Ukrainian Refugees in Poland: Current Situation and What to Expect

The 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine has forced millions to flee from the war zone. By March 9th, over 2.3 million people have found refuge outside of Ukraine with many of them fleeing to Poland, or via Poland to other countries. This brief addresses Ukrainian refuge in Poland. It provides an overview of the current situation, discusses the ongoing solutions and potential future challenges, and stresses the key areas for urgent policy intervention. It is based on a presentation held at the FREE Network webinar *Fleeing the war zone: Will open hearts be enough?*, which took place on March 14, 2022. The full webinar can be seen [here](#).
The latest data (from March 15, 2022) shows that since February 24, 1.8 million refugees have already crossed the Polish-Ukrainian border. This number represents over 60 percent of Ukrainians who have fled the country thus far. Among this group that relocated to Poland, approximately 97 percent were people with Ukrainian citizenship. Most of the foreign nationals living in Ukraine before the war, and who came to Poland after its outbreak, have already returned to their countries of origin.

**Figure 1. Influx of refugees from Ukraine to Poland since February 24, 2022.**

Source: The vertical axis shows number of refugees per million. Data from Polish Border Guard

Our estimates show that there are currently about 1.1 million Ukrainian war refugees in Poland. Many stay in large cities such as Warsaw, Kraków or Wrocław. The rest of those who crossed the Polish border transited to other EU Member States or countries outside of Europe, such as Canada or the USA, reuniting with their families and friends.

In the first days after the outbreak of the war, refugee assistance in Poland was mostly provided by Polish families and households, as well as owners of guesthouses and hotels who made them available for the purpose of providing accommodation.

A similar situation took place at the border and at railway and bus stations where refugees were arriving, with a majority of support coming from volunteering citizens. This assistance largely consisted of the provision of basic necessities such as food, hygiene products, and medical or psychological first aid. The level of mobilization among non-governmental organizations, grass-roots initiatives, private citizens, and civil society in general is extremely commendable and should be accredited with providing the safe welcome refugees received upon arrival. For example, during the first days, Polish families sheltered several hundred thousand refugees, often in their own houses or apartments. There are currently two main Ukrainian social groups arriving in Poland: women with children and older persons over the age of 60. This is a result of Ukraine’s internal regulations, which prohibit men aged between 18 and 60 from leaving the country.

Among those who have managed to escape the war, there is a large group of people requiring very specialized support, e.g. children suffering from oncological diseases, and elderly with a high degree of disability. So far, these groups have been provided with the necessary support, but if these needs become more frequent, a review of the capacity of the Polish healthcare system and the system of support for the disabled will be needed.

In the first days after the war broke out, the situation at the border was very difficult. The waiting time for crossing reached up to 70 hours. However, this was related to problems with the information system and the limited number of border guards on the Ukrainian side. Currently, crossing the border is quick and seamless. Every day the Polish Border Police register 80 to 100 thousand individuals, a vast majority of them crossing into Poland. This is a many-fold increase compared to pre-war migration flows, which fluctuated around 12-15 thousand people per day. At the same time, over 80,000 people, mainly men, have crossed the Polish border to Ukraine in the last 20 days with the goal of joining the army or territorial defense.

For a long time, the Polish government held the position that there would be no need to build refugee centers. However, the government recently reversed this decision and decided to open a dozen centers, located in market and sports halls. Currently, over 100,000 people are staying in these types of temporary accommodation facilities. However, these centers are not
sufficiently adapted for stays longer than a few days. It is necessary to prepare housing infrastructure (temporary accommodation centers equipped with habitable containers) in which refugees can stay for two or three months, until they find another place to live.

So far, Poland has essentially dealt with two of three possible migratory waves. In the first, people with family members or friends living in Poland or in other EU Member States arrived. Before the war, there were already approximately 800 thousand Ukrainians working or studying in Poland. In the second wave, after the bombing of civilian facilities in large cities, people without family or friends living in Poland started arriving. They require full assistance. A third wave is possible, and this one may be much larger than the previous two. It may occur if the situation at the front worsens and the repressions by Russian troops become harsher. Such reports are already coming from eastern Ukraine. If the situation worsens, Poland could even face a couple of additional million people that would leave Ukraine. Under these circumstances, we should assume that the third wave would include young men in addition to women, children, and the elderly. This scenario is currently very unlikely, but cannot be completely ruled out.

