SEEKING AND AVOIDING: ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF PSYCHOLOGICAL HELP FOR BELARUSIAN REFUGEES

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Abstract: This paper responds to an apparent public consensus about the need for psychological help for Belarusians who have experienced repression and forced migration. Using data from interviews and participant observation conducted within long-term ethnographic fieldwork, I examine various forms and meanings of psychological help as it was practised, understood and dealt with within the community of Belarusian political refugees who fled to Lithuania after 2020. The article provides an overview of heterogeneous psy encounters in the field, zooming in on two practices that were organised within the community. I argue that informal and community-based psychological help, as it was practised within my field, should be understood as a dynamic entanglement of practices, charged with past experiences and current predicaments. The proposed approach allows us to see how so-called 'psychological help' can take various forms even within a relatively small community. Those forms can be entangled with different historical and socio-cultural contexts, state bureaucracies and relationships within the diaspora. The meaning of such help to its recipients, as well as their desire to resist psychologisation, should be taken into account by activists, practitioners, and community members.

Keywords: Belarus, Refugees, Psychologisation, Mental Health, Responsibilisation, Ethnography

Introduction

The need for psychological help among Belarusian political prisoners, refugees and those who suffered from other forms of violence is mentioned in public discourse quite often. Volha Vialichka, psychologist and representative of the Doctors for Truth and Justice initiative, said that incarceration deforms a person's psyche, and after three years, such a change becomes irreversible (Viasna 2023, December 4). A study of recently released political prisoners shows that almost half of the survey respondents mentioned the need for psychological help (Hurnievič 2024, May 24). There are many initiatives and organisations offering free-of-charge psychological services to Belarusians; some work in particular locations, like Poland or Lithuania, while others operate remotely. The words *psychological help* are used in the public discourse as if they are self-explanatory. At the same time, there is little to no discussion of discourses and practices that are mobilised in response to this need. This paper offers an ethnographic perspective on the variety of practices and meanings that a seemingly common-sense idea can inspire. I examined how different types of psychological help were encountered, interpreted and dealt with within the Belarusian refugee community in Lithuania.

This article contributes to recent studies centring on the Belarusian diaspora after 2020, highlighting the individual and collective effects of protests, repression and forced migration (Kazakou & Thomas 2024; Korshunau 2024). Kazakou and Thomas offer an extensive overview of challenges Belarusian migrants face in Lithuania, among other countries; they contextualise mental health issues Belarusians face within a wider well-being frame (2024). Their conclusions are in line with the overall consensus that mental health support is important and needed for Belarusians; however, very little is known about how such support can be practised.

While many studies of psychological discipline mobilisation among refugees and migrants either focus solely on discursive articulations or one particular type of practice, the Belarusian case allows us to examine the diversity of encounters that occur within one community. I suggest this diversity should be appreciated and embraced, similarly to how it became a common understanding that forced migration cannot be reduced to one type of experience (Eastmond 2007; Gatrell 2013). Ethnography offers a particularly good opportunity to approach this subject holistically, contextualising refugees' narratives in their everyday lives and social practices.

I argue that informal and community-based psychological help, as it was practised within the Belarusian refugee community in Lithuania,

should be understood as a dynamic entanglement of practices, charged with past experiences and current predicaments. This case, on the one hand, illustrates the pervasiveness of psychologisation in today's society, but, on the other hand, shows the potential for reflexivity about the ways psy knowledges are instrumentalised. The implications of my findings about this particular community can be generative in the context of current debates of radical transformations of the mental health domain towards a plurality of approaches and community care (Frazer-Carroll 2023).

Analytical Approach

I use the term *psy* offered by Rose for various experts whose authority is based on claims of understanding human thoughts, feelings and behaviours (1999: 10). Psy could include psychotherapists, psychiatrists or life coaches. As the idea of psychological help in my field included a mix of these disciplines, and many people saw them as equivalent, *psy* works as a convenient umbrella term, unless a more specific term is needed.

My analysis builds on the tension surrounding the discussion of the politics of mental health. There are arguments for the emancipatory potential of psy knowledges, from Fanon's idea of social change through individual liberation (Fanon 1963: 56) to the role of psy discourses within the feminist tradition (Illouz 2008; Perheentupa 2019; Wright 2020). However, there is a substantial critique of psy disciplines for pathologising experiences of marginalised groups, such as women (Stoppard 2000; Ussher 2011; Neitzke 2016), queer people (Hadjiioannou & Saadi 2023; Jack 2023), neurodivergent people (Chapman 2020; Walker 2021; Dwyer 2022) and refugees (Kirmayer 2003; Eastmond 2011). At the same time, the lack of access to psychological expertise, services and resources is also closely related to class, gender, race and other aspects of vulnerability (Frazer-Carroll 2023). Specifically, when refugees' mental health is problematised, the trauma framework can have a critical role in this process (Ibrahim 2021; 2024). Here, I will employ Eastmond's concept of the *incomplete agency of the refugee* to discuss the meaning of imposed psychological help and psychologisation of suffering in my field.

