

Piotr ARAK: Society of solidarity

Director of the Polish Economic Institute

The war has forced several millions of Ukrainians to leave their country. The Poles have welcomed these war refugees to their homes with open arms. By an unprecedented decision of the Polish authorities, the Ukrainians were granted the same rights as the Poles, the only exception being the right to vote.

On 24 February 2022, Russian troops entered Ukrainian territory to begin the largest war in Europe since WW2. According to UN data, nearly 14 million people were forced to leave their homes and almost 8 million have fled the country. These have been mainly women, children and old people.

Just like during WW2, Russia started deporting people to Siberia, while its units tortured members of the elites and POWs, raped women and committed genocide in the captured towns and villages. The atrocities perpetrated by Russian troops made millions of women flee. 80 years ago, one of such women was my grandmother. Together with her sister, she decided to settle in Poland for good rather than go back to a Ukraine controlled by barbarians. For me and for many other Poles, the war in Ukraine is not only an act of aggression against a neighbour, but also against us.

Since the outset of Russia's onslaught, the Polish-Ukrainian border has been crossed by over 7.4 million refugees from Ukraine. Given that about 5.6 million have moved in the opposite direction, roughly 1.5-2 million refugees have stayed in Poland. Together with the previous wave of Ukrainian migrants triggered by the Donbas war in 2014, this puts the total number of Ukrainians living in Poland at about 3-3.5 million.

Almost every Pole got involved in helping Ukrainian refugees

The spontaneous response of the Polish society exceeded all expectations as 70 percent of adult Poles joined in the effort to help the refugees. People offered their rooms or even entire flats. With 7 percent of Poles doing so, several hundred thousand families were housed in private homes rather than placed in refugee camps as is the case during other crises of that type.

59 percent of Poles bought essentials and 53 percent contributed to raise money for refugees. According to the study carried out by the Polish Economic Institute, the Poles spent up to €2 bn to support the Ukrainians fleeing the war over the first three months.

Cash benefits, health assistance and education

Thanks to changes in Polish legislation, Ukrainians may be granted the PESEL identification number like every Polish citizen. This allows them to legally stay in Poland for 18 months. They have the right to set up the "trusted profile", a digital identity that they can use to obtain various social benefits, including the universal family benefit of about €120 per child.

The wave of refugees caused by the war is mainly made up of women. Over 60 percent of them came with their children, so they need to secure a place in a school or nursery before they can look for a job.

Ukrainian refugees are entitled to payments such as family, child-rearing, start-of-school and carer benefits amounting to as much as €2,600. To help take care of children, municipalities have followed fast-track procedures to open more nurseries and many public institutions have been transformed into temporary sleeping facilities. Refugees were also granted a one-off payment of €80 per person.

In addition, the Ukrainians fleeing war were given access to free psychological support, food aid and health care.

Already experienced in remote teaching, schools knew how to quickly reorganise their work to admit 200,000 extra students from Ukraine (including nearly 20,000 in Warsaw alone). The rules for hiring teachers have been eased to employ Ukrainian speakers from among the refugees. Besides learning in Polish schools in the Polish language, many Ukrainian children also attended Ukrainian schools remotely.

Easier recruitment of Ukrainians

Poland also liberalised the legislation regarding the employment of Ukrainians. When recruiting a person from Ukraine, it is now enough to inform the relevant labour office within 7 days. Ukrainians may take up and carry out business activity in Poland on the same terms as Polish citizens. The new rules have applied to over 450,000 new employees. With about 600,000 Ukrainian refugees of working age registered in Poland, this means that some 60 percent have found a job. On top of that, Ukrainians have set up over 10,000 firms which accounts for almost every tenth newly registered business.

It is unprecedented, too, that Poles are similarly free to take up employment in Ukraine. This will be very useful once the process of rebuilding Ukraine has started, even without a peace agreement.

OECD estimates that, in 2022, Poland will support war refugees from Ukraine to the tune of €8.4 bn, the highest such amount among the OECD countries (total OECD expenditure being estimated at €26.8 bn). This is followed by Germany (€6.8 bn) and the Czech Republic (€2 bn).

The solidarity demonstrated by the Polish society is amazing. The Polish and Ukrainian nations have always had a lot in common, even though our shared history also included some dark episodes. There are many Poles who could recount family histories similar to mine or who remember the crimes committed by Ukrainian radicals against the Poles in Volhynia during WW2. Today, all that is in the past. It goes without saying that we must help our neighbours in need and will continue to do so until they can return to their homes safely.

Piotr Arak

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