



Resettlement of Ukrainian war Refugees to Poland During Russian Invasion on Ukraine

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Abstract

The resettlement of Ukrainian war refugees to Poland during the Russian invasion of Ukraine represents a significant humanitarian and geopolitical response to a severe crisis. Beginning in late February 2022, the Russian military aggression led to massive displacement, with millions of Ukrainians fleeing their homes in search of safety. Poland, sharing a long border with Ukraine, emerged as a primary destination for these refugees due to its proximity and historical ties with Ukraine. Poland's response was swift and multifaceted, involving immediate humanitarian aid and long-term integration strategies. The Polish government, alongside local municipalities, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and volunteers, mobilized an extensive support system to address the urgent needs of incoming refugees. This included the provision of temporary shelters, medical care, and essential supplies. Moreover, Poland facilitated the establishment of emergency housing and assistance centers, with a focus on accommodating large numbers of people rapidly. One of the key aspects of this resettlement effort was the legal framework established to manage the influx of refugees. Poland, in coordination with the European Union (EU), implemented temporary protection directives that granted Ukrainian refugees legal status, access to employment, and social services. This legal protection was crucial for stabilizing the situation and providing a degree of security for the displaced individuals. The integration of Ukrainian refugees into Polish society posed its own set of challenges. Efforts were made to address language barriers, provide educational opportunities for children, and offer job training programs. Social cohesion initiatives were also important, aimed at fostering positive interactions between local communities and newcomers. Despite these efforts, there were hurdles related to housing shortages, employment competition, and cultural differences that needed ongoing attention. The resettlement process also highlighted the importance of international cooperation. The EU played a pivotal role in coordinating aid and support mechanisms, and there was significant involvement from various international agencies and donor organizations. This collaborative approach helped to share the burden and provided a more comprehensive response to the crisis.

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Introduction

In February 2022, Poland almost overnight became a country where - according to the PESEL register - more than 1.4 million people fleeing war were given refuge. The last decade has been a time of accelerated transformation for Poland from a historically emigration country to an immigration country. Russia's aggression against Ukraine in February 2022 and the full-scale war

across the country's eastern border caused a massive influx of war refugees to Poland - mostly women and children.

In response to these events, the majority of the Polish public (77%) became involved in helping refugees from Ukraine. This assistance took various forms - from financial and material support, through various volunteer activities, to providing their own homes and apartments to those left homeless.

The influx of a similar number of people, the beginning of the war in the neighboring country and the ongoing unrest on the border with Belarus posed a challenge to the Polish state not only of a humanitarian nature, but also of a socio-economic dimension. Thanks to the efficient cooperation of the government, NGOs and the people of Poland, however, the refugees were able to obtain shelter and safety fairly quickly. The prolonged armed conflict caused their plans to stay in Poland to lengthen, which translated into the need to find livelihoods and become active in the labor market. Data from public records and academic research paint a picture of surprisingly high labor force participation among refugees. Against the background of OECD countries, it is Poland where the scale of employment of war refugees is the highest, despite the fact that it was not earnings plans that motivated refugees to come to the country, but the remoteness of themselves and loved ones from the threat to their lives.

Statistics

According to UNHCR data, the total number of Ukrainian refugees in Poland amounted to 958,935 (as of 18/10/2023). Refugees submitted 1,639,725 applications for various forms of temporary protection to the relevant institutions in Poland. Noteworthy is the specific demographic profile of refugees from Ukraine to Poland: nearly 90% are women and children, with the National Bank of Poland study showing that the largest age group is 27-44 years old (48%), followed by those aged 45-59 (24%) and those under 26 (18%). The elderly, who are over 60 years old, account for 9% of refugees.

Poland's refugee employment rate is the highest among OECD countries at 65%, which was likely significantly influenced by the significant number of Ukrainians working in the country before the Russian invasion began in 2022. According to the Social Insurance Institution, as of March 2022, 667,000 Ukrainian citizens were enrolled in the pension and disability insurance system. The large number of working immigrants before the war could help incoming refugees find employment, housing, and provide organizational assistance to facilitate their new situation. Thus, the existing Ukrainian social network in Poland to some extent neutralized the negative effects of forced migration at the first stage of the refugees' stay in Poland.