Further, I will use concepts of psychologisation and responsibilisation to interpret the mobilisation of psy knowledges within the field. *Psychologisation* is defined by Madsen as "making something psychological", or transforming social, political and moral categories into questions of psychological factors (2018: 128). Madsen connects

therapeutic culture as a product of total psychologization to the global consumer culture and individuals' need to cope with the overwhelming challenges societies are facing today. *Responsibilisation*, according to Rose, is one of the key technologies that animated the psy domain, producing autonomous subjectivity (1999: vii, 217). This technology of burdening people with responsibility for things beyond their control has been criticised specifically in the context of involuntary migration (Uehling 2015).

The global spread of Western psy knowledges is often criticised as a form of psychiatric imperialism (Watters 2011). Although the concepts I am employing were developed for Western contexts, their extended application remains productive to see how technologies of neo-liberal ideology interact with different socio-political contexts (for example, Duncan 2017; Yu et al. 2018). It allows us to appreciate variations that would not fit the idea of "localisation of a same global trend" (Madsen 218: 25), as soon as local specificity is taken into account. For example, Shchyttsova highlights important differences in how concepts produced by the Western psy domain landed in the context of post-Soviet transformations and psychological culture development in Belarus, such as the very limited influence of Freudianism on academic and popular psy culture, de-coupling from the feminist movement, as well as the absence of the so-called anti-psychiatry movement in Belarus (2014). Chulitskaya and Matonyte show that, despite the dominance of paternalistic authoritarian discourse, there was a gradual shifting of states's responsibility to individuals in line with a neo-liberal logic of responsibilisation, particularly prominent in the case of the unemployed (2018). Vazyanau's study of the psychologisation of resistance demonstrates how, in the context of Belarusian protests in 2020, psychologisation had a different logic and outcomes compared to Madsen's conclusions about the logic of consumerism (2023).

Method and Data

The anthropological approach considers psychological and psychiatric ideas as always embedded within social and cultural contexts (Littlewood 1996; Luhrmann 2020; Nehring et. al. 2020). The meanings of these ideas are changing depending on the cultural context into which they are relocated (Kleinman 1981), and ethnographic perspectives help to reveal how people navigate competing psy models of knowledge (Lurmann 2020), trying to influence, transform or resist the psy domain in different ways (Brodwin 2013; Calabrese 2013; Myers 2015). Long-term participant observation was important in getting

a dynamic understanding of both discursive articulations and social practices related to psychological help, as well as the everyday life context surrounding them.

Building on the idea of a place as a "location that is fixed by all the relationships it involves" (Green 2016: 211–212), I started with a refugee shelter as a point of departure, eventually expanding to other private and co-living spaces, public and family events, as well as volunteering and taking road trips with my study participants. For the participant aspect of participant observation, the monotonous work within various forms of volunteering offered particularly good opportunities for informal conversations and experiential learning. I was able to stay for several weeks in places offering temporary accommodation for refugees, sharing a room with several other women. This experience was invaluable to learn about the women's social life which is usually hidden from visitors. Additionally, part of my data was collected through sensory ethnography methods (Pink 2015), focusing on smells, textures, temperatures and other sensations accompanying overcrowded co-living spaces.

This paper is based on long-term ethnographic fieldwork (2022–2024) with the community of Belarusians who fled from political repression and sought asylum in Lithuania. My study focused on refugees, as well as people who helped them, such as mentors, volunteers and some psy experts. I consider 42 people my informants; their ages vary from 23 to 64. I conducted 20 semi-structured interviews and many more informal conversations. For the interviews with refugees, I employed the limited 'life story' approach (Eastmond 2007; Vandevoordt & Verschraegen 2019), beginning with the stories of protest participation, exile, and settling in Lithuania, proceeding to everyday life, self-care, etc. Taking inspiration from the 'following method' (Chan 2023), I aimed to interview several participants in the same situation, for example, mentors and people they have been mentoring, or members of the same refugee family, etc.

The data I worked with consisted of fieldnotes, interview transcripts and written documents shared with me by study participants. Those were iteratively thematically coded. The first stage of coding had a wider focus on self-care, looking into different practices and resources that Belarusian refugees considered important to endure their abrupt migration. Later, observing how much emphasis and tension surrounded the topic of "all things psychological", I did another round of coding to pay closer attention to various instances of psy knowledges and practices mobilisation. Because of this "funnel" structure of the project common to ethnographic research (Hammersley & Atkinson 2019), I was able to contextualise various kinds of psychological

help within refugees' stories of migration and other self-care practices. In particular, I paid attention to both moments of engagement with psychological expertise and psychological, or therapeutic, discourse mobilisations in everyday life, trying to understand the relationships between them.

