

# Policy Brief The Way Forward for Ukrainian Refugees in CEE

Hrishabh Sandilya



*This short brief offers insight into the key issues that policymakers, philanthropy and civil society should consider as they continue to support Ukrainian refugees in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE).<sup>1</sup> It builds on the discussion at a roundtable at the 26th Forum 2000 Conference in Prague, co-hosted by the European Programme for Integration and Migration (EPIM), and several follow-up conversations on the ground in Warsaw, Bratislava, Vienna and other cities in the region.*

## Introduction

One of the remarkable aspects of the past few months has been the scale of the involvement of local communities and civil society in the Ukraine response in CEE. Much of the burden has fallen on community organisations and individuals, who have worked assiduously and stepped in to fill gaps that public institutions could not. With so much to focus on, it is easy to forget the fact that formal and structured civil society only emerged in the region three decades ago, after the fall of Communism, and until 2022, the civil society and government have often had a fraught relationship. Yet, in the context of the Ukraine response, these actors have learnt to coexist and, in many cases, recognize the value of a synergetic approach. This fact reflects how much these societies have matured, and this should continue to be the frame through which the region welcomes and includes Ukrainians.

## The Big Picture

Some initial thoughts to keep in mind:

### Think long-term

While the needs on the ground, and particularly in the context of an acute winter housing and energy crisis, demand a focus on the immediate, institutions and actors risk getting sucked into a cycle of short-term emergency responses which will eventually do more harm than good. Ukrainians were already the largest minority in Poland and Czechia before the war, and while a significant number may return to Ukraine when it ends, an equally significant number will stay in the region – a substantial inclusion challenge that requires long-term planning and resources directed toward it.

### Live with uncertainty

Governments tend to struggle with fluid situations and the mass to-and-fro movement of people across borders goes against everything that is taught in policymaking manuals. Yet, as the past few months have shown us, they can cope and will need to continue innovating. Going forward, the situation is unlikely to change. Ukrainians will continue to move between temporary homes in CEE and their homeland, challenging established protection norms and asylum support systems. Authorities will be better off seeing this as a sign of things to come and ensuring their systems (e.g. immigration, benefits, and healthcare) are designed with this in mind.

### Give Ukrainians agency

Finally, far too much of the decision-making on the future of Ukrainian refugees at the community, municipal, regional and national levels seems to be happening without their involvement. While this was comprehensible and somewhat forgivable given the fluid and rapidly evolving situation, as the focus turns toward inclusion, Ukrainians must be given a seat at the table and the chance to co-create their futures. Europe has rarely done this with migrants and refugees in the past, but the goodwill that seems to accompany Ukrainians provides an opening. It should not be squandered.

<sup>1</sup> A caveat on the use of the umbrella term Ukrainian refugees: Most countries in CEE have chosen the strictest possible interpretation of the European Temporary Protection Directive, offering protection to citizens of Ukraine only, ignoring thousands of Third-Country National and stateless Roma residents of the country.

## Recapitulating the Needs

There exists a plethora of needs. Some of the most salient of these have been listed below, ranging from the immediate to the medium- and long-term.

### Winterisation

Surviving the winter of 2022-2023 seems to be the key concern on everyone's minds. Year-on-year inflation in CEE is close to 20%, and estimates suggest that the worst effects of the drastic rise in the cost of utilities essential to heating in the winter are yet to kick in. Even though Ukrainians are homed (see next point) in a multitude of ways across the region, questions abound about the affordability of heating and whether refugees, hosts, landlords and even institutional providers will manage to keep the heat on.

### Housing

Closely related to the issue of winter survival is the need to ensure viable housing in the short-to-medium term for Ukrainians. Across the region, authorities have utilised several (decentralised) approaches from community-based hosting to mass dormitories for refugees. Yet, the stark reality is that the regions' largest cities were already experiencing a housing shortfall before the Ukrainians arrived. Combined with an unparalleled rise in property prices which is forcing more people to rent, the arrival of Ukrainians is creating an untenable situation that may be fast spiralling out of control, as local hosts grow tired of their welcoming responsibilities.

### Education

While many Ukrainian children continue to follow an online curriculum run by the government in Kyiv, they will need to enrol in local schools to ensure their long-term inclusion in society. Mirroring the housing shortfall, it is estimated that thousands of children will have to wait until at least the next academic year before they can enter local schools, as municipalities add additional rooms and hire staff. Yet, this may not be enough in the biggest cities, and more creative solutions like commuting to other locations for school should be explored. Similarly, access to early childhood education remains a major area of concern, given how scant affordable (public) kindergarten options were, even before the war. Both issues will raise serious questions for the development of an entire generation of Ukrainian children, if not addressed.

### Psychosocial support

Addressing trauma and consistent psychosocial support for Ukrainians is paramount and is closely linked to the question of long-term integration into society. While authorities can be afforded a certain amount of leeway on housing and education issues due to their structural nature, given the scale of potential trauma and the mental health needs, this can no longer be an issue that stays on the backburner. Some innovative ideas and approaches are now being employed but, realistically, this issue will need significant institutional response, given the seeming protraction of conflict.

