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Large Law Firms Respond to Russia's Invasion of Ukraine

By: Kira Dennis



As these words are being strung together, the civilian death toll continues to rise in Ukraine.[1] As of March 14th, over 600 people have died and over 1,100 civilians have been wounded.[2] In addition to those injured, over 2.8 million people have fled their homes in Ukraine, seeking refuge in Poland, Germany, Romania, Moldova, and Lithuania, to name a few.[3] As Russia continues to attack Ukraine and war surges, the world is responding in a number of significant ways — donations, spreading awareness across social media platforms, cross-border acceptance of refugees, pro bono legal assistance, protests against Russian war tactics. The international community has relentlessly used its voice, social media platforms, financial resources, and even opened their homes to provide safe harbor for refugees and denounce Russia's deadly attacks on Ukraine. More specifically, the international legal community has taken a stand against Russian attacks in two distinct ways. First, many major law firms have shut down operations in Russia, closing offices and dropping Russian clients to comply with sanctions that have been imposed. Second, law firms and lawyers in their individual capacities have been providing pro bono legal services to Ukrainians to offset some of the deleterious effects of the war.

As Russia continues to attack Ukrainian cities, killing and injuring civilians while destroying Ukrainian infrastructure, big law firms have taken a stand against Putin's violent attacks by slowing down or closing office operations in Russia. Large American law firms, joined by prestigious law firms in the United Kingdom, have used these office closures as one of the primary means of voicing their opposition to Putin's attacks on Ukraine. Large firms, including Latham Watkins, Cleary

Gottlieb Steen & Hamilton, Allen & Overy, Clifford Chance, Akin Gump, among others, have proffered statements surrounding the closure of their Moscow offices. One firm, invoking the moral issues presented by the Russian invasion, announced that they “are closing [their] Moscow operations out of a sense of solidarity with the Ukrainian people . . . This decision is simply the right thing to do, and our clients understand and respect that.”[4] A spokesperson for Allen & Overy spoke more critically of the Russian invasion, noting “the [decision to close Russian offices] has been made necessary by the illegal and senseless invasion of Ukraine and the ensuing humanitarian crisis.”[5]

In addition to law firm closures, firms have been dedicating their pro bono resources to providing aid and legal assistance to Ukrainian refugees who have fled their homes. Paul, Weiss, a firm with a longstanding, historical commitment to doing the most topical and relevant pro bono work, has mobilized its attorneys and “pro bono resources to work with relief organizations and legal services providers to help those desperately in need.”[6] Some firms have made use of their Poland offices to assist refugees, while other law firms have personally donated and matched employee donations to Ukrainian refugee organizations.[7] In DLA Piper’s case, the firm has taken over a grassroots advice service that was started for Ukrainians seeking refuge in the United Kingdom.[8] The service, Ukraine Advice Project UK, was initially run by six lawyer-friends, but as the organization grew in scale, galvanizing over 430 volunteer attorneys, it required the resources and expertise of a larger, more established enterprise.[9] DLA Piper has specific expertise in providing refugee assistance in times of crisis after running a similar program for Afghan refugees and is therefore well-placed to take over this initiative.[10]

While there has been significant institutional support and assistance from big law firms, what has perhaps been the most noteworthy is the initiative taken by more junior associates. More specifically, Biglawboiz, a famous Instagram handle that posts news, update, and memes related to the “Biglaw” world, put out a call on Instagram to encourage lawyers to join the Ukraine Legal Aid Attorney Network, which uses AI to match up lawyers and Ukrainian refugees who are seeking asylum or are in need of support navigating the immigration system.[11] The handle called on Biglaw associates to encourage their firm’s leadership to get involved and provide assistance at the firm level, while also aggregating resources for Ukrainian refugees on what entry requirements there are for each jurisdiction refugees will be entering. With 125,000 engaged followers, Biglawboiz has not only amplified the ways in which attorneys can use their unique skills and position as lawyers to assist Ukrainians in the midst of this humanitarian crisis, but has strategically made use of an Instagram handle, that is usually comprised of legal-oriented memes, to effectively galvanize legal support for the Ukraine Legal Aid Attorney Network.[12] Law 360 marveled at the reach and power of social media and Biglawboiz’s campaign, specifically noting that the Ukraine Legal Aid Attorney Network database came together “almost entirely because of social media.”[13] Because of Biglawboiz’s efforts, big law firms such as Willkie Farr & Gallagher have donated resources to the network and agreed to spread awareness to get other big firms involved, highlighting the impact that social media has had on spreading awareness and providing support throughout this crisis.[14]

In the midst of the heartbreaking events taking place in Ukraine, it has been particularly inspiring and empowering to see the role that large law firms, but especially young lawyers, have played in providing legal support to those most in need. As large law firms close Russian offices, sever ties with Russian clients, and dedicate pro bono resources to Ukrainian refugees, we are witnesses the ways in which lawyers are uniquely positioned to utilize their bespoke skill sets, firm resources, and professional network to effectuate change amid this humanitarian crisis.

Kira Dennis is a Staff Editor at CICLR.

[1] Sharon Braithwaite, *At Least 636 Civilians Have Been Killed in Ukraine Since Russian Invasion Began*, CNN (Mar. 14, 2022, 11:33 AM), https://www.cnn.com/europe/live-news/ukraine-russia-putin-news-03-14-22/h_6e0bb41933f5632afa413e82e3f74831 [<https://perma.cc/R78L-URLT>].

[2] *Id.*

[3] *Id.*

[4] Rose Walker, *Simply the Right Thing to Do': Clifford Chance, Allen & Overy, HSF and Other Law Firms to Close in Moscow*, Law.Com (Mar. 10, 2022), <https://perma.cc/EAZ9-5KHR>,

[5] *Id.*

[6] Joe Patrice, *Paul Weiss Mobilizing Pro Bono Resources For Ukrainian Refugees*, Above the Law (Feb 28, 2022, 10:05 AM), <https://abovethelaw.com/2022/02/paul-weiss-mobilizing-pro-bono-resources-for-ukrainian-refugees/> [<https://perma.cc/F5J3-2WE9>].

[7] Rachel Rippetoe, *How Law Firms Are Supporting Ukraine*, Law 360 (Mar. 2, 2022, 3:37 PM),

<https://www.law360.com/articles/1469803/how-law-firms-are-supporting-ukraine> [<https://perma.cc/DT4H-GAMF>].

[8] Lucy Saddleton, *DLA Piper Steps in to Run Pro Bono Support Website for Ukrainian Refugees in the UK*, Law 360 (Mar. 15, 2022), <https://www.thelawyermag.com/au/news/general/dla-piper-steps-in-to-run-pro-bono-support-website-for-ukrainian-refugees-in-the-uk/398598> [<https://perma.cc/Z7DF-Y3GJ>].

[9] *Id.*

[10] *Id.*

[11] Biglawboiz (@biglawboiz), Instagram (Feb. 27, 2022), <https://www.instagram.com/biglawboiz/?hl=en>.

[12] *Id.*

[13] Rachel Rippetoe, *supra* note 7.

[14] Rachel Rippetoe, *Ukraine Refugee Pro Bono Database Fueled By Social Media*, Law 360 (Mar. 3, 2022), <https://www.law360.com/pulse/articles/1470381/ukraine-refugee-pro-bono-database-fueled-by-social-media> [<https://perma.cc/B76Q-NADL>].