

DISPLACED, TWO WEEKS ON

Stories of Ukrainians in displacement

16 March 2022

Background and Context

On 24th February 2022, following an escalation of hostilities in Ukraine, more than two million people had fled the country within a period of two weeks: the largest cross-border displacement Europe has seen since the second world war. As of 16 March 2022, more than three million refugees have sought safety across international borders. The pictures of Ukrainians crossing into Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania, Moldova, have been shared across the world. They have reached safety. But for many at that point the journey is not over: Ukrainians are among the largest diaspora groups in Europe, with sizeable communities in Hungary, Czech Republic, Italy, Germany, and Spain. And yet, what happens to those who cross into neighbouring countries, if and how their journeys continue, and the challenges they may face in building a new life - at least intermittently - in Europe, we do not know. This is why at IMPACT we track refugees' experiences, from when they first leave Ukraine to their eventual destination and potential return. We are in touch with refugees from the moment they cross

the border: in partnership with UNHCR we have teams situated at Ukraine's borders with neighbouring countries, where we support the humanitarian response by gathering basic data about those who cross and their immediate needs. As part of this, we ask respondents whether they agree to stay in touch with our teams every two weeks, to share their stories of displacement, hopes and challenges, as they settle into a new life. We also ask about intentions to return, based on the evolving situation in Ukraine.

Part of a larger longitudinal study, we have so far collected 750 interviews with refugees crossing the border. We plan to collect several thousands of interviews and stay in touch with respondents over the next months to hear their stories. This is the first brief based on the first 30 follow-up interviews with those who left Ukraine between 25 February - 3rd March 2022. When we spoke to them (10-14 March), two weeks had passed since they left. Respondents focused on the present and the future.

