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## INTEGRATION OF UKRAINIAN REFUGEES: THE ROAD AHEAD

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**Over 2 million people have fled across Ukraine’s borders following Russia’s invasion on 24 February. Right now, attention is understandably focused on their entry and reception. But soon the EU will need to consider how to best help these newcomers settle in. Last week’s activation of the Temporary Protection Directive gives (mainly) Ukrainians the right to access key integration-related services and employment. National administrations now face an enormous challenge to make such access a reality.**

[Over 1 million people](#) fled across Ukraine’s borders in just the first week following Russia’s invasion, and the latest estimate from UN agencies predicts that [4 million](#) people could be displaced from the country as the conflict continues. Right now, attention is necessarily focused on the entry and reception of those fleeing war in Ukraine – after all, physical safety and humanitarian aid must be the first priorities. But before long, EU Member States will have to think about how to best help newcomers settle in through the provision of integration support. Last week’s [activation of the Temporary Protection Directive](#) is an important – [and landmark](#) – step that also enables Ukraine’s citizens and long-term residents to access essential integration-related services and to work. We know from past experience that [acting early is key to supporting successful integration](#). With this in mind, some important considerations are:

### Who is arriving and where?

With the Ukrainian government [requiring men ages 18-60 to stay](#) and support the war effort, it is largely women and children, as well as elderly men, who are currently crossing into the EU. The rapid escalation of conflict meant they needed to leave quickly and had little time to prepare before making their way to the border. It is not only Ukrainian citizens who have had to flee: Students, workers, and refugees from other countries have also been uprooted by the immediate outbreak of conflict. Not all non-Ukrainians will be covered by the Temporary Protection Directive, and for those who are not, Member States will need to determine if they will be able to stay.

Over [2 million](#) people have fled Ukraine across international borders, with the vast majority heading to neighbouring EU countries (Poland, Hungary, Slovakia, and Romania). Meanwhile,

Poland, Italy, the Czech Republic, Spain, and Germany are home to the largest Ukrainian communities in the EU (measured in [permits at the end of 2020](#)), most of whom came to work. Ukrainians are highly mobile: [According to a 2018 survey](#), one-quarter of Ukrainians reported that they or a family member had previously worked abroad temporarily. Some now leaving Ukraine have networks in particular EU countries and are moving there [to join](#) them – and, notably, visa-free travel enables them to do so thus far (in comparison with most other refugees). Such networks are a critical source of help, but additional support will surely be needed – even more so for those with limited social capital to help them settle in.

## **Where will they stay?**

Housing is one of the most immediate needs. Facing such a large number of arrivals, neighbouring countries have moved to ready reception spaces, with some using existing asylum reception facilities or building temporary camps and others relying on [hotels and guest houses](#). These facilities will be particularly important for newcomers without family or friends with whom they can stay (who remain a key source of support for those with personal networks). The [private sector](#) and [private citizens](#) are also stepping up to offer flats for newcomers without a place to stay. And Slovakia is providing [financial support](#) for private persons and tourist facilities accommodating Ukrainian citizens (€100 per child and €200 per adult each month). While these options are critical in the first days and weeks, the large number of newcomers is [already putting pressure](#) on the local housing stock in some cities, leading to a drop in available accommodation and jump in prices. Arrivals in Poland ([1.2 million](#) as of 8 March) now exceed the population of the country's second largest city, Krakow. Many countries seeing the largest numbers of arrivals already have a [dearth of affordable](#) or social housing. More generally, high costs, as well as [housing discrimination](#), remain persistent challenges for many migrants looking for a place to rent.

In the wake of the 2015-2016 spike in arrivals, we also saw a range of creative approaches to meeting housing needs, including [matching](#) refugees with volunteer hosts and co-housing refugees with local [young people](#) and [seniors](#). Such initiatives are typically small in scale, and can thus only make a small dent in the housing need, but they offer important opportunities for cross-cultural interaction and might be further expanded. Increasing financial assistance is another way to help people cope with high or rising housing costs.

