece.
5. Dentons, White & Case, Allen & Overy, Norton Rose Fulbright, Hogan Lovells and Bird & Bird