

Analysis of Ukrainian Refugees in Poland

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Introduction

The Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 triggered the biggest migration movements on the European continent since the WWII. An unprecedented number of refugees left Ukraine in weeks following the invasion, seeking shelter in other European countries. Poland - since the very beginning - was among priority destinations for Ukrainians escaping from their country.

Already before February 2022 Poland was the main destination for Ukrainian economic immigrants to the UE. Since 2014, when the conflict in the Donbas region began and Russia started to occupy the Autonomous Republic of Crimea and the City of Sevastopol, the number of Ukrainian immigrants in Poland started to grow. Difficult situation in Ukraine and the economic growth of the Polish economy combined with an increasing demand for employees from abroad (in 2014-2022 the unemployment rate in Poland decreased from 9.2% to 2.9%, Eurostat 2023) had fueled the growing economic immigration (mostly of temporary and circular character). This was accompanied by simplified procedures of hiring employees from abroad that created Poland as one the most liberal EU countries in terms of employing foreigners. The pre-war economic immigration from Ukraine was highly masculinized and professionally active. The economic situation in Poland and low unemployment had resulted that the growing dynamically economic immigration from abroad, including Ukrainian citizens, did not lead to any serious social tensions. Poland became popular destination for Ukrainian economic immigrants also due to geographical, cultural, and language proximity. According to Eurostat, at the end of 2021 ca. 1.57 million Ukrainian citizens were authorized to stay in the European Union, of which 1/3 were in Poland. The Poland's Central Statistical Office (GUS) estimates the number of Ukrainians living in Poland before the war at 1.35 million people.

Analysis of Refugee Flow from Ukraine to Poland

The Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 changed dramatically the scale and character of migration from Ukraine. Poland is one of four EU countries (next to Slovakia, Hungary, and Romania) having borders with Ukraine and since the beginning of the war the country became the most popular destination (or transition country) for Ukrainian refugees escaping from Ukraine. The movement of people is carried out by eight border crossings located on the Polish-Ukrainian border.

Since the first days of the war, the Polish-Ukrainian border crossings faced unprecedented pressure from the growing number of Ukrainian refugees trying to leave their country. While on the first day of the conflict, the number of people crossing the border from Ukraine to Poland amounted to ca. 30k, it skyrocketed in the following days and reached its peak in the second week of the war. On the 6 March 2022 a record number of over 140k refugees from Ukraine entered Poland. During the first days of the war (24-28.02.2022) ca. 355k of Ukrainian refugees crossed the Polish-Ukrainian border that was followed by 2 million in March 2022. In the following months, the number of entries from Ukraine to Poland decreased to ca. 600-700k people per month. In the first year of the war, the total number of entries from Ukraine recorded by the Polish Border Guard amounted to 10.03m people, and by the end of July 2023 the number increased to 13.8m. That means that more than half of all border crossings from Ukraine (25.16 m) to other countries was through the Polish-Ukrainian border. Since the beginning of the war, Poland has become the main both destination and transit country for Ukrainian refugees. While in the months following the Russian invasion many Ukrainians decided to return to their homes, and many refugees treated Poland only as a transit country, Poland remains one of the most important destinations for Ukrainians escaping from the war. According to UNHCR, the total number of refugees from Ukraine amounted to 5.873m (as of 1 August 2023) of which 968k were recorded in Poland.

Such a historic flow of refugees has brought unprecedented logistical, organizational, and political challenges to Poland. Since the first days of the war thousands of Poles provided shelters (ca. 150k of Poles offered accommodation in their private flats/houses), basic food and hygiene products, or free transportation (often by private cars) from the border to other parts of the country. At the biggest railways stations in Poland operated information and assistance refugee centers. Polish national and regional railway companies organized more than 640 additional trains and enhanced more than 2.3k regular trains to carry a higher number of passengers (in the first year of the war), and offered free tickets for refugees from Ukraine since the first day (special regulations expired in July 2022).

Spontaneous support and aid actions initiated by thousands of private people have been paralleled to support systems created mostly by regional and local governments. Such a huge wave of refugees has been an enormous challenge for many cities, including the biggest Polish metropolises. In the first phase, the efforts were concentrated on providing basic and short-term assistance. In many cities were created accommodation centers as well as support centers that distributed aid provided by individuals, private companies, local authorities, and public institutions.