My positionality as a Belarusian woman with experience of repression and involuntary migration both aided access to the field and created challenges. Just as an ethnographer is always actively positioned by study participants based on categories existing within the field (Angrosino & Mays de Perez 2000; Ringer 2013), I could be seen as "one of us", as "a student from Sweden" or, at times, as an irrelevant middle-aged woman washing dishes.

Given the scale of repression in Belarus, I had many opportunities to reflect on self-censorship in my attempts to protect study participants' data. Due to high risks related to the Belarusian state's interest in diasporic organisations, apart from standard ethical procedures, such as informed consent and maintaining anonymity, additional data safety measures were implemented to protect both study participants and me as a researcher. In some cases, my interlocutors would prefer to use their real names; however, I decided against it.

Encounters With Psy

To set up the scene for the discussion, I would like to briefly catalogue some of the encounters my study participants had with the so-called psy disciplines during the protests and migration. This list is far from exhaustive; its main purpose is to show the diversity of experiences and practices associated with psy expertise that Belarusian refugees could encounter within their journey.

A. Prior long-term engagement with a therapist and/or psychiatrist in Belarus. For many, a therapist could be the only person with whom they could discuss the risk of imprisonment or their flight plans. Some psy experts later had to flee the country to protect both themselves and their clients whose personal data the police were interested in.

B. The psychologist in a Belarusian prison. For example, one of the former political prisoners, Volha Takarchuk, told the story of her interaction with a psychologist working for a prison (Melkaziorau, 2024). In her story, the prison psychologist convinced her to end her hunger strike because protesting human rights violations in the prison, according to the psychologist, was "pointless".

C. Involuntary psychiatric treatment remains one of the repression technologies; the human rights organisation Viasna is aware of at least 33 individuals subjected to involuntary psychiatric treatment for political reasons (Viasna, 24 April 2025).

D. Psy volunteers in Belarus who helped the repressed. Seva, one of my study participants, was temporarily released after some time in detention and was facing criminal charges. Agata, his wife, prepared everything to leave the country; however, Seva refused. Agata told me during the interview: "He did not understand the flow of time, what was happening outside, he was just repeating he was not going anywhere!". Friends connected them with the psychiatrist characterised as "svoj",[1] who was able to convince Seva to leave. This likely spared Seva from a serious sentence in Belarus.

E. Psychologist in the Lithuanian refugee camp. Access is a major challenge in understanding what happens inside prisons and refugee camps. Several study participants shared their impression that the camp psychologist seemed only interested in suicide prevention and did not pay attention to other mental health-related issues people might have. One person, however, told me that the psychologist working in the camp tried to defend them against homophobic bullying.

F. The Lithuanian State Healthcare System. One of my study participants, Darja, described her interaction with a Lithuanian psychiatrist as "terrible" and "shocking". She lost her job, had to apply for asylum, and her partner had decided to go fight in the war on Ukraine's side. According to Darja, the doctor's first reaction was a question about why she did not join her partner: "... I replied it was dangerous and asked her why *she* [Darja's emphasis] would not want to go to war". It is important to acknowledge that this example most likely does not represent the majority of Lithuanian professionals; however, it makes a strong impression and creates barriers for others in the community to seek help.

Finally, the following two encounters will be discussed below in more detail:

G. Regular group meetings with a psychologist;
H. Psy volunteers offering services to refugees/repressed individuals in Lithuania.

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1 Can be translated as "one of us"; here refers to trust based on both personal relationships and alliance with the protesters.

Most of the items in this list would be called "psychological help". Most of them would claim certain impartiality or "objectivity". At the same time, all of them can be associated with different political projects and work towards different agendas, some more problematic than others. Some psy experts I have met emphasised their solidarity with the LGBTQ+ community, others based their solidarity on gender, nationality or other factors.

Often, refugees actively sought psychological help, using very specific criteria. First of all, such help needed to be free of charge, as most of them could not pay for regular sessions. Second, they expected at least some awareness of the Belarusian context. Finally, some women and members of the LGBTQ+ community were afraid to face hostility from psy experts during sessions and wanted their feminist or queer allyship to be expressed beforehand. Although various approaches and schools exist within the psy space, most study participants expressed less interest in such nuances.

Incomplete Agency of the Refugee

"People arrive here wounded", said one of my interlocutors during the interview, arguing that this woundedness needs certain attention and work to avoid conflicts in the shelter. "Wounded" (Russian: *ranienyi*) was a word I heard often. Reasons for woundedness could differ. If in 2020, protesting against state violence could be framed as a sign of psychological health, repression and border-crossing turned people into potentially "troubled" individuals. One of the volunteers shared her understanding of queer people as being traumatised by society: "You need to understand that such people are wounded in our society by default". Using this articulation, she acknowledged the existing discrimination, but the outcomes of violence were assigned to individuals in the form of woundedness.

