THE HUMANITARIAN CONDITIONS OF REFUGEES IN COUNTRIES NEIGHBOURING UKRAINE

Introduction

On June 3rd it will be 100 days since the Russian Federation launched a military offensive into Ukraine. While the whole country has been impacted by the conflict, settlements in the East and South of Ukraine have experienced the most intense conflict with widespread destruction and mounting civilian casualties (over four thousand fatalities as of May 30th although the actual figure is assumed to be far higher) (OHCHR 30/05/2022).

The conflict has driven extensive displacement with approximately one third of Ukraine’s population either displaced inside Ukraine (an estimated 7.134 million people) or fleeing to neighbouring countries (around 6.98 million people) The initial refugee influx to neighbouring countries was rapid and massive. Within five weeks over four million people had fled Ukraine with the largest number heading into Poland. Border crossing are still be registered at the rate of around 45,000 people per day, but there are also many Ukrainians moving back into Ukraine. In addition, over 2.9 million Ukrainian refugees have moved on to other countries within Europe. Currently around 1.3 million Ukraine refugees have registered for temporary protection or similar schemes in Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Hungary (NRC accessed 02/06/2022, UNHCR accessed 02/06/2022, IOM 30/05/2022).

This brief analyses the current situation facing refugee populations in the five neighbouring countries namely Poland, Romania, Hungary, Slovakia and Moldova. It should be noted that there is very little data on those refugees staying in private accommodation (outside of reception centres) therefore most of the analysis and subsequently identified needs and priorities is based on information almost solely from refugees in collective centres. In addition, large numbers of Ukrainians have also moved to Russia, but there is limited information as to what extent (if any) movement was voluntary, or the conditions those now in Russia now face.

Displacement Map - Refugees and Internally Displaced People (IDPs)
Humanitarian Conditions of Ukrainian Refugees Hosted in Neighbouring Countries

**NEEDS AND PRIORITIES**

Food assistance, access to shelter, to health and protection services, to WASH, to information and to transportation were reported in most hosting countries as the most urgent needs. Socio-economic needs related to longer-term integration of the refugees in the countries include access to education, job opportunities, financial support and to longer-term accommodation.

Although adequate assistance is provided in temporary shelter and reception shelters the continuity of needs coverage is a concern once the refugees have left these emergency shelters. Prevention and protection from sexual abuse and exploitation remains priorities for humanitarian actors across the response as the majority of refugees are women and children. Child protection (CP) and gender-based violence (GBV) basic principles should be applied throughout the response.

The most vulnerable groups amongst the refugees are unaccompanied and separated children, pregnant and lactating women, undocumented people, people with specific needs (e.g., chronic health conditions) and people with disabilities. The issue of discrimination against Third Country Nationals (TCN) and people from minorities should be addressed.

Psychosocial support for all refugees, particularly children is as a priority as many will experienced stress and anxiety from the conflict and/or displacement.

Continued support to help refugees overcome language barriers to enable them to access information and services is required, especially for longer term solutions.

**LIVING STANDARDS**

Lack of cash and income is likely to be an issue across all refugee-hosting countries with refugees in Poland also faced by difficulties in exchanging Ukrainian currency.

Data from May indicates that significant numbers of refugees have been able to find work, notably in Poland (132,000), in Romania (2,000), in Moldova (400) and in Slovakia (400). Various reports indicate that TCN and people from the Roma minority have faced discrimination regarding employment, access to goods, services, and aid.

In Poland, food shortages have been reported in some centres hosting refugees and pregnant and lactating women face challenges in accessing formula milk due to the high cost.

By April/May many children had been able to access local education services including 200K children in Poland, 6K in Slovakia, 4K in Romania, 2K in Moldova and 1K in Hungary.

Both language and a lack of information were cited by refugees as barriers to job opportunities, to financial support and to longer-term accommodation.

**COPING STRATEGIES**

Evidence from all countries indicates that most refugees are staying with relatives, friends, host families or are renting accommodation.

Online education offered by Ukraine appears to be attended by many Ukrainian children outside of the country with an estimated 500,000 children in Poland studying the Ukrainian curriculum remotely.

There is increasing evidence of cross border movements as refugees move in and out of Ukraine to access funds, buy goods or receive information.

**PHYSICAL AND MENTAL WELL-BEING**

Refugees suffer from crisis-attributable injuries and trauma. Many women are the lone caretakers of the family, causing high stress and anxiety levels.