An analysis of OECD data shows that refugees find employment as manual laborers, as well as in tourism and hospitality, manufacturing, logistics, IT and construction. This means that a mismatch of skills with the market and under-qualified work is common. The 2022 survey found that more than 50% of refugees found employment doing simple unskilled jobs. However, NBP data shows that there was a significant increase in wages among refugees between 2022 and 2023. While in November 2022 the largest number of respondents in this group of workers (nearly 40%) indicated monthly earnings of PLN 2-3 thousand, in a subsequent survey conducted in the summer of 2023, when asked about

earnings, the most common answer (nearly 30% of refugees) was to indicate an income range between PLN 3,000 and PLN 4,000 net. The number of refugees earning less than PLN 3,000 net decreased by more than 10 percentage points. There are more and more refugees earning above PLN 4,000 and above PLN 5,000 net. The best earners are refugees working in IT and transportation.

A key element in the process of finding a job, especially in the context of efforts to better match skills and qualifications, was knowledge of the Polish language. The employment rate for refugees who knew Polish was 82%, while the rate for those who did not know the language was as much as 32 percentage points lower, reaching a ceiling of only 50%. Among those declaring that they "somewhat" understood the language, the employment rate rose to 64%. The percentage of refugees declaring their intention to stay in Poland is significantly lower than that of pre-2022 migrants, with 21% of Ukrainian refugees and nearly half (48%) of pre-war migrants declaring their intention to stay permanently. Longer than a year, 18% of refugees and 13% of pre-war migrants want to stay in Poland. However, as many as 52% of refugees signal difficulties in declaring a return date, indicating high uncertainty about the future. A comparison with data from the previous NBP survey shows that the percentage of pre-war migrants interested in staying in Poland permanently has decreased by 7 percentage points. In a survey conducted by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) in selected provinces in April-June 2023, when asked about the reasons for return, most respondents indicate homesickness (42%); the next reason relates to the labor market and is a job in the primary services sector (16%); in third place is the desire to meet family members living in Ukraine (16%).

Assistance from NGOs and Society

The Caritas organization in Poland operates 28 centers to help migrants and refugees. In these aid centers in the second year of the war, more than 92,000 people found help, 30% of whom were children. In 2023 alone, Caritas donated 87 million zlotys to help Ukrainians in Poland, and 61 million went to those who stayed in the country¹.

According to the Polish Economic Institute, up to three-quarters of Poles engaged in various forms of support for Ukrainians fleeing war, which in financial terms translates into PLN 9-10 billion in aid provided from private pockets. Polish citizens were most willing - 59% - to help by purchasing food, clothing or hygiene items for refugees; 53% also said they donated cash in aid collections. Roughly one in five Poles engaged in helping to run various errands for refugees, and 17% - in volunteering in the broadest sense, donating their time and energy. A much less popular way of support was providing refugees with a roof over .

Objectives

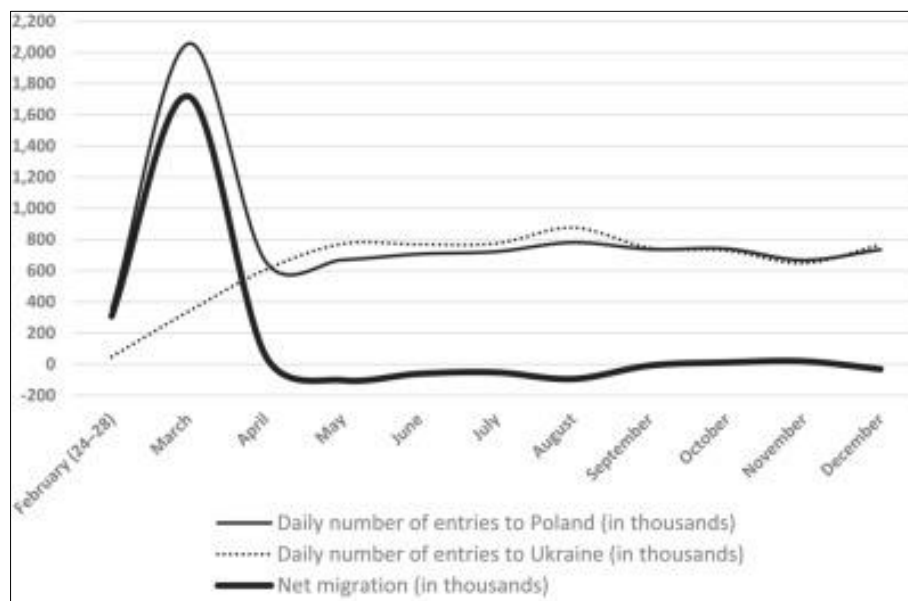
- To identifies Humanitarian Assistance and Immediate Relief
- To measure Legal Integration and Support Systems
- To knows Social Cohesion and Community Integration