Thinking about how North Korean refugees were considered in need of education on the subject of mental health as part of their integration process in South Korea (Yu et al. 2018), it is hard to ignore the possible role of the authoritarian regime in constructing depressive subjects in Belarus (Shchyttsova 2021). The incomplete agency of Belarusian refugees could then stem not only from the traumatic experiences they endured, but from the fact of being foreign to a Lithuanian society, unfamiliar with living in a democratic country. And indeed, comments about Belarusians not knowing how to navigate democratic institutions were common in the shelter, coming from both Lithuanian visitors and other Belarusians.

The idea of "woundedness" is not unique. For example, Eastmond, in her analysis of psycho-medical categories used in relation to Bosnian refugees in Sweden, shows how the idea of the 'traumatised refugee' entangles relationships of care and custody to construct what she calls the 'incomplete agency of the refugee' (2011). To become complete and participate fully in society, certain work should be performed on them (ibid.: 282). The important difference, however, is that in the Swedish case, social workers were tasked with refugees' 'integration', while the Belarusian community in Lithuania relied on unpaid volunteers' labour to perform a similar role. When a Belarusian refugee was signed out of the refugee camp, mentors and volunteers took 'custody' of them and assumed responsibility for potential problems. The majority of those mentors and volunteers had refugee backgrounds themselves. A suicide attempt that happened in the community some time ago marked all other refugees with the potential of self-harm or threat to others, until proven otherwise. While Uehling shows that refugees are not only subjected to state interventions and may eventually take on bureaucratic roles and represent the state (2015), the Belarusian case highlights that such enactment of a bureaucratic mindset may happen informally.

Unlike Eastmond's observations, in the Belarusian refugee community in Lithuania the relationships between woundedness and incompleteness were not necessarily linear. The idea of traumatic experiences influencing refugees' agency interacted with notions of gender and the particular source of violence. Pavel, one of the men staying in the shelter, seemed very relaxed about the rules and discipline, as well as any critical remarks about his behaviour. He previously fought in Ukraine against Russia, and women in the community often discussed him as "wounded by the war", teasing him for his inability to live in a peaceful reality. Josticova and Aliyev, in their study, discuss the high status of Belarusians fighting on Ukraine's side in the diaspora (Josticova & Aliyev 2024). Pavel seemed fully aware of his high status; he might have been "more wounded" and "less incomplete", but this enabled him to openly resist any attempt at psychological help.

Where to talk about distress

The sources of distress and what constituted a traumatic or extreme experience varied. It could be experiences of imprisonment, police violence or war,[2] as well as deportation from another EU country, or

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2   Many Belarusians who initially moved to Ukraine in 2020–2021 had to flee again at the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

violence at the border. It could also be prolonged life in hiding, loss of loved ones, as well as abrupt departure from Belarus and the loss of home. Finally, the loss of social status, the need to live in the refugee shelter and work precarious, clandestine jobs, were also described as major disruptions.

Whether these experiences were discussed in psychological terms or not, they were framed as major life events, influencing and individual's sense of self. The impact of these extreme experiences was profound and was seen as located in the body. Teeth, backs and stomachs were most often discussed as affected by distress. Teeth grinding and losing teeth were very common issues discussed in connection with stress that reflected on the body. Many study participants described decreased energy levels, feelings of vulnerability and weakness, leading to an inability to deal with everyday injustices or rejection. Some told me they felt shame for how this state of apathy influenced their ability to maintain relationships, search for work or use other opportunities for "integration".

Narrating stories of violence was a common practice for dealing with extreme experiences. Patel quotes torture survivors who described their pain as part of their life, an enemy, a friend and a witness living in their bodies (Patel 2011: 241). Similarly, one of the study participants explained it this way: "You need to accept that it happened to you and it goes nowhere, it is now part of who you are". In a recent study of Belarusians in Lithuania, a tension between different parts of the diaspora was articulated: "activist" members of the diaspora were perceived by others as being overly focused on politics and constantly discussing the violence they have experienced (Vardamatski & Novikava 2024). As I observed in my field, discussions of violence were pervasive, and almost any small talk could pivot into graphic stories of arrests, torture or violence on the border.

In summer 2025, Siarhei Cihanouski cried, describing the terrors of prison experiences during a press conference organised after his forced deportation from Belarus. His emotional appeal sparked a heated debate in the diaspora about whether it is ethical to allow people to speak publicly in a state of shock, before having "time and help". Not having qualifications to answer this question, I feel it is important to connect this debate to common attitudes towards speaking about violence publicly.