Family separation, child neglect, human trafficking, sexual abuse and exploitation, gender-based violence and discrimination are the main protection threats faced by the Ukrainian refugees and TCN.

In Romania, 41% of the refugees interviewed reported feeling worried and about 30% overwhelmed and/or stressed. 34% also raised concerns on their children’s mental health.

According to a WHO projection in Moldova, 22% of refugees are expected to have some form of mental health disorders including severe PTSD, and this is likely to mirror across neighbouring countries.

According to UNHCR, 62% of refugees interviewed in Romania reported violence and xenophobia against them.

Psychosocial support is required, as most people with disabilities or chronic illnesses. Women and children make up the large majority of the refugee population.

**IMPACT ON PEOPLE**

Refugees who endured war have often suffered from food and water deprivation and exposure and some will require immediate medical attention.

Evidence from past displacement crises and the current situation indicate that refugees arrive in host countries with limited belongings and cash having left behind most of their assets.

Displaced people face increased protection risks including trafficking, exploitation, and gender-based violence.

Many refugees will have left family members behind as men of military age were not allowed to leave Ukraine (unless they met certain exemption criteria). Family separation will put an additional burden on families already under stress due to displacement.

As economic indicators such as inflation worsen, potential tensions could occur between host communities and refugees, especially around labour disruptions.

As the impact of the conflict fluctuates, many refugees are considering returning with 2.1 million border crossing into Ukraine registered since February 28. Some may be permanent, but others were for temporary reasons such as shopping or visiting relatives.

**IMPACT ON SERVICES**

Evidence from several countries indicates that national infrastructure and facilities are starting to be overwhelmed by the influx of refugees raising concerns over future provision of basic needs.

The strain on the health system is expected to be particularly burdened due to the demographic needs of the displaced, especially after health services in many hosting countries are yet to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Mental health care capacity is low in countries such as Moldova and Poland and therefore support to refugees suffering from stress, anxiety and trauma may be limited.

The lack of a central registration system for the refugees makes it difficult for humanitarian actors to gain specific knowledge of refugees’ location and needs.

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The lack of verification and availability of volunteers poses an additional threat, notably the one of smuggling networks and illegal migration organisations, in addition reliance on volunteer support may not be sustainable in the long-term.

**DISPLACEMENT**

The Russian military offensive launched on February 24 has caused thousands of civilian casualties and widespread destruction displacing approximately one third of Ukraine’s population. As of May 30th, 6.8 million people have crossed into neighbouring countries.

**EU TEMPORARY PROTECTION STATUS**

The EU has permitted Ukrainians fleeing the war the benefit of temporary protection status. This includes the right to residence, housing, work, medical assistance, and access to education.

**DISCRIMINATION**

There are reports of discrimination, violence, and xenophobia against some ethnic groups (such as the Roma) and TCN who do not receive the same protection as Ukrainians.

**VULNERABLE GROUPS**

Refugee households contain many vulnerable groups including children, infants, the elderly and people with disabilities or chronic illnesses. Women and children make up the large majority of the refugee population.

**ECONOMIC PRESSURE**

Inflation continues to reach very high rates in all neighbouring countries. Food prices being at historically high levels in the whole world according to the FAO Food Price Index.
Health

Health remains one of the major needs of refugees, including those suffering from chronic illnesses, conflict-related trauma injuries, sexual violence, and mental health issues due to the war. Widespread stress and anxiety are reported across the five neighbouring countries as refugees deal with displacement, family separation and the impact of witnessing conflict at close hand. A World Vision assessment in Romania shows that 41% of the respondents reported feeling worried and about 30% overwhelmed and/or stressed. 34% also raised concerns on their children’s mental health. According to a projection to have some form of mental health disorders including severe PTSD, a situation which is likely to be similar in the other hosting countries (World Vision 10/05/2022, UNHCR 26/04/2022, IMC 23/04/2022).

These multiple needs will put pressure on hosting countries health systems already burdened after 2 years dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic. In Moldova and Poland, mental health care was not sufficiently addressed before the conflict and is thus limited in terms of capacities, restricting the support to refugees suffering from stress, anxiety and trauma (MTI 10/05/2022, UNHCR 25/04/2022, IMC 23/04/2022, UNHCR 21/04/2022).

