

Foreword

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The war on Ukraine has uprooted people and wrought hardship, separation and suffering on millions of households on an epic, historic scale. Social theorists have long noted that disasters have a paradoxical tendency to bring out the best in humanity, providing ‘a glimpse of who else we ourselves may be and what else our society could become.’¹ The range of topics covered in this special edition on Ukraine attest to how much has been accomplished – but also to the challenges that lie ahead.

The European Union’s decision to trigger the Temporary Protection Directive (TPD) for the first time created a common legal basis for refugees to access protection, enjoy rights immediately upon arrival and be included in host communities. The Directive has demonstrated that swift and effective access to international protection and other rights is possible in large-scale influxes, particularly if the will to make crucial investments exists.

States in Europe and beyond have demonstrated that they have the tools, capacities and ‘space’ to protect and include refugees, and to manage large-scale population movements effectively. To varying degrees, refugees have accessed services and national social safety nets, entered the workforce, become self-reliant, and contributed to the social fabric of host communities quickly and productively, albeit with variations across host countries. The political will and commitment shown by European states and regional institutions has been matched in the response of municipal authorities and civil society.

Within Ukraine, the inter-agency, multi-partner response under the leadership of the UN Humanitarian Coordinator provides lifesaving assistance to millions of families impacted by fighting, often in high-risk, dangerous locations, particularly among the networks of local organisations serving communities on the frontlines of the conflict. In neighbouring host states, the Refugee Coordination Model has facilitated a collaborative response, with local authorities and civil societies often at the fore.



In Poland, a UNHCR protection monitor assesses the needs of refugees from Ukraine. Credit: UNHCR/Anna Liminowicz

In terms of challenges, the risks of trafficking and potential sexual exploitation and abuse continue; prevention of these must remain a key shared priority. For the vast majority of refugees and internally displaced people, daily life remains challenging and the trauma of being uprooted from homes and communities and separated from loved ones is real. As return may not be imminent, humanitarian actors, host States and communities have to plan for the medium and long-term, including what protection arrangements will follow the expiry of the TPD in 2024.

The response to the forced displacement of millions of Ukrainians is often described as exceptional. But the pattern of displacement, and what Europe has done in response, is the norm in many parts of the world. Neighbouring states generously host some 70% of the world’s refugees, with 75% hosted in low and middle income countries. The factors that stand out in the response to the Ukraine war are the mobilisation of sustained political will and substantial resources, innovative protection tools and technology, rapid response mechanisms such as cash-based interventions, the engagement of the private sector, the role of local leadership and the robust inclusion of refugees in national systems.

As the number of the world’s forcibly displaced people continues to climb, we should consider how the lessons of the Ukraine response might influence future reforms and possibilities for all asylum seekers and refugees in Europe and beyond.

1. Solnit, Rebecca (2009) *A Paradise Built in Hell: The Extraordinary Communities That Arise in Disaster*