But local authorities had also faced many long-term challenges such as providing necessary educational or health care services to Ukrainian refugees. Local authorities had to arrange additional space and sources to include and integrate thousands of Ukrainian children into the Polish educational system. 87% of Ukrainian refugees who were granted the Polish ID number were women and children, and 47%

of all Ukrainian refugees registered (as of March 2023) were children and youth. Most of the Ukrainian refugees decided to migrate and settle in the biggest Polish cities which absorbed the lion's share of the migration wave. Within first three months of the war (March-May 2022) the share of Ukrainians in the total population of the capital city of Warsaw increased to 16% (May 2022). Almost 70% of all refugees coming at that time to Poland stayed in the 12 biggest Polish cities. The highest share of Ukrainians in the total population was recorded in Rzeszów (almost 40% of the total population) which became – due to its geographical location in the south-eastern part of Poland and the proximity of the Ukrainian border – an important hub for both Ukrainian refugees arriving to Poland as well as for humanitarian and military aid delivered to Ukraine via Poland from the third countries. Although some incentives to move to smaller towns and villages, for which the refugees could also be a positive economic impulse in the context of general demographic depopulation of such regions, Ukrainian refugees tended to stay in the biggest Polish metropolises and more developed regions (mazowieckie, dolnośląskie, wielkopolskie). In a year since the beginning of the war, the official number of refugees living only in Warsaw amounted to over 100k. It is a common belief, also among refugees, that bigger cities offer better access to developed job markets as well as education and health systems.

The legal status of Ukrainian refugees coming to Poland was regulated by the Act of 12 March 2022 on assistance to citizens of Ukraine in connection with an armed conflict in the territory of this country. Provisions included in this special Act regulated - with retroactive effect - the status and rights of Ukrainians that fled to Poland after 24 February 2022. The Act guaranteed refugees' legal residence in Poland, their access to job market, education, health system, and other public services. According to those regulations, Ukrainian citizens were granted a right to stay legally in Poland for 18 months starting from 24 February 2022. The latest amendment has prolonged this term until 4 March 2024 (and 31 August 2024 for all pupils/students and their carers). The same rules apply to Ukrainian citizens that came to Poland before the war on the basis of visas and temporary residence permits.

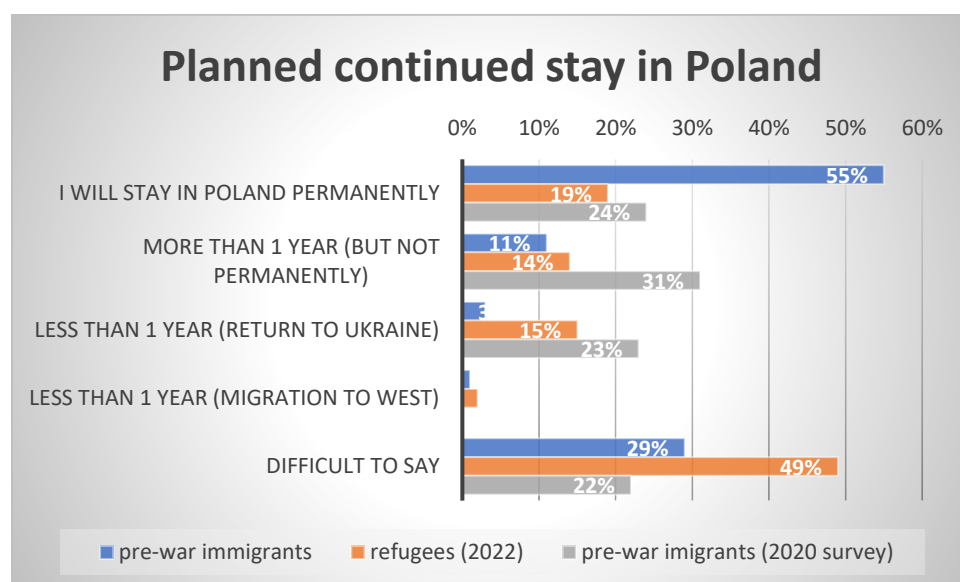
The Act includes also provisions facilitating access to labor market and the status of an unemployed person or job seeker. The provisions eliminated a requirement for a separate work permit, and it is enough to notify the employment office by the employer within 14 days of starting work by a Ukrainian citizen. Moreover, the Act has provided for the possibility of undertaking and conducting business activity by Ukrainian citizens under the same conditions as Polish citizens. The Act also regulated the right of Ukrainian children and students to continue their education in Poland. According to the Polish Ministry of Education and Science ca. 190k Ukrainian children, that came to Poland after 24 February 2022, attended Polish educational system (ca. 43k in kindergartens, 120k in primary schools, and 28k in secondary schools; as of February 2023), and this number remains relatively stable over last months.