The risk of infectious diseases is also a concern on health services, notably due to the low vaccination rates of Ukrainians, including COVID-19 vaccination (36% rate in Ukraine before the war). According to local actors, watery diarrhoea and dehydration are increasing at their reception centres and accommodation centres in Poland (IMC 23/04/2022, WHO 21/04/2022, WHO 14/04/2022). To respond to these threats, several countries’ authorities implemented vaccination campaigns, namely in Hungary, Poland and Moldova (WHO 21/04/2022).

Even though the refugees are supposed to have the same access to goods and services as host communities, some barriers to healthcare remain. In Poland, 14% of the refugees assessed in transit and reception centres do not have access to health services and 14% of respondents reported not knowing how to access to health services, underlining information gaps for services (Wyborcza 11/05/2022, Dziennik 08/05/2022). Challenges regarding long queues, lack of familiarity with the local mechanisms and procedure and lack of interpreters are also reported in several countries (Wyborcza 11/05/2022, NRC 11/05/2022, Dziennik 08/05/2022, IMC 23/04/2022). Issues regarding lack of access to medication (due to high costs or unavailability) were also flagged (IMC 23/04/2022).

Persons living with a disability, elderly, adults and children with pre-existing mental health conditions, pregnant and breastfeeding mothers are amongst the most vulnerable people in terms of health. The lack of knowledge of their location and needs (due to limited registration services for those outside of communal centres) makes it more difficult to provide them support in accessing the essential health services (IMC 23/04/2022, UNHCR 21/04/2022).

Food Security and Livelihoods

Disruption to Ukraine’s food supply, energy and commodity imports and the ban on Russian importation are key factors leading to reduced food supply in neighbouring countries. The rising inflation caused both by the conflict and the 2 years pandemic have led food prices to reach historically high levels across the globe, putting at risk host communities’ and refugees’ food security. In Poland, inflation could reach a peak of around 13% to 14% by the end of the third quarter of 2022. In Romania, Slovakia and Hungary, the inflation rates are similar, reaching 10.2% in March in Romania, 9.5% in March in Slovakia and 9.5% in April in Hungary. The situation in Moldova is the most dire, with the current inflation reaching 22% (Slovak Statistics visited in May 2022, Daily News, Hungary 10/05/2022, FAO 06/05/2022, The Warsaw Voice 05/05/2022, Unimedia 04/05/2022, BursaRo 20/04/2022, World Bank 10/04/2022, The First News 07/04/2022). Food continues to be cited as one of the main needs of the refugees, while food shortages have been reported the past months in centres hosting refugees in Poland. Though sources do not indicate such problems in other host countries, this kind of situation could occur in all countries. In fact, data from a Premise assessment shows that in Poland, 77% of the refugees surveyed in transit and reception centres received food for free while 10% needed to buy it. Moreover, risks of malnutrition have been flagged by UNHCR, especially for vulnerable persons such as pregnant, lactating women and children. The high cost of formula milk reported in Poland exacerbates this risk (Wyborcza 11/05/2022, UNHCR 25/04/2022, IMC 23/04/2022). Nine percent of the refugees returning to Ukraine and interviewed by REACH in April explained they returned to buy supplies, which could be driven by the lower prices in Ukraine and easier access to cash (REACH and UNHCR 03/05/2022, REACH and UNHCR 21/04/2022).

Lack of access to cash was reported by refugees throughout the countries, notably due to their loss of livelihood with the displacement and the limited belongings and cash brought in the emergency. Moreover, the difficulty to change Ukrainian currency could aggravate the access to food. However, with the special status given to Ukrainian refugees -temporary protection status allowing them to remain and work in European countries- many refugees have been given the opportunity to work since their arrival. Indeed, between April and May, about 132,000 Ukrainian refugees found work in Poland, more than 4,400 refugees (mostly women) in Slovakia, close to 2,000 refugees in Romania and about 400 in Moldova (Wyborcza 16/05/2022, The First News 13/05/2022, Council of the EU 4/03/2022). Measures were put in place by most of the governments to allow refugees to work. In Poland, 36% of companies are already employing Ukrainians, a percentage that rises to 60% among large companies, and one in four is trying to fill their vacancies with Ukrainian citizens (About Hungary 13/04/2022, Pomorska 07/04/2022, RP 05/04/2022, EuroNews 01/04/2022). However, the UN warns that if this situation should last, there is a risk it could lead to labour disruptions and thus to tensions between refugees and host communities. Premise data show that 75% of the Poles assessed were concerned about the impact of the Ukrainian population on the labour market (UN News 11/05/2022, The First News 10/05/2022, Premise 09/05/2022).
Two main barriers restrict refugees from being able to work. The main barrier that was reported in all hosting countries was the lack of knowledge of the local language with a particularly an issue for the large part of the refugees who are highly educated (according to ILO, high skilled and medium skilled population represent the majority of the refugees). For example, according to IOM, only 7% of respondents intending to stay in Romania spoke Romanian, whilst one in three spoke English (ILO 11/05/2022, IOM 21/04/2022, EWL 13/04/2022). The second issue reported in most countries is the discrimination towards minorities and TNC who are not considered as refugees. Support to these groups needs to be addressed as they cannot work and thus lack cash, livelihood opportunities and often access to assistance (IOM 20/04/2022, IOM 19/04/2022, Premium Times 31/03/2022).

