



**Summary of the annual
research project “Refugees
from Ukraine in Poland”**

For the past year (2022/2023), the Amnesty International Association has been investigating the situation of refugees who fled to Poland from the Russian aggression against Ukraine. We reported on the discrimination faced by Roma people from Ukraine, the unequal access to education for students, the difficulties in the home rental market, and the anti-Ukrainian rhetoric and misinformation on the Internet. Each time, we recommended solutions that the Polish government should adopt in the face of these challenges and problems.

In this summary, we are presenting the main conclusions of our investigation.

Roma people from Ukraine in Poland

The millions of refugees who have arrived in Poland include Ukrainians from the Roma community. It is estimated that 100,000 Roma people have reached the countries of the Community that border Ukraine (as of September 2022).

In Poland, the support and assistance to refugees from the Roma community was largely provided by Polish Roma people and NGOs supporting the Roma community.

Stereotypes about Roma people, which are strongly rooted in the minds of the Polish and European society, undoubtedly affect the perception and treatment of Roma refugees in the host countries.

Despite the extremely warm welcome given by the Polish society to the Ukrainian refugees, it is those of Roma origin who, because of their ethnicity, have faced inferior treatment, hostility, and misunderstanding on the part of some volunteers and coordinators working with refugees. As reported to Amnesty International, as a result of stereotypes and prejudices, refugees of Roma origin were not admitted to reception centers or were provided with less or a lower standard of care and support than other refugees.

For precisely these reasons, some Roma people have decided to return to Ukraine. Some of them were helped by Polish NGOs to go to countries of Western Europe.

Amnesty International has been informed by volunteers and NGOs about at least several situations in which reception centers, managed and/or funded by provincial or local governments, did not let in Roma refugees from Ukraine because of their ethnicity.

Such situations were said to have occurred, among others, at the PTAK Humanitarian Aid Center in Nadarzyn, as well as a center in Cracow and in Hrubieszow (near the Ukrainian border). Such reports, which come from independent sources, indicate a disturbing pattern of actions taken in relation to Roma refugees at reception centers in various Polish cities.

Amnesty International also recognizes the problem with access to housing outside reception centers. Many refugees from Ukraine have found temporary free housing in the apartments of Poles or in hotels and vacation homes of private owners. Unfortunately, in the case of Roma refugees, it has been much more difficult to find such accommodations, on the one hand due to the size of their families, and on the other due to prejudice.

Non-governmental organizations working for Roma refugees emphasize that people of Roma descent fleeing the war in Ukraine constantly face discrimination in Poland from some of those working and helping at reception centers. This manifested itself in, among other things, avoiding giving them information or assistance, issuing fewer clothing items or food servings, or accusations of theft despite lacking evidence.

In the opinion of Amnesty International, there is no effective response to these problems by the state. Despite the measures that government entities are taking to ensure the equal treatment and safety of all refugees, acts of discrimination against Roma people in temporary accommodation centers and aid stations continue to occur.

For the integration of the Roma community in Poland to be effective, anti-discrimination education and the state's promotion of openness and inclusiveness are also necessary. Meanwhile, there are instances in which resentment and stereotypes toward Roma refugees are reproduced by representatives of the central government, as well as local and regional government. This leads to the persistence and deepening of resentment and prejudice against that community, which translates into marginalization, discrimination, and even a direct threat to Roma people.

Although we have seen an improvement in the situation of Roma people from Ukraine in Poland over time, a year after the Russian aggression against Ukraine, they still face inferior treatment in collective accommodation centers, resentment, and double standards.

Ensuring equal treatment for every refugee is an obligation of the Polish authorities that stems from, among other things, the 1951 Geneva Convention. International human rights treaties also oblige the signatory states to protect people from discrimination, such as unequal treatment, violence, and persecution.

Students from Ukraine in Polish schools

With some 190,000 Ukrainian students attending Polish schools (as of February 2023), the Polish education system faced a huge challenge. The students, very often not knowing the Polish language, are forced to fulfill their schooling obligation in Poland or continue their education remotely in Ukraine, which, due to the ongoing armed conflict there, is in many cases extremely difficult, including due to power outages.

"The Ministry of Education and Science does not monitor the number of children and young people arriving in Poland from Ukraine since February 24, 2022 who are not enrolled in Polish educational institutions" - the Ministry (MES) told Amnesty International. The MES also does not collect information on how many school-age Ukrainian refugees residing in Poland are studying remotely in the Ukrainian education system.

The parent or the person who has custody of the student is obliged to submit to the municipality where they reside a statement on the continuation of education by that student in the Ukrainian educational system. Practice shows, however, that not everyone fulfills that obligation. This means that we do not know exactly how many students who have fled to Poland from Ukraine are currently outside any educational system.

Already in the last school year (2021/2022), researchers from the Migration Research Center wrote about hundreds of thousands of Ukrainian students whose education status was unknown.