Methodology

Overview of the flows, stocks and basics characteristics of Ukraine migration in Poland from 24 February to 31 December 2022, there were more than 8.83 million border crossings to Poland from Ukraine and 7.05 million crossings from Poland to Ukraine. Thus, the net balance in this respect was 1.78 million border crossings (Border Guards, 2023). As many as 93.5% of these were Ukrainians. Unfortunately, these numbers include also multiple crossings. If one person crossed the border several times, there is no information about it in the data published by the Border Guard. This information is held by the Border Guard but is not made publicly available. In addition, it should be noted that Poland was, and still is, a transit country for many Ukrainians. After a certain period of stay in Poland, some of them go to other EU Member States or countries beyond Europe. However, it should be noted that in the whole year traffic on the Polish–Ukrainian border doubled from 8.7 million border crossings

in 2021 to 17.3 million in 2022 (Border Guards,). When analyzing the traffic through border crossings after 24 February, the following trends can be observed. The main influx of war refugees from Ukraine occurred by the end of March 2022. Between the end of March and the end of December 2022, fluctuations in flows have been observed. For example, immediately before and during the holiday months, departures outnumbered arrivals. This was evident in both April and December. The largest negative migration balance was recorded at the end of August when refugees after the summer holidays had to decide in which education system their children would be placed for the 2022–2023 school year.

Despite the most recent attacks and Russia's destruction of critical infrastructure in Ukraine, no increased influx of war refugees to Poland has been observed until the end of 2022.



Source: Own elaboration based on the Border Guard Data

Fig 1: Border crossings between Ukraine and Poland and between Poland and Ukraine from 24 February to 31 December 2022, cumulative monthly data, in thousands.

Source, Own elaboration based on the Border Guard data. Regarding the stock of Ukrainian war refugees, according to the PESEL register dedicated to them, until the end of December 2022, 1.5 million Ukrainian citizens have been cumulatively registered in the PESEL database (Open Data, 2023). However, only part of them remained in Poland until that date. Verification of the data in the database, carried

out weekly by the State Development Fund, showed that at the end of December 2022, there were less than 950,000 war refugees from Ukraine in Poland possessing a PESEL Number (Table 1).¹⁰ This would mean that more than 550,000 persons had left for other EU Member States or returned to Ukraine.

Table 1: Ukrainian war refugees in Poland (December 2022).

Empty Cell	Number of refugees	Percentage distribution
Children 0–18 years	432,621	45.57%
Working age	455,834	48.01%
Women	361,145	38.04%
Men	94,689	9.97%
Post-working age	60,926	6.42%
Women	52,019	5.48%
Men	8,907	0.94%
Total	949,381	100%

Source: Compilation prepared by the Polish Development Fund on the basis of PESEL and CSO data.

According to Table 1, two groups prevail among war refugees from Ukraine. The first group is children under the age of 18 years, accounting for over 45% of the total

population, and the second one is women of working age with a share of 38%. The percentage of persons at the post-working age is as high as 6.4%, however, it is gradually

increasing compared with registrations in the first months after 24 February. Importantly, men at the post-working age account for less than 1% of the war refugee population.