My observation was that attempts to talk about such experiences were often dismissed or interrupted. The tendency to re-frame the effects of violence in psy terms, noticed by Vazyanau (2023: 89), was brought to the diaspora and further cultivated there. One of the volunteers who helped more than 100 Belarusians upon arrival told me

she had to learn to disconnect as soon as people started talking about brutalities. In her opinion, such stories belonged to a psychotherapeutic space and exposing others to them was not appropriate or ethical. This tendency was even more prominent when someone was sharing a story perceived as "less terrible". For example, one interlocutor told me that her short detention and months spent in hiding before exile were not considered "real" suffering within the community. She felt dismissed by others. In this case, a psy expert could be the first person to show compassion and validate their suffering as no less real. But even those who enthusiastically embraced therapy and psy vocabularies as part of their "repair work" still believed that it is not enough, and that being heard outside of the therapeutic process is important too. Building on Patel's argument that pure psychological focus on the individual effects of trauma often obscures the effects of torture as an extreme form of violence on the community, such as mistrust and fragmentation (Patel, 2011, pp. 245–246), I would add that such fragmentation diminishes capacity for compassion and, by extension, solidarity.

Humour and narrativity became important elements of such stories told in public spaces. For example, I observed one of the women living in the refugee shelter sharing the story of a quite brutal arrest. She was cooking and describing the lack of air in an overcrowded police van, the beatings, the fear. At the same time, she sprinkled the story with funny and absurd details, like the carnival costume she decided to wear to the protests. Maček, in her analysis of Bosnian humour in Sarajevo under siege, concludes that macabre jokes provide a possibility to talk about destruction and humiliation as a shared experience (Maček 2009: 51ff). While Maček interprets dark humour as a form of resilience, I would argue that in my field, it was a tacit strategy to resist the psychologisation of repression. If the psychologisation among protestors observed by Vazyanau moved the focus from the violence itself to the feelings resulting from the violence (2023), my study participants were actively resisting this discursive move: many wanted to talk about what happened, not the resulting feelings.

Seeking Psychological Help

Formally, it is possible for asylum seekers and people with so-called 'humanitarian' visas to get free mental health help in Lithuania; however, the process is often complicated and unclear, especially without language proficiency. Maryna was a woman in her thirties who worked in the mental health domain in Belarus. After abruptly fleeing the

country, she became a volunteer managing requests for psychological help within the community. Using her expertise and personal contacts, Maryna organised a kind of 'triage' process, wherein all requests for psychological help in the community were redirected to her. She would clarify the request and suggest options from a list of therapists and psychiatrists who work free of charge. This simplified the process of finding help, which was often overwhelming. It also ensured that psy experts would speak Russian and have at least a minimum awareness of the Belarusian context.

When I asked Maryna what kind of requests she received from refugees, she quoted a variety of them describing issues with insomnia, apathy, irritation and self-harm. When talking about her "clients", she described the differences between people who were imprisoned and those who spent time in hiding. First, according to her, they were lifeless and struggling to make sense of their experiences, while the latter continued to expect something bad to happen. I noticed that she only briefly mentioned psy terms, like anxiety and depression, but mostly avoided them and tried to use less distant, or even more compassionate language.

Maryna's thinking about the help she provided was interesting in several aspects. First, the informal treatment, common in Belarus and described by Shchyttsova as underground culture (Shchyttsova 2014: 64), implied a gap between state categories of the "norm" and the psy experts' understanding of what constitutes help. Maryna spoke positively about the psy help provided informally, without a "paper trail". She was convinced that the discrimination and stigmatisation she observed in Belarus were possible in Lithuania, too. Second, she seemed very humble in terms of the potential for psy help to alleviate suffering:

> You need time to feel disoriented and depressed, yes. But at the same time, if you do not use this first time to get back on your feet in practical terms.. You risk finding yourself in an even worse situation later and ending up in the psychiatric ward. So really it is also a bad time [i.e., the first months after arrival] to be depressed... At the same time, people might do a lot of work both in therapy and on their own and still struggle with depression.

Maryna knew from personal experience that the reality of refugees' lives often offered little space for "processing emotions" when the material aspects of survival were prioritised. Moreover, she volunteered as a way to deal with the intensity of her own experiences, from serious physical injury to the loss of her profession. Such volunteering can be understood as biographical repair, in which volunteering and

utilising competencies from past occupations helps to deal with what is termed as biographical disruption (Hart 2023).

Finally, in Western(ised) psy practice, some discourses work as mutually exclusive (Speed 2011: 127), and the mental health issue must be attributed either to nature (brain) or nurture (trauma). For Maryna, however, refugees' agency in deciding how to interpret their distress played an important role. Her 'triage' questionnaire included the question of whether a person knows what kind of help they would like to find. Apart from the tension between talk therapy and medicalised treatment, Maryna was aware of the mismatch between categories of mental health in the West and Belarus. Having several categories for any phenomenon might have made her more reflexive about knowledge validity in general, something resonant with how Bourdieu describes the habitus cleft (Bourdieu 2000: 64). Being socialised in more than one field and having several repertoires to play with may be inducing reflexivity, the ability to "step out of oneself" (Ingram & Abrahams 2015). So Maryna's approach was "whatever works", and she seemed comfortable choosing one discourse over another or combining them creatively. Moreover, her list of psy experts could include both official Lithuanian psychiatrists or psychologists and therapists from Belarus working informally. This approach, according to Shchyttsova, historically was a characteristic of the Belarusian psy field: psychiatrists were eclectically and adventurously acquiring new knowledge and technologies after the collapse of the Soviet Union (Shchyttsova 2014: 56ff). I would argue that this historical background, this initial habitus cleft, coupled with Maryna's own refugee background, enabled her to arrange psychological help in a way that would be more flexible, respectful and focused on refugees' well-being.