Compulsory education is one thing, but the quality of education is also proving problematic. Polish schools lack textbooks for students in Ukrainian or in both Polish and Ukrainian. Many schools also lack intercultural assistants or adequate infrastructure to accommodate new students, even though they have the right to attend those schools. Teachers look for their own for solutions to the situation they find themselves in. Many indicate that they feel "left alone" with this challenge.

In this difficult situation, in the last school year, Ukrainian students at Polish schools had to take The eighth-grade exam - otherwise they would repeat the year. Taking the exam in Polish, without knowing

that language, after a few months or weeks in a new school, involved a lot of stress and led to poor exam results for many of them. Those results determined the secondary school that the students could get into. Moreover, one should bear in mind that such an exam is an additional burden for young people who face the trauma of war.

Fully aware that no country can be prepared for such an exceptional situation, Amnesty International has concluded that the Ministry of Education and Science should do much more to ensure equal opportunities and the highest possible level of education for Ukrainian children and youth.

The Association's study also shows that despite the great help and warm welcome from the Polish society, some Ukrainian children and young people experience discrimination and hostility from Polish students and their parents. In view of this, it is necessary to systemically introduce intercultural and anti-discrimination education. Unfortunately, it has been lacking in Polish schools for years, and the gap is being filled by NGOs - including Amnesty International - in cooperation with volunteering teachers. Meanwhile, the MES is making further attempts to limit informal pro-equality education in schools. Once again, the responsibility for assisting and supporting refugees from Ukraine has largely fallen on the shoulders of the civil society.

International law obliges the Polish government to take care of children with refugee experience. This arises, among other things, from the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Poland has an obligation to take all measures to enable the exercise of the right to education. Under the same convention, a child's education is supposed to prepare him or her to live in a free society, "in the spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance, equality of sexes, and friendship among all peoples, ethnic, national and religious groups and persons of indigenous origin."

Anti-Ukrainian propaganda

As early as in August last year, we drew attention to the disturbing anti-Ukrainian rhetoric and repeating of the Russian narrative by politicians on the far right. Unfortunately, in the following months, experts in the field of combating disinformation and hate speech found that anti-Ukrainian propaganda on social media remains on a high level all the time.

Moreover, [as Marcel Kiełtyka, a member of the board of the Demagogue Society, said to Wirtualne Media](#), "political parties and Polish members of parliament continue to appear among the profiles spreading anti-Ukrainian content with the greatest outreach."

The association, together with the Media Monitoring Institute, [prepared a report in November](#), the results of which are very disturbing: in the month under review, as many as 73,000 Polish-language posts and comments were detected that "contained negative references to the Ukrainian community."

The most popular accounts on Twitter (a medium with more than 90 percent of the anti-Ukrainian posts) spreading disinformation about Ukraine and Ukrainians include the account of Grzegorz Braun, a member of the Polish Parliament, one of the leaders of the Konfederacja coalition and the president of its member party Konfederacja Korony Polskiej.

The latter prepared a brochure informing, among other things, that "the presence of a large Ukrainian minority in Poland will result in the negative import of numerous pathologies of social life from across the eastern border; from corruption and crime to demands for easier access to abortion." In addition, members of the coalition circulated a graphic art on the Internet saying that people from Ukraine were "overrunning Polish cities."

The spread of anti-Ukrainian disinformation by public figures does not only apply to politicians from

Konfederacja. Posts with such content were also published by, for example, Barbara Nowak, the education superintendent of the Małopolskie Province, who wrote that “the wave of Ukrainians fleeing the war has filled native anti-Polish groups with the hope of eradicating at least some Polishness. They call for an end to the teaching of Polish history and literature, under the pretext of caring for the feelings of Ukrainians. There is no consent to giving up Polishness!”

One must bear in mind that public figures have a huge responsibility to publish only verified and evidence-based information. Given their wide social media reach and their influence on the public debate, they should be especially careful to avoid spreading misinformation.

The latest research on anti-Ukrainian rhetoric and disinformation [was published by the “Never Again” Association](#) (February 2023) and [by Maison&Partners](#) commissioned by the Warsaw Enterprise Institute (January 2023).

The Maison&Partners report states that in January 2023, the number of Poles supporting views similar to those promoted by the Kremlin had increased since September 2022. If the survey is to be believed, the largest number of people agreed, among other things, with the statement that Poland cannot afford refugees and that refugees from Ukraine are actually economic migrants. However, the authors of the survey point out that such results are not necessarily a consequence of propaganda, but also, among other things, of fatigue with the war across our eastern border.”

The “Never Again” Association, in cooperation with SentiOne, reported that over the past 12 months (February 2023), nearly 400,000 anti-Ukrainian statements appeared on the Polish Internet, with about 550 million page views. A comprehensive report on the subject was also published by the Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights (2023)¹.