### The elderly and adolescents

While the majority demographic may be women with young children, significant numbers of adolescent and older Ukrainians also entered CEE. Both groups have differing needs. Many adolescents remain outside formal institutional structures (not being subjected to mandatory education laws) and could pose a significant inclusion challenge going forward if they are not engaged. Older Ukrainians may need specialised care, struggle to navigate the healthcare system, and are significantly less likely to access language classes and enter the community. And the touchy topic of linking up pension systems has yet to cross most policymakers' minds.



## Childcare

While a significant number of Ukrainian mothers are eligible to enter the workforce, and seem to be interested in doing so, the lack of childcare facilities for younger children is a jarring impediment. Already a dear resource in cities like Prague and Bratislava, the arrival of several thousand additional children has almost caused the entire childcare system to collapse. While some cities and communities have experimented with shared and volunteer childcare groups, these ad-hoc solutions are too small to scale and there is a drastic need for larger institutional options, as benefits decrease, and more Ukrainians look for jobs.

## Looking forward

Where and how to intervene:

### Rethink the urban nature of the challenge

Across CEE, this is a (mostly) urban challenge, with Ukrainians flocking to medium-to-large agglomerations in the region. There are therefore two ways to address this. First, and perhaps easier, policies should incentivise the movement of refugees to smaller cities and semi-urban areas to reduce pressure on vital services in larger cities. This is easier said than done, given the limited mobility of refugees, the fact that many have networks in larger cities and the relative absence of civil society support outside these areas. Second, policies should look to innovate and scale alternate approaches in larger cities to ensure that they can serve the needs of a burgeoning population. Here, this will entail additional capacity in schools, in healthcare systems, in social services and eventually creating more affordable housing.

### More multistakeholder partnerships

It is evident that public institutions are not able to address this challenge alone. Volunteer groups, civil society actors and the private sector played a key role supporting the first arrivals in the Spring of 2022. Some seem to have forgotten this and the past few months have witnessed the emergence of siloed and leviathan bureaucratic solutions across the region. Instead, concerted effort needs to be made to ensure continued coordination with these other actors. And innovative and enduring coalitions, that involve civil society in design and the private sector in delivery, need to be created to address complex issues like housing and education, especially if further displacement out of Ukraine occurs.

### Go local and stay local

Communities have been at the heart of this response. The creation of countless community kitchens, temporary shelters, welcoming centres and book and conversation clubs for Ukrainians, underlines the importance of such organic and participatory actions. Yet, the centralised nature of many CEE states has meant that these grassroots responses and the local municipalities that host them, do not get the support they need, as governments direct their energies into more traditional top-down conduits. To ensure that these communities remain welcoming, and that the narrative doesn't change against Ukrainians, these bottom-up approaches need to remain a central plank of future planning, deserving of a commensurate investment of time and resources.

### Learn within the region

While the magnitude of the challenge and demographic remains markedly different across CEE, the core issues are remarkably similar. Logic would therefore suggest that a successful action in one state would most likely yield success in another. However, for this to happen, authorities need to stay abreast of developments in the region and learn from each other. While high-level coordination across CEE remains robust, exchanges between local policymakers and civil society in one country or region and another remain sporadic. Reinventing the wheel in each local context seems counterproductive. Capacity issues notwithstanding, more sharing and learning mechanisms like the EU Solidarity platform alongside smaller organic convenings for exchange are essential to a concerted and holistic response across the region.

## Conclusion

The path ahead is filled with uncertainty and pitfalls. Regretfully, the war in Ukraine continues unabated with much potential for additional displacement, leaving countries in a race against time. While there are no perfect solutions, doubling down on what has worked so far and ensuring that civil society, the private sector, philanthropy and public institutions remain in sync with each other, is probably the region's best bet.

*With special thanks to Markus Lux, Nadiia Ivanova, Anna Brabcová, Masha Volynsky, Milica Petrovic, Sophie Ngo-Diep, and many others across the region for their thoughts and insights, which have helped shape this brief.*

**Hrishabh Sandilya** is a Senior Programme Manager with the European Programme for Integration and Migration (EPIM). EPIM is the only, largest, and longest standing philanthropic collaborative working on migration and inclusion in Europe, dating back to 2005. Through its pooled resources, funding, and network of more than 15 partner foundations, EPIM supports civil society organisations across Europe in strengthening their responses towards shaping more humane and effective migration policies. Over the past 17 years, EPIM has supported more than 250 civil society organisations.

The views expressed in the brief are the responsibility of its author and do not necessarily reflect those of the Forum 2000 Foundation or its staff.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or any information storage or retrieval system, without the prior written permission of the copyright holder.

**Copyright © Forum 2000 Foundation, 2022**