## **What physical and mental health care?**

Two years into the COVID-19 pandemic, national health systems continue to be under stress. Most immediately, those injured by the conflict will need access to emergency medical

attention. Conflict-related challenges, including difficulties with physical distancing and extreme stress, combined with a relatively low vaccination rate among Ukrainians, [will likely lead to an increase](#) in COVID-19 infections and result in increased demand for health services. Access to medication is another pressing issue. Due to the demographics of arrivals, there will be particular pressure on health care for the elderly, children, and women, including expectant mothers. Thus far, receiving countries have focused on serving arrivals using mainstream health care systems rather than creating parallel ones, which is a positive development.

But as important as it is, physical health is not the only concern. As we have seen in the [headlines](#), peoples' lives were literally upended overnight, with some waiting as many as 60 hours in the freezing cold in lines many kilometres long to cross to safety. Meanwhile, especially with most men required to remain in Ukraine, families are separated, with those in Europe fearing for the safety of their loved ones back home. Such stressful situations are why mental health and psychosocial support are an essential component of humanitarian interventions – and why they should also be a key part of integration approaches. However, Europe's mental health systems are underdeveloped, plagued by [chronic underinvestment](#). Care is difficult for general populations to access, and even more challenging for refugees and other migrants. It will be critical to ramp up funding significantly for clinical mental health services to support newcomers in coping with trauma, alongside non-clinical approaches in partnership with schools, community-based organisations, and others.

### **How to incorporate new arrivals into education systems?**

School-age children constitute a large share of [arriving Ukrainian refugees](#), pointing to massive implications for school systems in the middle of the school year. Member States have already begun efforts to channel children into mainstream education systems, but the sudden incorporation of large numbers of refugee children poses a range of challenges. It might stretch school system capacities at the institutional level and hurt teacher-student ratios. Children often face difficulties beyond simply doing their homework, including adjusting to a new school, coping with trauma, dealing with language barriers, and navigating curriculum differences. Teachers are often insufficiently trained on addressing these challenges. Various approaches are now being assessed, including creating [special classes](#) for Ukrainian children to transition into Polish classrooms and hiring Ukrainian-speaking staff. Meanwhile, we should not forget about students whose university education was also interrupted. While in theory Ukrainian students have [access to state higher education](#), additional support, including stipends or housing allowances, might be necessary, while it is unclear to what extent credits

will transfer. It is also unclear how many non-Ukrainian students will be able to access EU higher education and how many plan to return to their countries of origin.

### **How to overcome language barriers?**

Some Ukrainians [already speak](#) Hungarian or Romanian as their native language, while personal networks and language proximity with other Slavic languages (e.g. Polish, Slovak, and Czech) may lessen language barriers that can hinder migrants from being aware of or accessing needed services. However, there will still be considerable and immediate demand for interpreters and translators. And in the longer term, language classes will be important for supporting adults in settling in and navigating their new communities, while children can receive assistance in schools. For those in or looking for work, job-related vocabulary and employer-based language classes are particularly useful approaches.

### **How to integrate arrivals into the labour market?**

Facilitating labour market access is traditionally a central focus of integration policy, and is also crucial considering newcomers' limited financial resources and [current challenges](#) converting money into local currencies. Employers in a number of EU Member States remain optimistic about the absorption capacities of their labour markets, announcing that they can easily accommodate anywhere from 100,000 ([Slovakia](#)) to 500,000 ([Poland](#)) additional workers. Private sector initiatives offering jobs, combined with additional support (e.g. housing) to newly arrived refugees, have been mushrooming. Indeed, labour shortages mean there may be more opportunities – but most likely not everyone will enter the labour market so easily. In addition to language-related challenges, it is largely women, children, and seniors arriving, meaning that a significant share of newcomers may not have been active in the Ukrainian labour market and may not be in the EU either. And for caregivers, child and elderly care may be a precondition for employment. While some might indeed become economically self-sustaining quickly, vulnerable refugees will require long-term support. However, the countries receiving them are largely not welfare states.