Dr. Agnieszka Demczuk of the Department of Political Systems and Human Rights at the Maria Curie-Skłodowska University in Lublin says that although she has noticed greater involvement of the Polish authorities in combating disinformation after February 24, 2022, “these actions are still insufficient.”

“There is a lack of systemic and comprehensive measures in this area, there is no strategy for building information security and social cyber resilience in Poland that would be adequate for the times we are in - the times of a full-scale war across our eastern border” - Dr. Demczuk told Amnesty International.

According to the UN Human Rights Council’s “Freedom on the Internet” resolution (2012), the same protection of human rights and freedoms is required online and offline.

Freedom of expression and freedom of speech do not function independently and are interdependent with other human rights. This means that freedom of expression does not give us the right to spread discriminatory content, that is, in the case at hand, radically anti-Ukrainian or anti-refugee content. This is stated in national and international law, including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, of which Poland is a signatory.

Housing situation of refugees from Ukraine

Thanks to a huge mobilization of the society, many refugees in Poland almost immediately found temporary housing. This assistance was necessary and worked well in the short term. However, one year after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, it is necessary to adopt systemic solutions in the medium and long

¹ <https://hfnr.pl/publikacje/raport-przvjda-i-zabiora-antvukrainska-mowa-nienawisci-na-polskim-twitterze-> (accessed on May 20, 2023)

term. These, unfortunately, are still lacking.

As Hanna Milewska-Wilk, a housing specialist at the Institute for Urban and Regional Development, told Amnesty International, according to her estimates, some 200,000 apartments may be currently (May 2023) rented by Ukrainian refugees according to market rules, mostly in large cities.

“These are conservative estimates, the number could be higher, it is unlikely to be lower. Group accommodation, employee housing, housing made available for free use, and non-residential premises (temporary, etc.) are not included here,” she said.

As of May 15, 2023, there were nearly 990,000 refugees with UKR PESEL numbers in Poland. This means that not all those who fled the Russian aggression have managed to rent apartments.

In the course of our monitoring, we have repeatedly received signals of reluctance to rent housing to refugees from Ukraine. The reason is often the belief that if, for example, the tenants fail to pay rent, it will be impossible to evict them. While this is not the case, as lawyer and activist Beata Siemieniako told Amnesty International, “both Ukrainians and landlords don’t quite know what rights they have,” which compounds the difficulties in the housing rental market.

The largest group among those who fled Ukraine for Poland after February 24, 2022 are adult women and persons under the age of 18. Many women arrived without relatives, knowing no one in the new country. One should bear in mind that due to the widespread draft in Ukraine, men capable of military service were required by law to remain in the country.

The elderly and people with disabilities also found themselves in an extremely difficult situation. Poland’s system of care remains inefficient due to an insufficient number of places in nursing homes. It should be noted, however, that despite the lack of places, refugees from Ukraine can apply to stay in nursing homes once their disability certificate is recognized, just like people from Poland.

Unfortunately, due to the small number of physicians who speak Ukrainian in Poland, obtaining a certificate of physical or intellectual disability is difficult for refugees, and the process drags on for up to several months.

As UNHCR data shows, landlords who voluntarily provide access to their apartments and houses to people from Ukraine continue to be a vital support in accommodating refugees in Poland. According to the Act on assistance to citizens of Ukraine in connection with the armed conflict in the territory of that country, referred to as “assistance act,” which was adopted last March, any host that provides accommodation and food to a refugee from Ukraine is entitled to a cash benefit of PLN 40 per day per person for up to 120 days.

However, it should be taken into account that long-term hosting of people reduces the comfort of both the guests and the hosts, and can also lead to conflicts and “aid burnout.” In addition to offering a roof over their heads, it was not uncommon for hosts to help refugees find jobs, apply for a UKR PESEL number, and assist them in other aspects of life in their new country.

Given the overwhelming support of the Polish society and the foreigners who provide aid, they too should be supported by the central government, as well as the local and regional governments, in ways other than just financial assistance.

According to the Migration Consortium, more than a year after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, there are still many people in group housing centers, especially in large cities, despite their temporary nature.

Although such places provide humanitarian aid and, as such, should be free of charge, the government

has decided to introduce a participation fee for their residents. According to an amendment to the so-called “special assistance act” adopted on January 13, 2023, refugees are required to cover part of the cost of their stay in group housing centers. Previously, stay at such centers was free. While this obligation is supposed to exclude certain groups of people, including pregnant women, people with disabilities, and the elderly, it still applies to the majority of people who are currently in those centers.

Polish law does not explicitly oblige the government to provide permanent housing for its citizens or foreigners. However, given the state’s obligation to respect and protect human dignity (Article 30 of the Constitution), public authorities should strive to ensure basic living conditions for everyone who lives in the territory of Poland.

All materials published as part of the project “Refugees from Ukraine in Poland” (in Polish and Ukrainian) are available at: <https://www.amnesty.org.pl/uchodzczy-z-ukrainy-w-polsce/>