Since the beginning of March, Poland has seen an increase in the activity of both local representatives of the government administration and the central government. Information has been gathered about vacancies in smaller cities and local communities where refugees could be accommodated. This is because large cities are on the verge of reaching their capacity for the number of refugees they are able to manage. In addition, a special law entered into force March 13, which provides for a catalog of support tools for refugees. The main issues are:

1. The possibility of obtaining an individual identification number, which will enable the opening of a bank account and grant access to the labor market, education, and social benefits. It will be possible to apply for the ID number from March 16. Certainly, large queues can be expected in the first days, as the procedure is complicated and rather bureaucratic. The government decided to require all the necessary information at the start of the application process, which could be complicated for some applicants and lead to additional delays. Based on recent numbers, up to 1 million Ukrainians may apply for an individual identification number in the near future.

2. Reimbursement of the costs of hosting refugees from Ukraine in Polish family homes and in private hotels. The government has agreed to cover the value of around 8 euros per day for each person. However, receiving this refund requires submitting a special application to the local administration offices, which may again cause various kinds of perturbations, and even resignation from obtaining such support.

3. Ukrainian children can be enrolled in Polish schools. It will also be possible to open school branches in temporary accommodation centers, as well as parallel Ukrainian classes inside Polish schools. At present, however, the preferred model is the inclusion of Ukrainian children in Polish classrooms. Currently, no major problems have been reported with this process, but only around 10% of Ukrainian children have entered Polish schools so far. Numerous challenges connected with this integration process are expected. Part of the solution could be distance learning or hybrid learning. The priority is to involve children in education as fast as possible so that they do not lose time while living in Poland from an educational development point of view.

4. A simplified system of qualifications recognition has been implemented for nurses and doctors. Unfortunately, contrary to the advice of experts, the act does not provide guidelines for a simplified qualification recognition of teachers, educators or psychologists from Ukraine. In his media
statements, the Minister of Education and Science did not rule out introducing a simplified procedure in the near future. Such recognition could, to some extent, solve the problem of understaffing in Polish schools.

5. All adults from Ukraine who arrived after February 24 have open access to the labor market.

Until early March, the Polish government did not apply for support from other EU member states. Now, this position has changed. Over the first weekend of March alone, more than 20 trains were organized that made it possible for refugees interested in moving from Poland to countries such as Germany or other destinations within the EU. Additional relocation measures are expected in the near future. However, in contrast to the European migrant crisis in 2015, the relocation scheme of Ukrainian refugees is carried out on a voluntary, rather than a compulsory basis.

It is very difficult to predict what will happen in the next days or weeks. While it should be emphasized that Poland is managing the migration challenge well, this is not least due to the exceptional commitment of civil society. Certainly, in the coming months, Poland will not be able to cope with the integration of more than 800,000 people into the labor market and education system. Of course, it is possible to provide ad-hoc support, but that is completely different than integrating refugees into Polish society. Ukrainians are still treated as guests who are expected to return to their homes when possible. Such an assumption should not be changed until May when the situation in Ukraine will be more predictable. We must also be aware that we are dealing with dispersed families who will want to reunite as soon as possible. It is not known, however, whether this will take place in Poland or in Ukraine. It depends on how the situation develops in the weeks and months to come.

In the coming weeks, the key issue will be the relocation of Ukrainian refugees from large to smaller cities within not only Poland but also the European Union. It is absolutely necessary to coordinate activities both at the level of the Polish government and the European Commission. As far as the Polish government is concerned, a task force should be established to maintain constant contact with the European Commission and the EU Member States regarding the ability to relocate refugees from Poland to other countries. This team should be composed mainly of civil servants from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of the Interior. It is also necessary to appoint a team coordinating the actions of voivodes, who are responsible for crisis management in accordance with Polish law. It is also critical to ensure the flow of information between local administrations and the government, as well as to coordinate the activities of non-governmental organizations, whose activity is key in dealing with the challenges related to the migration crisis. In the next stages, it will be necessary to adopt a systemic approach to the inclusion of Ukrainian children in the education system (Polish and Ukrainian, but functioning in Poland - remote learning), and adult refugees to the labor market.

In the end, I would like to recall my opinion, which is now popular in the media and among representatives of the central government, local governments and non-governmental organizations: "Helping refugees and managing migration crises is a marathon, not a sprint." We must keep this in mind.

The webinar “Fleeing the war zone: Will open hearts be enough?”, was hosted by the FREE Network together with the Stockholm Institute of Transition Economics (SITE) and can be seen here.
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