The challenges go far beyond simple job matching, although the question remains whether the profiles of potential workers will match available vacancies. For instance, in addition to shortages of lower skilled workers, the Polish labour market has been struggling with a large deficit of workers with specific qualifications. Ukraine has a [well-educated labour force](#), but 'brain waste' is a persistent problem among refugees, and education in Ukraine lags behind labour market developments. Even if it may be relatively easy to channel lower skilled workers into the labour market, those with higher qualifications might find it more challenging due to

difficulties getting these recognised (especially if they did not manage to bring documentation of their skills when they fled). Since 2015, Europe has recognised the importance of validating informal and non-formal skills early on and recognising foreign qualifications so that refugees are able to capitalise on their skills. For policymakers looking to do this and simultaneously fill shortage positions, Sweden's [Fast Track initiative](#) can provide inspiration. Policymakers must also address working conditions and mitigate the risks of exploitation.

On the bright side, it may be easier for Ukrainians joining their networks to find jobs through these connections. Additionally, the ability of Ukrainians to travel within the EU means that they can theoretically go where they speak the language or feel they have the most opportunities. This is something most other refugees are not able to do.

### **How do public attitudes enter the equation?**

Public attitudes towards refugees and migrants shape the welcome newcomers will receive and also influence local and national policies affecting them. Across the EU, the outpouring of support for Ukrainians has been remarkable. This does not necessarily mean, though, that it will stay this way, as we have seen in other cases. It is not just time, but also the scale of arrivals, that can shift public opinion. The head of UNHCR has already [warned](#) that European hospitality may diminish over time. That tensions are likely to appear sooner or later is another reason [why addressing integration is so important](#). For Ukrainians moving to Eastern Europe, linguistic and cultural similarities may prove helpful in pre-empting such tensions, but there is no guarantee. It is not only newcomers who will need to adapt, and promoting local engagement will therefore be paramount. And for people belonging to racial and ethnic minorities, there have already been reports of difficulties entering EU territory, which come on top of long-standing challenges regarding [discrimination against migrants and members of racial, ethnic, and religious minorities](#). It is clear that efforts to tackle discrimination and [strategic communication](#) will have important roles to play.

### **A unique situation**

While much about the unfolding conflict remains uncertain, we do know that, when it ends, it will take time to recover. And even if return becomes possible, some will wish to stay in the EU, as seen for instance with [many Bosnians remaining in Austria](#) after the war ended. More immediately, we do not know the full scale of displacement or in which Member State people will settle. It is not just these dynamics, but also individual profiles and local contexts, that will shape integration considerations, needs, and responses.

While many of the current destination countries have increasingly realised the importance of comprehensive immigration policies, there is still considerable [room for improvement](#) in various integration policy areas. Moreover, integration policy in Eastern Europe is largely projectised, pointing to the need to shift to a long-term and holistic approach. Finding the right balance between mainstream and tailored supports will be key in the coming weeks and months. And while national authorities are taking the lead on reception facilities and call the shots regarding legal status and integration, it is cities that play a key role in helping newcomers settle in.

The EU can and should play a supportive role for Member States – and for EU funding to have an immediate impact, it needs to be flexible in order to respond to different national, regional, and local contexts. It is clear that all levels of government will require an injection of funding to provide all of the above support – for instance, [Poland foresees needing €350-€700 million](#). The EU can also bring together those countries that received large-scale arrivals in the recent past — such as Germany, Sweden, and Austria — with those doing so today to exchange experiences and good practices.

The scale of arrivals would test any EU Member State – and many of these countries have relatively short experience receiving immigrants. In many ways, the current situation differs from previous large-scale refugee arrivals – not least because Ukrainians across the board were granted the right to work, stay, and access services almost immediately. Also important, they are thus far allowed to move within the EU to link up with their networks. And many have already worked or studied in the EU. But that is not to say it will be easy. Europe has seen an amazing mobilization, with an outpouring of aid from civil society, the private sector, and individuals – and this is exactly what is needed for such a large undertaking. For integration to be successful, it is critical that this goodwill stands the test of time.

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