THE PRESENT

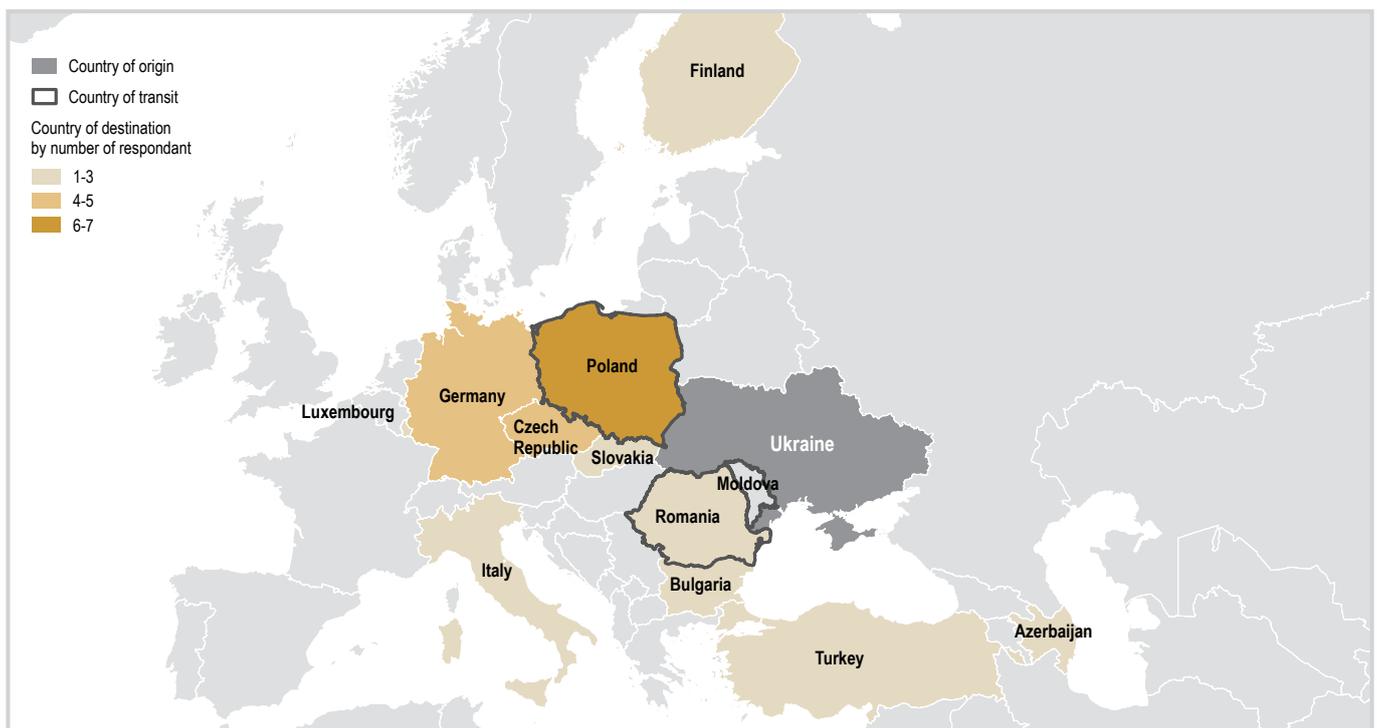
30 people, 13 countries

At the time of interview, our 30 respondents were scattered across 13 different countries. The relative majority were in Poland (7 respondents), followed by Germany (5), Czech Republic (4), Romania (3), Turkey and Slovakia (each 2), and Italy, Bulgaria, Turkey, Azerbaijan, Luxembourg, Finland. One

person had crossed but later decided to return to Ukraine to be with their family who stayed behind.

Most came to their location because family and friends had invited them to stay (reported by 14 respondents). In some cases, respondents' companies had organized a pick-up from the border to transfer employees with their families to safe neighbouring countries, where the company had offices and arranged accommodation (4). In other instances, respondents

Map 1: The journeys of refugee respondents who fled Ukraine between 24 February and 3 March 2022



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had been offered accommodation by volunteers whom they had met at the border and had travelled accordingly.

A warm welcome with many unknowns

All respondents reported to have been welcomed warmly by the host population, be that at the border, as they travelled, or at their (intermittent) destination. Most reported having received some sort of support during the journey or once arrived, mostly from friends, volunteers or civil society and religious groups. For instance, the majority of respondents (17 out of 30) were living with family and/or friends, with only few renting a flat (3) or staying in a hotel (3). Comparatively few respondents (5) stayed in a collective or government-run facility. Only three respondents were reportedly paying for their accommodation.

I just want to say that it feels really nice to be welcomed like this, and people are super kind everywhere but we just really want to go home.

23-year-old man, Czech Republic

With immediate needs addressed, most respondents were preoccupied with making their stay more sustainable, by finding work, a more long-term living situation and securing access to schools for their children. Learning the language at destination was reported by several respondents to be of priority. Some parents had already been able to send their children to school or kindergarten; those who had needed healthcare had reportedly been able to access it.

Now there are two key issues: kindergarten for children and the opportunity to go to work. If I give the children to kindergarten, everything will work out. We are now waiting for refugee status. When we solve the issue with the documents, then I will think about everything else.

24-year-old woman, Germany

The vast majority of respondents had not yet claimed asylum, as they were waiting to see how the situation at home develops. Most of the countries where respondents had moved to are in the Schengen area, where Ukrainians have the right to stay without having to formalize their status for 90 days. The two individuals who had already claimed asylum had done so either in a country outside of Schengen or because the individual already knew they wanted to stay in the location in the long term.

The first night we arrived here, we started looking for a job. We were still completely shocked. My husband is an IT specialist, but his salary will not be enough for 6 people. We were left without income. But we are happy that we are alive. I don't think I can complain, considering how people still in Ukraine feel. I cannot make plans for more than four to five days ahead.

34-year-old woman, Luxembourg

THE FUTURE

What united respondents across countries of destination and profiles, was uncertainty about what comes next. Most want to wait to see how the situation in Ukraine develops before making longer term plans. The vast majority want to return home as soon as possible. Some were planning to travel further to join family elsewhere, or to find a job and move accordingly. However, by and large, respondents said they would see in the coming week or two how the situation evolves - in Ukraine and in their present destination - and decide on that basis what to do.

I would like to go to the UK, I know the language, I have relatives there, but for now I stay. I am waiting for my 18-year-old daughter to join me here with our documents. She is in Kyiv right now but should come within the next few days.

