

# The needs of Ukrainian refugees in urban areas of neighbouring countries

Nataliia Makaruk and Louise Thaller

**Ukrainian refugees settling in major cities in neighbouring countries require a more consistent, sustainable local response and integration opportunities.**

The full-scale invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation has created the greatest refugee surge to European countries since World War II. Seven in 10 of the more than six million refugees who have fled Ukraine now reside in neighbouring countries, including Poland, Slovakia, Romania and Moldova.<sup>1</sup> In each of these countries, major cities are hosting the biggest numbers of refugees, becoming hubs for international humanitarian assistance. This phenomenon is not surprising, as six in 10 refugees worldwide live in cities.<sup>2</sup>

The sudden influx of vulnerable populations into urban centres has generated an unprecedented wave of international and local solidarity. Public service providers and communities have adapted, but assistance

and protection are not evenly available to those in need. Most refugees have self-settled in Krakow (Poland), Bratislava (Slovakia), Bucharest (Romania) and Chisinau (Moldova) with the help of their relatives and friends, finding private accommodation themselves or being hosted by members of supportive local communities. They tend therefore not to be on the radar of international humanitarian actors and local authorities in charge of social protection.

IMPACT initiatives conducted mixed-method research on urban refugees in these four refugee-hosting cities.<sup>3</sup> The research was designed to provide a comparison of the different ways in which, on the one hand, Ukrainians experience daily life as urban refugees and, on

the other hand, the refugee influx may have impacted the urban ecosystems and daily realities of local actors and communities. Testimonies from urban refugees, local community members, and authorities in charge of running public services and social assistance were gathered between September and November 2022. This research sheds light on the gaps that remain between what the official refugee protection policy provides and what is experienced by vast numbers of refugees who do not stay in directly serviced collective accommodation centres, it also highlights the solutions that have been introduced by hosted countries.

### Policy versus reality

In response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the EU triggered the Temporary Protection Directive for the first time since its adoption in 2001. It is meant to guarantee quick and effective assistance to people fleeing the war, providing temporary protection, including access to residence permits, employment, accommodation, social welfare or means of subsistence, medical care, education for those under 18 within the State education system, and banking services.

The responsibility to translate nationally established protection policies into concrete social protection at the local level lies with local governments, while the international aid community has stepped in to ensure the provision of essential assistance, most often organised through collective accommodation centres. However, with refugee population groups self-settled and dispersed across large urban centres, the reality is more challenging. Refugees may not be aware of – and enjoy – the full breadth of the rights to which they are entitled, while local actors (authorities, service providers and civil society) struggle to meet the specific needs of large numbers of refugees on top of their usual responsibilities.

### The attraction of cities

The proximity of Krakow, Bratislava, Bucharest and Chisinau to Ukraine was among the main pull factors for Ukrainian refugees as it permits easy movement back to their home country. The presence of friends and relatives,

and the availability of services and humanitarian assistance, were also frequently cited, particularly in Chisinau.

In cities like Bratislava, Krakow and Bucharest, where nearly all refugees obtained temporary protection status, most respondents declared an intention to remain in the hosting city for at least six months from when we interviewed them. Their primary reasons included the availability of permanent accommodation, employment, and the presence of friends and relatives (Bratislava), or the availability of humanitarian help and access to services (Bucharest). In contrast, a large proportion of refugee families in Chisinau (Moldova) reported their intention to return to Ukraine within six months – or they did not have concrete plans. As Moldova is not an EU member state, TPD does not apply there, and obtaining formal refugee status to access essential services requires applying for asylum, which takes on average six months.

Refugees' plans to move or stay in the host city are reflected in their efforts to integrate. Refugees in Chisinau were more likely to report having limited interest in integrating and wanting to return to Ukraine than refugees in Bratislava, for example, where Ukrainians stated their intention to stay for the long term, having already enrolled their children in local schools and with plans to participate more in local social cohesion activities. The research shows a positive correlation between legislation processes facilitating access to basic services and refugees' intentions and efforts to integrate locally.

### Finding a new home

Access to long-term housing is among the most important concern for refugees arriving from Ukraine. In Bratislava, a third of surveyed refugees acknowledged that the presence of people they already knew, who could help them find housing, impacted their decision to settle in the city. In Bucharest and Krakow, where most refugees reported not having social connections, online local solidarity initiatives, volunteers and word of mouth played important roles in helping refugees find housing. Government housing programmes in Slovakia, Romania and Moldova also played



A scene from the Palanca-Maiaki-Udobnoe border crossing point, between the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine on 4 March 2022.  
Credit: UN Women/Aurel Obreja

a significant role. In Bucharest, eight in ten refugees surveyed benefitted from the national housing programme, which provides an allowance to host families to cover refugees' rent and food expenses. In Bratislava, these public subsidies were also granted to landlords hosting refugees. In Chisinau, similar financial incentives for host families were provided by UN agencies. In Krakow, in the absence of any housing programme, some refugees were allowed to stay in hotels for free.

However, refugees who benefitted from housing support initiatives in all four cities reported concerns around their sustainability. In Bratislava, the housing initiative programme has been extended by the government as many refugees cannot secure housing using their own resources. If the housing programme ceases there is a risk that collective accommodation centres will be overloaded, it could also lead to tensions in relationships with the host community around rent prices and housing availability.