Avoiding Psychological Help

By the time of our interview with Maryna, about 25 people had approached her for help. The regular group meetings affected many more. These meetings were held in the refugee shelter every other week. During my fieldwork in 2022, I was given a tour. My guide showed me a big room and commented that a group meeting with the psychologist was taking place. He made an inviting gesture to come in. It was a transit space, with several entrances and no doors. Discussions that happened in this space could be heard from the outside. Being used to the idea that any psychological work is very intimate and confidential, I felt like an intruder. My companion, however, considered it a communal matter.

According to Kristina, the psychologist who facilitated these meetings, participation was voluntary. For her, it was volunteering driven by solidarity with Belarusians. She did not consider it real therapeutic work and wanted to avoid tapping into someone's trauma. The attendance might have initially been voluntary, but it changed over time. On numerous occasions, I witnessed people being encouraged or even pressured to attend by other volunteers. In 2024, the following message was posted in one of the community group chats:

> It is regrettable that [several nicknames tagged] avoided visiting the psychologist today. [Some people], at least, warned us, although they sprung it on us at the last minute [Russian: *postavili pered faktom*]. I have the impression that the rules are not for everyone.

In digital group chat culture, tagging someone can often be a request or demand for a response. The word "avoided" (Russian: *izbezhali*) has clear punitive undertones. Usually, classes or meetings are skipped, while problems or punishments are avoided. The words "sprung it last minute" also imply that people should have asked for permission to skip the group meeting in advance, which, to my knowledge, was not a formal rule before. This message shifted the positioning of the meetings from voluntary to mandatory. Some people described them as useful, some refused to participate openly, but the majority used different tactics to avoid both the meeting and the confrontation. While some tried to argue that they already have personal therapy, others sneaked out of the building quietly. From my interview with Kristina, I did not get the impression that she would consider it ethical, and she seemed unaware of such dynamics. However, I know that such insistence on therapeutic work is not unique to my field, and some other shelters and support organisations have similar practices.

One woman told me she was convinced that through these meetings, mentors and volunteers receive psychological assessments on refugees to identify possible risks. Later, I was able to ask one of the mentors how he made sense of it when psychological work is expected to be voluntary, and whether he thought it was ethical. He replied: "Of course [it is ethical]! Otherwise, how would you know if they are troubled?!" He then explained that, after one case of a suicide attempt in the community, mentors were scared and decided to learn more about recognising potential PTSD signs. This entanglement of care and surveillance is not new; the history of psy knowledge development is closely connected to governing large groups of people, and to explaining the exercise of power as ethical (Rose 1999: 5–6, 92). Even in the Western context, Härnbro et al. show how in social workers'

everyday interactions with their "clients", the threat of state violence is ever-present behind the call for self-motivation for improvement (2021). The fact that individual therapy was not considered equivalent to group meetings highlights its focus on management and discipline in the shelter. The incomplete agency of the shelter residents, their woundedness and the potentiality of distress were used to prioritise surveillance over freedom to engage (or not) with psychological help.

I did not attend the group meetings due to ethical issues, so I will discuss their content based on my interviews with attendees and Kristina. Most people described what happens during the meetings as "exercises". Some of them were related to problem-solving and conflict resolution. Based on an imaginary conflict situation, the group would discuss possible resolutions and how to hear the other person's perspective. When I asked Kristina whether people ever bring up situations of discrimination, she said it would mostly come up in individual conversations:

> But again, we are trying to look at the situation from the other person's perspective, why they behave the way they behave...

Illouz argues that the potential for conflict increases the relevance of therapeutic modes of communication; conflict stems from ambiguity and misunderstanding, and clarification of motives becomes a solution (Illouz 1997: 49, 56). Not only does trauma make refugees "incomplete", their unawareness of local ways to live and communicate is also often seen as requiring psy work. Therefore, therapy groups become a technology to make refugees "emotionally and linguistically ready" to access social capital in a new country (Garland et al. 2002). This may be the logic behind Kristina's volunteering. However, I would like to connect this to Uehling's suggestion that responsibilisation within psy-infused educational programs for migrants works to displace responsibility and expectations that initially belonged to those in power (Uehling 2015: 1014). The volume of various kinds of volunteer (i.e. unpaid) labour involved in and surrounding this practice cannot be ignored.