However, one limitation of the verification of data from the PESEL register should be pointed out. Some war refugees who decided to return temporarily to Ukraine and did not declare to have fled the war on their return to Poland may be temporarily removed from the PESEL register. They must then apply for reactivation of their number in the database. Therefore, it can be assumed that the number of war refugees who have been assigned a PESEL number is slightly higher than that verified based on information from the Border Guard.¹¹

When comparing the population of Ukrainians who resided in Poland before 24 February 2022 with the population of war refugees, it should be noted that the economic migrant group was strongly male dominated. Meanwhile, the war refugees are mainly women with children. This means that the population of Ukrainians in Poland nowadays is much more balanced than in the past and, at the same time, it is much younger than the Polish population.

Based on data from the Office for Foreigners on residence permit holders, it can be observed that Ukrainian citizens residing in Poland constitute the largest nationality group among foreigners. At the end of 2022, more than 400,000 Ukrainians were holding various types of residence permits in Poland, of which almost 350,000 persons had temporary residence permits. They accounted for almost 60% of all foreigners who obtained the right of residence in Poland Office for Foreigners (2023). The others had the right to permanent residence or the status of long-term EU residents. For the year 2022, the number of Ukrainians with residence permits in Poland grew by over 120,000. It should be noted that this figure does not include persons who were granted temporary protection under EU regulations.

The additional source of information worth considering in relation to the high number of Ukrainian children fleeing the war is the data of the Social Insurance Institution (ZUS) on the collection of the 500+ child benefit by children from Ukraine. From 24 February to the end of November 2022, 430,000 applications for child benefits submitted by Ukrainian nationals were processed (i.e., 98.5% of the submitted applications) and benefits were granted to 530,200 children from Ukraine. This accounts for approximately 8% of all such benefits granted in Poland in 2022. At the same time, 388,100 500+ benefits were paid to children from Ukraine in November 2022, representing almost 6% of all benefits paid out. This means that a large group of children (approximately 150,000) were no longer in Poland in November 2022. Otherwise, their parents would have been paid the benefit. It is impossible to estimate the number of Ukrainian children in Poland whose guardians have not applied for 500+ benefits. Their number, however, is probably small.

Numerous school-aged Ukrainian children in Poland are subject to compulsory education (either Polish or Ukrainian, depending on where they receive their education). A report by the Centre for Civic Education shows that only less than half (46%) of Ukrainian children attend Polish schools (CEO, 2022). The other half (54%) are expected to study remotely according to the Ukrainian school curriculum.

However, in fact, we do not know how many of them are fulfilling their compulsory schooling. This poses a great societal challenge because if they miss another year of education, such a backlog will be difficult to catch up with. According to the Ministry of Education and Science, approximately 190,000 Ukrainian children were enrolled in Polish schools in the 2022/23 school year. Some of them were sent to preparatory classes, but the majority of them were admitted to classes where they started their education together with Polish children. Taking the data from the report of the Centre for Civic Education as a basis, it should be concluded that approximately 200,000 refugee children remain outside the Polish school system.

In summary, on the basis of the above data, it can be tentatively estimated that there were approximately 2.1–2.3 million Ukrainian citizens in Poland at the end of December 2022. This group consists of two subgroups: those residing in Poland already before the outbreak of the war approximately 1.1–1.2 million and war refugees (approximately 1.0–1.1 million). This number has been relatively stable since September 2022. However, this does not mean that they are still the same people. Some Ukrainians are returning to Ukraine and others are arriving in their place.

According to the survey of the Centre for Migration Research, in mid-2022, almost 60% of migrants and over 25% of war refugees intended to stay in Poland for at least a few years. Importantly, while almost 30% of migrants planned to stay in Poland permanently, among war refugees it was much less frequent; applying to less than 10% of Ukrainian war refugees. It is obvious that these plans will change, but in any scenario, Poland should be prepared for several hundred thousand Ukrainians to remain and become a resource for Polish society.

Challenges and acclimatization

Adapting refugees - especially war refugees - to the conditions of a foreign country is always a challenge for both the host country and the refugees themselves. It involves many organizational and emotional challenges. New arrivals are forced to confront the various challenges of finding shelter and then a place to live, adjusting to the job market, and dealing with any trauma caused by the outbreak of war and the frequent loss of contact with loved ones. Feelings of loneliness, loss, uncertainty, memories of experienced or observed violence, the absence of loved ones or concerns about providing them with decent living conditions in their new location are just a few examples of the emotional challenges some of them face.