42-year-old woman, Germany

About our respondents

The vast majority of our respondents were women (27 out of 30), most of them aged between 25 and 40 years old. Most were travelling with at least one child (24 out of 30), having left their husbands behind in Ukraine. The majority came from Kyiv and Odessa and had first been interviewed at border points in Poland (16), Romania (8) and Moldova (6). The vast majority of them are skilled professionals, working in IT, the health sector as doctors and nurses, and teachers.

The socio-economic background of our respondents, as well as the rapidity with which they reached their (intermittent) destinations is indicative of their ability to leave Ukraine early at the onset of the conflict. In line with literature on forced displacements, is it likely that more vulnerable groups with less resources, be that financial or social - friends and family in Europe who they can join - will be displaced in the coming weeks and months, should the situation in Ukraine not improve.

Refugees' Voices

36-year-old woman, left Kyiv on 26 February with her two children (one aged 0 to 3, the other between the ages of 6 and 12), interviewed first at the border with Poland, now in Germany

I have friends here in Germany, they helped me to come here. First I want to learn German, have the children learn it. I don't know how and when I will be able to send the children to school. Since we are from Irpen, we literally have nowhere to return. We will learn the language, and then figure out what to do accordingly to the situation. Now there is nowhere to go. There is no house anymore, no grandparents. My husband back in Ukraine now lives in church, sleeping on a mattress.

We live in a village, there is no transport here. We have no acquaintances in the cities. Now we live in good conditions, we were given clothes, toothpaste. People bring us food for free. We will stay here for a week or two. And then maybe we'll stay, maybe we'll go.

27-year-old woman, left Kharkivska on 24 February, travelled alone to Romania

I work for an IT company, so I still have a job: my company is quite big and they have many offices in Romania, so that's why I am in this country, my acquaintances helped me to find accommodation and for the first few nights local volunteers helped us to find a place to stay.

My challenge is that I don't speak the language. We (me and a few friends) want to find accommodation for rent till the moment we will be able to come back home, for now everything is ok for us here, people are nice and friendly.

About IMPACT

IMPACT Initiatives is a Geneva based think-and-do-tank, created in 2010. IMPACT is a member of the ACTED Group. IMPACT's teams implement assessment, monitoring & evaluation and organisational capacity-building programmes in direct partnership with aid actors or through its inter-agency initiatives, REACH and Agora. Headquartered in Geneva, IMPACT has an established field presence in over 25 countries. IMPACT's team is composed of over 400 staff, including 180 full-time international experts, as well as a roster of consultants, who are currently implementing over 90 programmes across Africa, Middle East and North Africa, Central and South-East Asia, and Eastern Europe

37-year old woman left Odessa on 1 March, interviewed first at the border with Moldova, now in Bulgaria, travelled with four children of whom two younger than three years old and one child aged 3 to 6

We came here [town in Bulgaria] because our relatives live here, they sheltered us for some time. But we have to live here all together in just one room, it's crowded, so it's just temporary.

In the very beginning local volunteers paid for our groceries. Others helped with medication- two of my children and I have diabetes so we need constant access to the right medicine: local people gave us all we needed.

Our main challenge now is accommodation; we are looking for an apartment to rent on different websites etc. but we can't find anything for now. And because of that we can't start looking for work, kindergarten etc.

We want to stay here for now.

Methodology

This brief presents findings from a pilot research project exploring the experiences of refugees fleeing Ukraine to neighbouring countries and further afield over time. Through its humanitarian data initiative REACH, IMPACT, in partnership with UNHCR, continuously monitors refugees crossing borders from Ukraine. As refugees cross, they are first interviewed on their most urgent needs at the border to inform the immediate humanitarian response. Thereafter, many give their consent to stay in touch with our field teams for follow-up interviews every two weeks over the phone.

The data collection tool administered during each round includes some indicators which remain the same, to ensure longitudinal analysis, and a core section which changes each time, to reflect the changing situation and key concerns of respondents. Follow-up interviews are conducted by trained enumerators, who conduct the interviews in respondents' mother tongues. Data collection at the border, as well as follow up interviews, is done continuously, to ensure comparability of refugees' profiles as they cross at different times, originate from different places, and end up in different locations.

The present product is based on the first 30 pilot interviews conducted as part of this larger research stream. It is hence the first pilot output. Future products are likely to change in both scope and breadth, depending on information needs of humanitarian, government and other response actors.