The next example helps to explicate the meanings of this practice, shaped by the context of refugees' everyday lives. One of the exercises the participants often mentioned was the invitation to share the good things that happened to a person during the week. Kristina explained to me that people often tend to focus on the negative, so this was supposed to serve as a reminder to appreciate good things. Some interlocutors agreed that it was a useful reminder; others, however, saw it as useless or even harmful. Zosia, a young woman living in the shelter, told me during our first interview:

Well, imagine we are sitting together, all the people are in conflict with each other at the moment, and I don't think she [the psychologist] knows about it... And we have to share what good happened to us during the week, and I simply do not want to share anything in front of them... She comes with her own plan and strategy. Maybe I don't trust her too... Maybe I am wrong, but it all feels very superficial...There is a wall between us and the psychologist...

"Them" in Zosia's quotation referred to several major ongoing conflicts. One was related to several young women complaining about being sexually harassed by the men living in and visiting the shelter. The complaint was dismissed, and the women were blamed for "provoking" the men. I later witnessed Zosia being bullied by some of them, referring to information about her mental health. Similarly, the queer residents of the shelter also faced bullying and hate speech. This explains why sharing anything during these meetings would not feel safe or appropriate.

Moreover, the group aspect of group meetings had additional meanings. Living arrangements for refugees often combine overcrowding and a lack of protections, which magnify vulnerability (Martinez 2023: 12). Both refugee camps and private housing can do that, although in different ways. Here, co-living was creating a family-like, intimate knowing of each other, constantly fueling conflicts and tensions. Vital described his memory of living in the shelter:

Misunderstandings, you know, someone behaves [in a wrong way], someone is rude, someone snaps at you when asked a simple question, someone's socks are stinking, someone does not want to shower... this snoring, oh! It all annoys you so much...

Sharing fridge shelves, wardrobes and bathrooms with others, people craved privacy. An averted gaze, as I learned, was one of the ways to minimise interaction when you cannot be alone. The person who was enthusiastically chatting to me the day before could barely say hi the next day. I soon realised it was a sign that the person wants to be alone. At the same time, one of the mentors I interviewed described to me her approach to evaluating the level of distress in people:

A person can close off, avoid contact or sit somewhere in the corner... And you need to monitor a little bit of what is happening to them...

Ironically, after just one week of living in the shelter, I felt the strong need to avoid contact and sit quietly in a corner. What the mentor

described as a sign of disturbing behaviour seemed like an adequate response to being "a little bit monitored" all the time. It is also important that such understanding of "disturbing behaviour" relies on the neurotypical understanding of the "norm" as the only possible way to co-exist in a social space.

Furthermore, it is also impossible to ignore that this co-living situation echoes the particular forms of violence experienced previously. Overcrowding prison cells is a distinct and very common torture practice in the Belarusian penitentiary system. Some refugees faced further violence during the border-crossing, becoming painfully aware that (not) having privacy or being counted as an individual was directly related to the "right to have rights", initially Arendt's idea, later applied to the context of migration (Khosravi 2010: 121).

Finally, the loss of social status associated with imprisonment and/or forced treatment had clear class dimensions. Imposed group meetings were the opposite of individual therapy that middle-class consumers could engage in voluntarily; they coincided with precarious, illegal work for many, while waiting for a permit to work officially. One evening, Lora, another woman living in the shelter, returned from work looking frustrated. She told me she earned 7 euros for 8 hours of hard work and was told that 25 percent would be deducted "for accounting expenses", a euphemism for additional profit made by people who used her work without paying taxes. It is unlikely that positive thinking or understanding their perspective would help the mental state of a person facing such exploitation and powerlessness.

Knowing all this, the group exercises in positive thinking and conflict resolution did not look innocent or appropriate. I would argue that conflict and focusing on the negative could be an effective self-care tactic in this case. Later on, Lora told me how she confronted another employer who had been withholding several months of her salary (one more common practice, unfortunately). She learned about her rights and threatened to file an official complaint, which helped, and the salary owed was paid in full. This, according to Lora, felt incredibly empowering and improved her mental state significantly.

While Kristina and some of the volunteers worked under the assumption that psychological help is needed by all refugees and that any help is better than none, the refugees disagreed. Lena, a woman in her forties, added her criticism of the group meetings:

I know a thing or two about psychology, and this is not what we need... We would need individual work, of course, but I understand there is no way... Yesterday during the group, a woman shared a story about her brutal arrest, and I understand she needed to spell it out, but I looked

at another woman, and I saw she was all messed up after hearing it... It is not the way to do it...

Resistance to psychological work is often articulated in public discourse as a sign of older age and/or lack of education. It corresponds to the dynamics captured, for example, in Kovtiak's analysis of opinions on depression and antidepressants in Minsk (Kovtiak 2020). However, when Lena says, "I know a thing or two about psychology", she highlights that her criticism has a different origin and comes from a place of expertise. Lisle shows the importance of self-care above the bare minimum when migrants choose from the donated things in a warehouse (Lisle 2022: 33–34). I would argue that the same logic can be extended to not passively accepting "donated" psy work. Neither Zosia nor Lena were eager to accept the role of passive recipients of any psychological help offered to them. They positioned themselves as competent to evaluate which kind of intervention could be useful in their situation.