An extended stay in the host country comes with the need to work. One of the challenges Ukrainian refugees quickly encountered is discrimination based on nationality. This manifests itself in the form of inadequate or no pay, exploitation of a weaker position in the labor market, unequal treatment and workload, up to the occurrence of hurtful stereotypes. Refugees also face difficulties in having their qualifications accepted and often work below their skills or in the underground economy.

The Polish Economic Institute's² respondents include employees working in agriculture and trade, services, managers, employees of small and large companies, people with experience in the construction sector, information

technology, education and health care, as well as university lecturers. Many interviewees indicate a deep need to return to their country as soon as conditions permit. This, in turn, may translate into their treatment by employers as employees who do not need or want to tie their professional future to Poland. The declared desire to return immediately may be compounded by a change in social status and a loss of economic security. Respondents in the interviews highlighted financial challenges including the lack of a steady source of income, higher living costs and difficulties in securing basic necessities for themselves and their families. This is a radical change for these refugees, who were quite well off before the war, and after fleeing Russian aggression, their social status dropped significantly. This generates additional stress and disappointment related to the growing uncertainty of the future.

Another of the obstacles to finding one's way in a new reality, including getting a job, is the language barrier. The impact of the language barrier is complex and manifests itself in many spheres of professional and social activity. One example is a nurse interviewed, unable to find a job in a hospital because of insufficient knowledge of the Polish language. An interesting case is that of a person who, although she communicates in English in the workplace and only this language is required by the employer, but stresses that full integration and professional effectiveness requires knowledge of the local language, since team and informal communication takes place in Polish. Therefore, the language barrier is with one of the key factors that increase the likelihood of social exclusion and lack of acceptance of refugees in the workplace and in social life.

Another manifestation of the vulnerable position of refugees is the examples of work in the shadow economy. Sometimes refugees forced by circumstances perform work without a proper contract, which can end up in non-payment of wages. In one case, a cafe worker surveyed performed her work without a contract, was not paid her due salary and was subjected to hurtful comments from her employer. Some of those taking part in the survey stressed that although they had not faced discrimination, they assume that in the so-called "shadow economy," i.e. work without a legal basis, the situation of refugees is definitely more difficult and there discrimination can occur.

Outcomes

Humanitarian Impact, Poland's response was praised for its humanitarian efforts. The country's swift action provided critical support and safety to millions of refugees in their time of need.

Community Response, Many Polish citizens and organizations played a significant role in supporting refugees, demonstrating strong solidarity and compassion. This grassroots support helped mitigate some of the social tensions and assisted in smoother integration processes.

Policy Adjustments, Over time, the Polish government adjusted its policies to address the evolving needs of refugees, including improving access to long-term housing and expanding integration programs.

Preparedness and Flexibility, The need for rapid response systems and flexible policies became clear. Preparation for large-scale emergencies and the ability to adapt to changing circumstances are crucial.

Collaboration Effective collaboration between government bodies, NGOs, and local communities was essential for

successful resettlement and integration efforts.

Sustainable Solutions, Moving from emergency relief to sustainable solutions requires long-term planning and resources. Ensuring that refugees have access to employment, education, and permanent housing is vital for their successful integration.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the resettlement of Ukrainian war refugees to Poland during the Russian invasion represents a significant and complex humanitarian effort. Poland's response, marked by immediate relief, legal support, and community integration, reflects a commendable commitment to addressing the needs of displaced individuals. The challenges faced and the successes achieved offer important lessons for future humanitarian responses and highlight the ongoing need for international collaboration and support.

The experience of resettling Ukrainian refugees underscores the resilience and solidarity of both the host and displaced populations. It demonstrates the capacity of nations to come together in the face of crisis and provides a model for managing large-scale humanitarian challenges. As the situation continues to evolve, the lessons learned from this experience will be crucial in shaping future responses and ensuring the effective support and integration of refugees globally.

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