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UKRAINE: Refugees received with open arms in neighbouring countries

Refugees from Ukraine received with open arms in neighbouring countries

The humanitarian tragedy drawn in the face of refugees fleeing Ukraine, but they are received with comfort and open arms in neighboring countries

By Imane Rachidi (*) – Krakovets/Korczowa (Ukraine/Poland)

Diplomat Magazine (14.04.2022) – <https://bit.ly/3JS3HSi> – War is pain. A suffering that is drawn in the faces of the 4,5 million people who flee Ukraine daily since the end of February. They reach the border with a tired look. The elderly, some who can barely walk or speak any other language, are hopeless and scared. Children hardly understand what is going on. And young women carry them all: children, pets, luggage, and the load of the whole family's pain. They are heading to European countries seeking safety, housing, and refugee, while carefully watching the developments in their homeland. Some are expecting to be able to get back to their lives and homes sooner than later, and that is the reason why they choose to stay close to the border. Others have less expectations, and they rather travel across Europe looking for friends or families to stay with for a longer period.

Irina is a 65 years old Ukrainian refugee, and she used to teach teenagers history in a secondary school near Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Station, located in the Southeast of Ukraine and on the Dnieper River shore. "My son stayed back there. He is my only child, and I am afraid of losing him. He didn't want to leave the country, by any means. Our house is destroyed, nothing is left from it. I can't believe that at my age I must look for a new job, to make a living for myself. I am totally alone here in Poland", Irina told us, while crossing the border separating Ukraine from Poland, where everyone waits for the refugees with open arms. She saw terrible things on her way, and now she only carried with her a small bag with some basic clothes, her savings, and memories to never forget home and friends.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees estimates that there are more than 2,6 million Ukrainian refugees in Poland, almost 700.000 in Romania, around 424.000 in Hungary, 411.000 in Moldova, 317.781 in Slovakia, and 20.739 in Belarus. The Regional Refugee Response Plan brought together UN, NGO, and other relevant partners to be able to focus on supporting host country governments to ensure safe access to territory for refugees and third-country nationals fleeing from Ukraine. Within Ukrainian territory, there are more than 10 million people displaced internally, for instance to Lviv, the nearest city to the Polish border.

Olga, a 36-year-old mother, traveled all the way from Kiev with her two daughters and a little grey cat. The four of them wait inside a room in Przemyśl train station surrounded by folding beds, blankets and pillows, secondhand clothes, personal hygiene products and food. Neighbors in this Polish city have brought to the station everything that can be of help to the Ukrainian refugees, including baby trolley and hundreds of toys for the children. The European Union has opened its gates wide and Ukrainians automatically receive a special, temporary residence status of at least one year. As a result, refugees in EU countries are entitled to housing, benefits or work, education, and basic care.

Nina Carbaij is 18 years old, she was born in Przemyśl, and she spends her free time helping the Ukrainian refugees who arrive daily to Poland since 24th of February. "We try to give as much information as we can to help the people arriving here, for example where they can find the trains, a place to sleep, some food, or where to exchange money. Anything they might need. Some of them just need comfort, they are just

scared from what is happening”, Nina said. She thinks psychologists are really needed to help them cope with the trauma because volunteers do their most human best, but they are not experts. Although some psychologists, who are also volunteering in train and bus stations, underline that it is too early to work on trauma, and that such severe exposure to traumatic events make now the refugees try to keep their minds away from those memories to first feel safe.

Organizations are worried about the children and their education, far away from their classmates and neighborhood friends in Ukraine. Although they fled to a foreign country and they have already found a safe place to stay, the mothers’ mind is still back home. Men: husbands, fathers, and brothers, have stayed behind, and that makes women keep worrying about them, sometimes not giving priority to the need of the children to go to school. It is not clear how long they will have to stay in their refugee country, but experts believe children should start learning the local language, making new friends, and receiving proper education in schools. The target is making the whole family feel home, until it is possible for them to go back to their homeland.

(*) Imane Rachidi is a Journalist and researcher.

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