### Barriers to accessing basic services

As the survey results show, having a right to something does not necessarily mean it will be enjoyed. Although all refugees in Poland,

Slovakia and Romania are entitled to free health care, the vast majority stated that they suffered from not having health insurance coverage. This demonstrates that the lack of information and awareness of refugees' rights acts as a barrier to accessing basic services.

In Moldova, only refugee children and pregnant women are entitled to free health care. Refugees in Chisinau reported concerns around the cost of medical consultations or treatment; they were also more likely to report financial assistance and access to health care as their priority needs.

Long waiting times for appointments and language barriers were the main obstacles refugees reported in Bratislava, Krakow and Bucharest. Meanwhile, Ukrainian medical diplomas are not recognised in Slovakia and Poland, preventing health facilities from hiring Ukrainian refugee doctors. Local residents frequently reported that waiting times for health care have increased since the refugees' arrival.

In all the cities surveyed, the number of Ukrainian children enrolled in local schools fluctuates between 30% and 70%, with many children continuing their Ukrainian education online, often in addition to local schooling. The main reported barriers to accessing education

were language (specifically, the lack of staff who speak Ukrainian or Russian) and lack of capacity in schools. In Chisinau, school enrolment was reportedly lower than in other cities, as children are required to have a formal residence permit to attend local schools.

Local authorities and humanitarian actors have made a significant effort to provide integration programmes and intensive language courses for children. In Bratislava and Krakow almost half of respondents reported that their children attending school benefitted from such programmes. In Bucharest, NGOs and local government education services hired Ukrainian refugees as teachers in municipal schools and educational hubs, allowing children to follow the Ukrainian curriculum in their native language. Such initiatives also contributed to providing livelihood opportunities, with almost a third of refugee respondents reporting being employed in the childcare or education sector. However, the newly created educational facilities, such as hubs, are not recognised by either the Romanian government or the Ukrainian government, and therefore children also need to be attending the local school or doing distance learning through the Ukrainian education system.

Host communities share concerns about the decreasing quality of the education system due to the arrival of large numbers of Ukrainian refugee children in local schools, causing the average class size to increase sharply and a drop in the average budget per student. However, in the higher education sector, the municipality of Bratislava has opened new study programmes at local universities in response to increased demand.

### **Making a living**

Access to employment was reportedly more challenging for refugees in Bratislava than in other cities. Apart from the lack of available jobs and the language barrier, refugees also complained that employers often offer lower salaries for refugees. In Bucharest, the host community was more likely than in other cities to report high levels of competition in the job market with refugees, causing potential tensions. The lack of childcare options and the shortage of part-time jobs were the two other

barriers most reported by women, especially in Bucharest and Chisinau.

Despite access to full or part-time employment, 80% of refugees in Bucharest and Krakow reported still relying on humanitarian assistance as their main source of income; the same proportion stated that financial assistance was their priority need. In Chisinau, far fewer respondents rely on government cash support, while many use their savings or NGOs' and other agencies' cash support to meet needs. Meanwhile, host populations in Krakow and Chisinau mentioned that the shift in funding by local NGOs towards assisting refugees has considerably decreased resources available for low-income families, marginalised groups and homeless people; refugees were therefore perceived as competing with local vulnerable groups for aid provision.

### **The role of local governments in urban refugee response**

Although in all cities local authorities are directly responsible for ensuring refugees have access to whatever basic services they are entitled to, refugees surveyed in Bratislava, Bucharest and Chisinau reported that most aid came from the UN, local NGOs and international NGOs. However, this may be because such actors have provided more 'visible' recreational activities and courses, accommodation services, psychosocial services and core humanitarian assistance, with local governments coordinating support in the background. In Krakow, in contrast, refugees mentioned the local government as the main provider of social assistance.

The survey from the four European cities highlights that the impact of the refugee influx on cities and the socio-economic situation of urban refugees are highly dependent on the availability and adaptability of existing local services. Although local governments play a critical role in organising social protection, many support initiatives remain dependent on support from international humanitarian aid agencies. In most cases, existing coordination initiatives between local governments and international humanitarian organisations were reported to be scarce or completely absent at the city level, which raises concerns

about the sustainability of the humanitarian aid programmes that many urban refugees still rely on.

With the war in Ukraine showing no signs of coming to an end, compounded by a probable, imminent shrinking in international humanitarian funding for the refugee response across Europe, it is particularly important to ensure that support services for Ukrainian refugees can be sustained in the cities where they reside. These should be complemented by policies and programming to encourage refugee self-reliance, especially for women with children. Ukrainian refugees will then be better placed to contribute to the economic and social life of cities.

**Nataliia Makaruk**

*nataliia.makaruk@impact-initiatives.org*

Assessment Officer, IMPACT Initiatives

**Louise Thaller**

*louise.thaller@impact-initiatives.org*

@LouiseThaller

Research Manager, IMPACT Initiatives

1. UNHCR Ukraine refugee situation: [data.unhcr.org/en/situations/ukraine](https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/ukraine)
2. Park H (2016) 'The power of cities', UNHCR: [unhcr.org/innovation/the-power-of-cities/](https://unhcr.org/innovation/the-power-of-cities/)
3. We would like to acknowledge the input of the following IMPACT colleagues: Andrea Szenasi, Raluca Stoican, Marta Piekarczyk and Killian Foubert.

