



In March 2023, the EUAA organised a Thematic Workshop on Legal Assistance and Representation in the Asylum Procedure. Key stakeholders, including lawyers and civil society organisations, participated to share knowledge, good practices and challenges in the functioning of the Common European Asylum System.

The following article is based on a presentation given at the event.

# Legal Aid Coordination Centre: Empowering Refugees through Grassroots Initiatives in Poland

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In recent years, the global refugee crisis has brought to light the crucial role that grassroots initiatives play in providing legal support and assistance to displaced individuals. One shining example of such an initiative is the Legal Aid Coordination Centre (LACC) in Poland, established by the National Bar Council of Attorneys-at-law (Krajowa Izba Radców Prawnych). Led by committed lawyers and attorneys-at-law, LACC has been at the forefront of offering legal aid to refugees in Poland, particularly those affected by the crisis on the Polish-Belarusian border and the ongoing conflict in Ukraine.

This article explores the inception, development, and impact of LACC, showcasing the importance of grassroots efforts in ensuring access to justice for vulnerable populations.

## 1. Inception and objectives

Founded in December 2021, LACC was established as a response to the urgent legal needs of refugees arriving in Poland. The centre's primary aim is to coordinate legal assistance for foreigners who are victims of the crisis on the Polish-Belarusian border, individuals addressing the crisis, and members of the local community engaged in humanitarian efforts. The centre's headquarters, located in Hajnówka near the border, serves as a focal point for legal aid provision. Additionally, remote assistance is offered through a dedicated helpline.



## 2. Expansion to address the Ukrainian crisis

When Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine started in February 2022, LACC recognised the need to broaden its scope of assistance. Lawyers, legal professionals and bar associations from across Poland rallied together to provide support to Ukrainian refugees. Operating around the clock, these dedicated individuals offered legal information, guidance on rights and assistance with applications at railway stations and reception points. The urgency of the situation prompted the creation of the 'Lawyers for Ukraine' initiative, which was built on the existing LACC structure, to provide organised, sustained support.

## 3. Harnessing technology for greater outreach

Acknowledging the evolving needs of refugees, LACC made a strategic move to establish an office in Warsaw and use technology to extend its outreach. A helpline (number +48 800 088 544) was set up, made possible through collaboration with Deloitte Poland, offering legal advice in multiple languages, including Ukrainian, Polish, English and Russian. The helpline's expansion allowed the centre to cater to a larger audience, ensuring that legal aid was accessible to a diverse population of refugees. Legal information was provided by volunteers - Polish attorneys-at-law and advocates, and additionally, in cooperation with Ukrainian lawyers due to the need for their knowledge of Ukrainian and Russian.

The consultations may cover the following issues: i) the legal status of Ukrainian nationals arriving on the territory of Poland in connection with hostilities - their basic rights and obligations; ii) legalisation of stay and work; iii) temporary care and family foster care for unaccompanied minors; iv) employment of Ukrainian nationals; and v) access to essential services.

Moreover, the centre launched a website (<https://legalaiddpoland.org/>), offering essential information, Frequently Asked Questions and details about legal aid points across Poland. The involvement of private entities, including Wolters Kluwer Polska, strengthened the online platform by providing up-to-date legal content.

## 4. Collaboration for sustainable impact

The turning point for LACC came when the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) expressed interest in the initiative. This collaboration, initiated in June 2022, marked a significant step towards structured development and long-term planning.

The second partner became Fundacja Dialog with its seat in Białystok. With NRC's support, the centre was empowered to enhance its helpline and legal information website, securing the continuation of vital services into 2023. The partnership with NRC facilitated the expansion of LACC's outreach, enabling more refugees to access legal aid.





## 5. Impact and progress

The tireless efforts of LACC and its collaborators yielded impressive results in 2022. From June to December 2022, over 6,900 legal consultations were provided through the helpline,<sup>1</sup> addressing a wide range of issues, including legal status, work authorisation, family care, employment rights and social benefits. An extensive network of Ukrainian lawyers joined the initiative, receiving training on Polish law to better serve their fellow citizens.

Notably, in more complex cases, individual representation before courts and administrative bodies was undertaken. Beneficiaries expressed high satisfaction levels, with 100% reporting their contentment with the assistance received.

## 6. Conclusion

LACC stands as a beacon of hope and resilience, showcasing the power of grassroots initiatives in providing essential legal support to refugees. From its inception in response to the Polish-Belarusian border crisis to its expansion to aid displaced persons from Ukraine, LACC embodies the dedication and unity of legal professionals and bar associations in Poland.

The centre's innovative use of technology and strategic partnerships has enabled it to make a lasting impact, ensuring that displaced individuals receive the legal assistance they desperately need. As the collaboration with the NRC and Fundacja Dialog continues, LACC's mission to support Ukraine and displaced persons remains unwavering, embodying the spirit of solidarity and compassion.

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<sup>1</sup> From January to July 2023, LACC's consultants provided 6,380 legal consultations.