Finally, there is a need to address a tendency to attribute all bad encounters with a psy to the lack of professionalism of a particular psy expert. Some of my interlocutors saw those group meetings as ineffective and blamed Kristina for it. However, I accidentally came across some people who praised Kristina for helping them to deal with serious conditions. They worked individually, and, according to my interlocutors, her professionalism and ability to help in a crisis were truly impressive. This feedback on Kristina's individual work can be illustrative of how the social context of any psy intervention shapes its meaning and results. Such circumstances cannot be bracketed.

Discussion

Although most of my study participants realised the negative impact of the extreme experiences on their lives, they did not passively accept the discourses of trauma or "woundedness" imposed on them. Seeking, avoiding and resisting psychological help became an important part of their experiences after an abrupt migration. Belarusian refugees were aware of the psy domain being actively political, with psy experts either participating in injustice or resisting it. Their seeking psy experts that would be queer friendly, feminist or "familiar with the Belarusian context" demonstrates that psychological help was not understood as neutral.

I show how talking about extreme experiences generated tension between survivors' need for collective attention and others' insistence

on designating psy as an appropriate space for dealing with such narratives. This contributes to an understanding of the disguised effects that psychologisation of violence can have on communities (Patel 2011). The desire to talk about violence to others would be interpreted as a sign of trauma, serving as one more argument for their "incomplete agency", which required psychological work. I argue that the "repression stand-up" genre developed by refugees was one of the strategies to resist such psychologisation and maintain communal spaces as possible arenas for their stories.

My study shows how the logic of "woundedness" was flexibly used to construct the incomplete agency of Belarusian refugees. The shelter residents were framed as both 'wounded' by their experiences, but also 'incomplete' because of being foreign to Lithuanian society. They needed new competencies and vocabularies to do the work of 'integrating'. As volunteers with refugee backgrounds took "custody" of the people after border-crossing, they related to group meetings as a management technology. The conflict resolution paradigm was guiding people to understand the feelings and motivations behind discriminatory practices, instead of learning to resist them. Meanwhile, the conflicts my study participants faced were based on asymmetries of power, such as sexualised harassment of women, bullying of queer people, or illegal labour exploitation. Positive thinking exercises here were working in tandem with material practices of exploitation.

Encounters with psy can be very unpleasant or even harmful, such as the question about going to a warzone from a Lithuanian psychiatrist that shocked Darja, or mandatory group meetings. Those encounters likely added to the already extensive list of things refugees had to endure. The case of group meetings was particularly important in several aspects. The co-living circumstances and their power dynamics, the previous experiences of imprisonment and resistance to accepting the identity attached to forced treatment constitute critical elements to understand this practice as a continuation of violence. Unintentionally, Kristina was overlooking the context of participants' everyday lives, their needs and power relations in the shelter, creating a high risk of re-traumatisation. It illustrates how important it is to think not only about the individual qualifications of the psychologist but also about the situatedness of any psy practice. The positionality of the psy experts, the material conditions and political realities surrounding and shaping "psychological help" should always be critically examined. Furthermore, the logic of responsibilisation is prominent not only in assigning the responsibility for working on trauma or for integrating to refugees. It can also be observed in how bad experiences with psy become explained by an individual's lack of competence,

not the systems that informed, validated and enabled such practice. As we can see from Kristina's example, her practice was perceived very differently by group meeting participants versus people who worked with her individually.

Frazer-Carroll envisions that a radical political approach to mental health would think of plurality as a guiding principle. For her, the liberated future of mental health would be nuanced, contradictory, plural and individualised. People would be allowed to use different, sometimes conflicting, frameworks to describe their experiences and seek help, and "There should be no paradigm or language that everyone has to adopt, no blanket response that can be applied to everyone" (2023). I would argue that the experiences of Belarusian refugees in Lithuania who engage with diverse, contradictory and hybrid projects of psychological help can offer crucial insights into opportunities and risks accompanying such plurality. Community-organised care is often discussed as an alternative to coercive interventions and institutionalisation (for example, Torrents & Björkdahl 2024). In the case of group meetings, however, the core principles of trauma-informed care, such as trust, safety and shared decision-making (Sweeney & Taggart 2018) were compromised. In contrast, Maryna's practice, organised on the outskirts of the official healthcare system, although operated on an individual level, was more focused on community and reciprocal care.

The ethnography of psychological help enables a holistic view of how any project of mental health for refugees should be approached with attention to social setting, power dynamics and existing inequalities. Understanding this would enable activists, practitioners and community members to organise support resources for those who need it and avoid unintentional harm or unethical practices. It would also enable seeing the moments when the best possible help is not psychological at all.

Notes

All study participants' names were changed. Some other recognisable details were omitted or fictionalised to protect their anonymity.

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