**Protection**

Since the beginning of the war, the humanitarian community has warned about major protection threats for refugees in neighbouring countries. Most of these threats concern the borders and transit locations where refugees are the most vulnerable. Risks include family separation, child neglect, human trafficking, sexual abuse and exploitation, gender-based violence (GBV) and discrimination. Protection needs are particularly high due to the demographic distribution of the refugees, composed of a large part of children, single women or women headed households and elderly individuals, (partly due to the restriction on men leaving Ukraine). The lack of verification and availability of volunteers poses an additional threat, notably the one of smuggling networks and illegal migration organisations. This is especially true for unaccompanied children who face heightened risks due to the lack of their identification at the borders and thus the lack of immediate care and response by humanitarian actors (IMC 23/04/2022, UNHCR 21/04/2022, NRC 09/05/2022). No figures are available from public sources but testimonies and reports testify of such cases. According to international press, Interpol has already deployed officers in Moldova to help investigate alleged trafficking. These threats are adding fear and worry to the refugees amongst whom many already suffer from trauma and stress caused by the conflict and their displacement (IMC 23/04/2022, IPS 30/03/2022). According to REACH, 33% of the returnees assessed from the neighbouring countries left to reunite with their family, underlining the difficulty for refugees to be separated from their loved-ones (REACH and UNHCR 03/05/2022).

Regarding the response to GBV - for victims who suffered violence that occurred in Ukraine or in the hosting countries, national services (psychosocial and healthcare) are likely to be under pressure with the increasing demand and to suffer from a lack of staff with specific GBV training. The lack of translators is also a barrier to accessing the services. In Poland, post-rape care is reported to be inefficient notably due to the lack of access to safe abortion (HRW 29/04/2022, UNHCR 29/04/2022, UNHCR 25/04/2022, UNHCR 21/04/2022). The lack of a central registration system for the refugees entering neighbouring countries is an additional aggravating factor as it hampers partners getting knowledge on refugees’ locations and needs and thus responding adequately to all the needs. This is exacerbated by gaps in the information accessible to refugees which restrict them from accessing services, including protection services and mental health support (Unghiul 11/05/2022, UNHCR 10/05/2022).

Another protection issue emerged in Moldova as refugees who lost or lack documentation have to wait in long queues to get replacements at the embassy (Unghiul 11/05/2022).

At the borders and within the countries, marginalized groups such as Third Country Nationals (TNC), individuals from the minorities including the Roma community and stateless persons face additional barriers when trying to access national services and humanitarian assistance. This is notably due to discriminatory practices and to a less protective legal framework. In Hungary and Poland, the systematic discrimination against non-Ukrainian asylum-seekers and TCNs that were present before the war has worsened and the situation in Hungary is even been qualified by Euro-Med Human Rights Monitor as a ‘migratory apartheid’ (Euromedmonitor 16/05/2022, INTERSOS, REACH and UNHCR 10/05/2022, UNHCR 10/05/2022, NRC 09/05/2022, UN Women 04/05/2022).

**Education**

Education was disrupted for 5.7 million children in Ukraine, as schools shut down at the start of the war (OCHA 02/03/2022). Host countries have taken measures to allow child refugees to access schools, kindergarten and universities, which are safe places essential for children to get a sense of normalcy which helps support their mental health. Ukrainian teachers have been hired in Poland to assist local teachers and language classes were made available in Poland and Romania. By April/May, 200,000 children were attending school in Poland, 6,000 in Slovakia, 4,000 in Romania, 2,000 in Moldova and 1,000 in Hungary (UNHCR 20/05/2022, UNICEF 14/05/2022, GoP and UNHCR 16/05/2022, World Vision 10/05/2022, Agerpres 07/05/2022, Bursa 27/04/2022, Kronika Online 27/04/2022, The globe and mail 14/04/2022, hnonline 07/04/2022). However, these numbers remain quite low in regard to the ratio of children amongst the refugees. This can be partly explained by the fact that many children continue to attend online education offered by Ukraine (All-Ukrainian School Online platform set up since COVID-19). In fact, 500,000 children in Poland are reported to be studying remotely using the Ukrainian curriculum. Moreover, some refugees do not intend to stay long in the host countries as shows a UNICEF survey that they will return to Ukraine soon (The First News 04/05/2022, UNICEF 30/04/2022). Evidence from several countries also indicate that there are low rates of applications in tertiary studies (Wyborcza 20/04/2022).