At Polish universities study over 21k Ukrainian students, of which 60% started their education in Poland on 1 October 2022 (the beginning of an academic year in Poland).

The Act regulated also material support and social assistance to refugees. Ukrainian citizens have a right to support in the form of family and educational benefits. The regulations also provided access to free psychological help, access to medical care on the same terms as those covered by health insurance in Poland, as well as support for people with disabilities under the State Fund for Rehabilitation of Persons.

While at present the legal status of Ukrainian refugees is settled, their future is more vague and obviously strongly determined by the situation in Ukraine. According to the report “The living and economic situation of Ukrainian migrants in Poland” issued by the Polish Central Bank in April 2023, ca. 20% of the Ukrainian refugees living in Poland (as of November 2022) declared they would like to stay permanently in the country (Graph 1). In the same survey 14% of the refugees declared their stay longer than 1 year, and similar share of respondents declared they would stay in Poland below 1 year. The survey also confirms high uncertainty of the situation of the refugees - almost half of them were unable to say how long their stay in Poland would last. At the same time 3/4 of surveyed refugees that came to Poland after the Russian invasion declared their readiness to return to Ukraine within 3 months if the war ends.

Graph 1. Planned continued stay in Poland of Ukrainian refugees and pre-war immigrants



Source: NBP, “The living and economic situation of Ukrainian migrants in Poland – the impact of the pandemic and the war on the nature of migration in Poland. Report of the questionnaire survey”, 13.04.2023

Those replies differ significantly from declarations of pre-war Ukrainian immigrants and the war dramatically increased interest of this group in staying permanently in Poland. In the survey more than half of them declared their wish to stay permanently. The group is also less hesitant as only every third of the pre-war interviewees was unable to declare the length of their stay and future plans. The representatives of this group are also more reluctant to return to Ukraine if the war ends (only ¼ of them declares their readiness to leave Poland within 3 months after the conflict ends).

This is clearly perceivable that Ukrainian immigrants that came to Poland before February 2022 plan their future in this country more heavily than the refugees fleeing into the country after the invasion. The war has changed the nature of migration from circulatory to settlement and strongly increased the share of those pre-war immigrants that want to stay in Poland permanently. The same survey delivered also some suggestions on expected by immigrants forms of assistance that would facilitate their stay in Poland. While pre-war immigrants expected mostly easier legislation of residence (47%), Polish language courses (27%) and access to healthcare system (26%), the refugees that came to Poland in months following the Russian invasion prioritize language courses (43%) and assistance in finding a job (35%).

Conclusion and Future Expectations

At present the future of Russia-Ukraine war is difficult to foresee and it is unpredictable to answer when and how the war will end. The situation behind the eastern border of Poland directly influences the situation and decisions of Ukrainian refugees living in Poland. While some of the refugees decided to return to Ukraine and the movement across borders is currently stable (the number of entries across Polish-Ukrainian border is balanced at ca. 30k per day to and from Ukraine), the length of the conflict will shape decisions of Ukrainians that fled their country. The longer the war is going on, the less refugees that escaped to Poland (and other countries) will decide to return to Ukraine. Obviously, the end of the conflict would encourage some refugees to return to Ukraine, but for many of them this decision might not be so obvious. The end of the war would not mean the end of many challenges for Ukrainian economy and state. Many regions have been devastated and especially people that lived in eastern parts of the country do not have homes to which they could return. The economic situation in Ukraine is also very difficult and the end of war will not automatically mean a return to the path of rapid economic growth. The end of the conflict will trigger the re-unification of families, but it does not necessarily mean that Ukrainian refugees would return to their country. Currently, Ukrainian men aged 18 to 60 may be mobilized and have no right to leave the country. The end of the conflict may lead to a new wave of migrations of men from Ukraine to other countries, where their families live or that offer better economic opportunities and standard of living.

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