



Exodus from Ukraine: The New Refugee Challenge for the European Union

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The Russian invasion of Ukraine has caused a massive humanitarian crisis, both in that country and as the fastest exodus of refugees in Europe since World War II. The scale and dynamic of this migration pose a great challenge primarily to the neighbouring countries of Ukraine, which have little experience in accepting refugees and are not systemically prepared for it. To meet this challenge, they need both ad hoc and long-term support from the EU.

Mass Refugee Crisis. Russia's 24 February invasion of Ukraine forced people to flee their houses in search of a safe haven. Besides the internally displaced people, so far, more than 3 million people have fled Ukraine.

Most of these refugees have come to Poland (more than 1.8 million as of 16 March). Most of the rest, but far fewer, have crossed the borders of other EU Member States neighbouring Ukraine: Hungary (272,000), Slovakia (213,000), Romania (467,000). Although data are incomplete on how many of them have travelled onwards to other Member States, just two weeks after the beginning of the invasion, increased migration was noted by Germany and other countries: Germany has recorded about 120,000 people, Czechia around 100,000, Bulgaria more than 40,000, and Italy about 17,000. Moldova has turned out to be a transit state that received more than 344,000 refugees from Ukraine between 24 February and 15 March, with most of them—more than 200,000—later continuing their journey to the EU.

As the war continues, civilian facilities (residential buildings, schools, hospitals) are increasingly the target of Russian shelling and bombing, killing more and more civilians. Shelling and other attacks on humanitarian corridors hampers the safe evacuation of civilians. It is estimated that, depending on how the conflict develops and the scale of destruction, the number of refugees from Ukraine to the EU may soon reach 4 million and possibly as many as 10 million people. Additionally, the sharp increase in repression in

Russia and Belarus of opponents of the invasion and the effects of the sanctions on their economies may increase migration to the EU from these countries.

Growing Needs of the Frontline States. Since the start of the Russian aggression, Ukraine's EU neighbours opened their borders wide to refugees, creating special reception points offering the necessary legal and logistical information in Ukrainian. Non-governmental organisations and local governments in neighbouring countries have played a key role in providing humanitarian aid in the first days after the invasion. The mobilisation of host countries' societies turned out to be unprecedented. Poles, Romanians, Hungarians, and Slovaks, as well as representatives of the Ukrainian minority living in these countries, organised ad hoc support to the newcomers.

In Poland, which so far has accepted the most refugees, on 12 March adopted a law allowing Ukrainians who crossed the Ukrainian-Polish border since the beginning of the invasion, legal access to the labour market, medical care, and family and child benefits for up to 18 months. Although the labour market in Poland, like in other EU countries neighbouring Ukraine, is in good condition—according to Eurostat data, in December 2021 the unemployment rate in Poland was only 2.9%, in Hungary, 3.7%, in Romania, 5.4%, and in Slovakia, 6.4%—migration on such a large scale will be difficult for local economies to absorb. The more so as preliminary data indicate that the structure of this migration—mainly women with little or no related

experience—does not match the market needs of Central and Eastern European countries where industrial workers, construction workers, traders, and IT workers are most often sought after. This will make it difficult for these refugees to become independent, requiring large expenditure on social policies in the host countries. The mismatch between the qualifications of the refugees and the needs of the national labour markets, as well as the high share of children and young people among the refugees, require significant funding for education systems.

EU Support. In response to the humanitarian crisis, the EU has offered financial support to both Ukraine and its neighbours under migration pressure. European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen announced that €500 million from the EU budget would be allocated for this purpose. Of this amount, €90 million has already been spent on the most urgent humanitarian aid for Ukraine (€85 million) and Moldova (€5 million). In addition, the European Commission (EC) has proposed using the CARE instrument, which enables the Member States and regions to use cohesion funds remaining from the 2014–2020 budget to support people fleeing the Russian invasion of Ukraine (in total, €420 million). The use of a new pool of funds for 2021–2027 for the purposes of building up the reception capacity of the Member States remains an open question. The EC also plans to strengthen European solidarity by proposing that Member States make voluntary contributions to the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund for 2021–2027.

Apart from financial support for the countries hosting the largest number of refugees, the EU countries decided to legalise the stay of refugees on the territory of the entire Community. Based on the EC's request, earlier this month the Justice and Home Affairs Council adopted a decision to grant temporary protection in the EU to those fleeing the Russian invasion under the 2001 directive. Thanks to this decision, both Ukrainian citizens and persons permanently residing in that country prior to the invasion, as well as their family members displaced as a result of the conflict, gained the right to temporary residence and protection throughout the European Union for one year (with the possibility of extension up to three years). This status includes the right to access housing, healthcare, work, education, and social benefits. The freedom of movement combined with the legalisation of stay and protection throughout the EU is to enable the bottom-up relocation of refugees, thus relieving the frontline states.

Some Member States also help frontline countries on a bilateral basis. For example, the Czech police and army

support Slovakia in accepting refugees. Most Member States have also allowed refugees access to certain public transport for free. In cooperation with frontline states, EU countries are increasing the number of rail, bus, and air connections, creating a system that Poland's minister of internal affairs called a "relay race", enabling refugees to reach destinations more easily in various parts of Europe through transit countries.

Conclusions and Recommendations. For Ukraine's neighbouring countries with little experience in managing migration, the current refugee crisis may be a turning point in the development of national migration policies. The growing scale of the needs and the nature of the challenges related to migration require intensified cooperation between the local and central authorities in order to prevent a humanitarian catastrophe and the development of a long-term refugee integration strategy. The more so as it is difficult to predict how long the war will last and—because of the geographical, linguistic proximity, and existing Ukrainian minorities—the reality that it is in the EU countries directly bordering Ukraine, especially Poland, where most of the refugees will remain.

In response to the challenges of the influx of refugees, effort by the entire EU is essential. The financial aid declared by the European Commission from the EU budget requires quick and efficient distribution in countries hosting refugees. In addition to the funds offered so far, it also will be necessary to release further tranches of aid from the EU budget for 2021–2027. Bearing in mind the need to relieve frontline reception systems and accelerate bottom-up relocation across the EU, it is worthwhile for other Member States to create special programmes aimed at offering refugees not only logistical support in relocating but also help in learning the local language, finding employment, or learning opportunities within their education systems. Coordination support from EU institutions in organising the voluntary relocation of refugees within the Community may prove essential.

The ongoing crisis is an impulse to revive the discussion on comprehensive reform of the EU's migration and asylum policy. It requires the development of effective mechanisms to respond to situations of a sudden increase in the number of refugees, allowing for shared responsibility between countries for the costs of their admission to the territory of the EU. The current situation shows that all Member States are and will be affected by migration. This may facilitate the development of a pan-European consensus on solidarity mechanisms.