Additional challenges reduce the ability of children to access schools. The lack of availability of information on education, the language barriers, the limited national capacities are some of the challenges hampering access. There are concerns that local teachers could suffer from exhaustion with the wave of child
refugees and after shouldering the burden of the pandemic for two years, which could impact the quality of the courses. Mental health training of teachers is also reported lacking in some countries, situation which is likely to be similar in all hosting countries (UNHCR 20/05/2022, UNHCR 25/04/2022, UNHCR 21/04/2022, ABC News 14/04/2022, The globe and mail 14/04/2022, ECW 13/04/2022, postoj 07/04/2022). For those attending online classes, access to learning material (tablets, laptops) and access to the internet can also be a barrier (UNHCR 10/05/2022).

Utilities and Shelter

While most refugees in the neighbouring countries have been making their own arrangements, notably in terms of shelter (staying with relatives, friends or host families; renting a place etc.), very little information is available on their situation and needs. Most assessments available have been conducted with households staying in accommodation centres. Evidence indicates that accommodation centres set up by governments to host refugees offer overall good conditions. However, various types of infrastructure are used as shelters and not all are adequate (dormitories, education buildings, public and religious buildings etc.). Indeed, some sources have reported overcrowded environment (especially at the beginning of the conflict), inaccessible locations of the accommodation centres, lack of sanitary facilities, notably for people with disability and a lack of intimacy (including the lack of facilities disaggregated per sex). Data from assessments in Moldova found that more than 80% of the refugee accommodation centres (RAC) had adequate WASH facilities, although less than a third of the centres were accessible for people with disabilities (UNHCR 10/05/2022, UNHCR 06/05/2022, Jurnal 04/05/2022, UNHCR, UNHCR, UNICEF 07/04/2022, CARE 16/03/2022, NRC 14/04/2022, REACH 24/03/2022, ACAPS 01/04/2022, REACH 24/03/2022). In Poland, centers at the Medyka border, Korczowa and Przemysyl have the least developed WASH infrastructure (NRC 09/05/2022).

As the conflict continues, many refugees are expected to remain in the hosting countries, putting strain on the current shelter solutions and potentially increasing the need for governments’ support (NRC 14/04/2022, REACH 24/03/2022). Indeed, prices of rent and availability of housing are reported to be challenging in several countries with up to 30% prices’ increase in Poland and particularly high at the border between Romania and Ukraine. In Poland, the availability of rental housing in Poland has also declined by 70% (UNHCR 25/04/2022, Wyborcza 25/04/2022, Daily news Hungary 12/04/2022, entrepreneur 12/04/2022 Wyborcza 11/04/2022, NRC 08/04/2022). The financial support offered by the governments for those hosting Ukrainian refugees might soon be coming to an end, adding uncertainty for the future of refugees in terms of accommodation (Wyborcza 14/04/2022, Adevarul 11/04/2022). If occupancy rate of accommodation centres has lowered and temporary housing capacities have been sufficient to meet the demand in all neighbouring countries, they would likely not be adequate to respond to the needs of the refugees looking for longer-term accommodation (Ministry of Interior 17/04/2022, About Hungary 13/04/2022, Deschide 08/04/2022). According to REACH assessments, 5% of the returnees assessed from neighbouring countries report leaving because they could not find housing (REACH and UNHCR 03/05/2022).

ABOUT THIS BRIEF

The analysis provided is a synthesis of information collected and tagged using the DEEP platform from publicly available sources and supplemented by assessment data provided by humanitarian partners working in Ukraine and neighbouring countries. This brief was prepared on behalf of the Information Management and Analysis Cell (IMAC) in Ukraine, but the analysis provided is produced independently by Data Friendly Space (DFS). MAPACTION provided mapping support to this brief.