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## THE CLOCK IS TICKING FOR TEMPORARY PROTECTION: WHAT COMES NEXT?

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*In March 2025 at the latest, temporary protection for people fleeing Ukraine comes to an end. Determining what comes next is a complex process in which host countries must navigate multiple policy options, practical considerations, and political and economic interests. There is no time to waste in developing a coordinated approach, particularly due to the large number of people concerned, the range of countries involved, and the prospect of necessary legislative changes.*

One year ago, European Union Member States unanimously activated the Temporary Protection Directive (TPD) for the first time, just a week after the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Since then, the Directive has enabled [nearly 5 million](#) people displaced from Ukraine to receive immediate status as well as access to key integration services and employment. Designed to last for a maximum period of three years, the Directive has provided the flexibility needed to avoid the collapse of national asylum systems amid rapid and mass displacement, enabling swift and unbureaucratic protection for those in need. Attention and responses have thus far largely focused on immediate needs related to reception and early integration, which remain significant challenges considering the scale of displacement. However, when it comes to the question of what comes after its three-year duration, the TPD remains vague. Given the complexities of selecting, designing, implementing, and coordinating post-temporary protection policy options, conversations with all key stakeholders must take place early on.

### **Planning ahead is crucial, despite uncertainty**

As the war in Ukraine becomes increasingly protracted, much uncertainty remains about when and how it will end. This has significant ramifications for when it will be safe for people to return and to where, and if the presently high number of [Ukrainians expressing a wish to return](#) will translate into high numbers of actual returns if the war drags on for a longer time. The economic prospects of Ukraine and the countries supporting its reconstruction are similarly uncertain. But one thing is clear: When the war ends, some will wish to return to Ukraine, while others will wish to remain in the EU (and other countries of refuge).

Temporary protection under the TPD will last until March 2025 at the latest. The situation in Ukraine at that time will certainly be a determining factor shaping the policy options regarding what comes next for temporary protection beneficiaries. Yet there are a multitude of other considerations that go into the development of the next steps. Starting these discussions early is therefore crucial. ICMPD published a [discussion paper](#) that explores policy options for countries hosting refugees from Ukraine. It is part of a [joint initiative](#) of ICMPD and the Inter-Governmental Consultations on Migration, Asylum and Refugees (IGC) to explore future prospects for people who are displaced from Ukraine and for countries where they are currently residing. As part of this initiative, ICMPD and IGC Member States shared and discussed different policy options in a February 2023 workshop.

### **Policymakers must navigate an array of policy options**

Host countries have a wide range of policy options at their disposal. These range from the further extension of temporary protection, to the development of new or the use of existing channels for long-term residence, and several in between. Whatever is decided, a number of practical questions arise. For policies facilitating stay in host countries, will this mean a special status or an existing (mainstream) one? Will this status be temporary or permanent? Will it be applied collectively, assessed individually, or granted only when meeting particular integration or vulnerability criteria? Will it include the same level of rights or fewer than under the TPD? When it comes to facilitating return once the situation allows for it, a different set of questions arise, including: How will voluntary returns be supported, and what type/extent of reintegration support should be provided? Should returns be phased to ease pressure on the Ukrainian government and on local communities' capacities to absorb large-scale returns, and if so, who should be prioritised? What role might a transition period play regarding both remain and return, and what might such transitions look like?

These questions point to just some of the myriad of considerations policymakers will have to grapple with. Moreover, potential solutions go beyond a binary remain or return. Transnational solutions like circular migration, onward movement, and [remote work](#) may provide a sustainable solution for some refugees –and each comes with their own sets of questions and considerations. It is clear that there is much to be discussed. Right now, movement is about protection. In the future, it will also be about reconstruction.

## **Reconciling conflicting interests will not be easy**

Importantly, it is not just practical questions but also political considerations that quickly come into play. There are multiple, and often conflicting, interests that need to be reconciled. Host countries want to address current and future labour needs and maintain public support for their policies. While they want to support reconstruction in Ukraine, they may simultaneously want to retain those Ukrainian workers who integrated into their labour markets. Ukraine, in turn, aims to regain its population, which was already declining before the war. The country will require a significant workforce to assist with reconstruction, whether these workers are Ukrainians or other nationals. Host countries and Ukraine may thus be looking to employ the same workers. At the same time, the needs and interests of displaced persons must also be considered, namely what type of future displaced persons envision for themselves and whether family members wish to reunite inside or outside of Ukraine. Reconciling conflicting interests will almost certainly necessitate hard conversations.

## **Continued coordination is key**

The response to displacement from Ukraine has seen a remarkably high degree of coordination thus far, particularly in the EU. A common approach to exit strategies should follow. While Member States may decide who can settle on their territory and under which conditions, the broader framework of exit strategies, including any transition periods (related to return and remain), should be considered jointly. Conversations should not only involve EU Member States but also other host countries—as well as Ukraine, which is of particular importance when discussing returns. Once a plan is set in motion, governments should be sure to effectively communicate their policies and timelines, sharing accurate and timely information to both host societies and refugees.

A number of fora have been established to coordinate, exchange, and address present challenges resulting from the unprecedented pace and scale of displacement from Ukraine. However, none started to consider what might follow temporary protection. It is precisely for this reason that ICMPD and IGC decided to jointly trigger such discussions and start exploring future options.

## **The clock is ticking**

The time is now to start thinking about what happens when temporary protection ends—not least because a common EU response, the ideal scenario, might require legislation, which entails a long process—particularly if competing interests need to be reconciled. The implications for the millions of individuals concerned are immense and require timely

communication of future prospects. In addition, there are potential consequences of a patchwork approach of uneven opportunities in each host country (especially within the EU), particularly that people may feel compelled to move yet again. The need for a coordinated response is clear – the costs and consequences of going it alone are high. Hopefully, the same unity that resulted in the swift and first-ever activation of the TPD will also enable Member States to devise a common approach to continue supporting people displaced from Ukraine after it ends.

Temporary protection is primarily designed to serve as an emergency rather than a durable solution. Yet, part of a successful temporary protection instrument is knowing when and how it will end. Some will say it is too early to discuss an exit strategy from temporary protection. We are still two years away from the maximum duration of the TPD, which seems like a long time. Yet it is not when considering the large number of people concerned, the range of countries involved, and the prospect of necessary legislative changes. These two years will pass quickly – the clock is ticking. Existing fora should be leveraged now to discuss available policy options with this deadline in mind. Planning something of this magnitude takes time. There is no time like the present.

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