

UK: Johnson government keeps Ukrainian refugees entry to bare minimum

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The response from Boris Johnson's Conservative government to the Ukrainian refugee crisis has been brutal and laced with breathtaking hypocrisy. Having played a leading role, along with the US, in provoking the Russian government into launching its catastrophic invasion, British imperialism is indifferent to the millions of people they have forced to flee for their lives.

Some two and half million refugees have already left Ukraine. Four million, and possibly as many as seven million, are anticipated. Of these, the vast majority are in Poland, where a largely voluntary effort centred on the country's large Ukrainian population is seeking to house as many as 1.5 million people.

Following the invasion, the European Union (EU), on March 2, ordered its members prepare to receive a "mass influx" of refugees. A directive instructed member states to allow those fleeing to stay for at least one year, with the option of extending their stay to three, with no visa requirement. In contrast with the EU's general attitude towards refugees and asylum seekers fleeing poverty and imperialist generated bloodbaths, Ukrainian refugees are also allowed to receive social benefits, housing, education and be able to work.

Britain is no longer in the EU, and the marginal loosening of Fortress Europe's brutal rules to those fleeing the worst refugee crisis in Europe since World War 2, does not apply. The Tory government insisted it would enforce its own visa rules to refugees from Ukraine. Johnson told parliament, "The EU already, because of its Schengen border-free zone, has its own arrangements with Ukraine. They differed for a long time from those of the UK, but what we do have is a plan to be as generous as we possibly can to the people of Ukraine..." He added, "What we won't do is simply abandon all checks. We don't think that, that is sensible, particularly in view of the security concerns, the reasonable security concerns about people coming from that theatre of war."

By Wednesday last week, only 957 Ukrainians had been granted visas to enter the UK, around 0.05 percent of the total and 4.5 percent of the 22,000 that had applied to the UK. By Friday the figure has risen to just 1,305 visas. The government continued to insist on onsite processing of forms, personal security checks and biometric data capture before only those with close family ties to Britain could enter the country.

Many reports emerged last week of Ukrainian refugees confronting incompetence and chaos in their efforts to stay with families and friends in the UK. Despite Johnson's claims of a "huge and very generous" visa programme, the implementation of the Ukraine Family Scheme has resulted in hundreds of traumatised people becoming victims of a vicious bureaucratic roller coaster.

Many arrived at the British Visa Application Centre (VAC) in Lviv, Ukraine only to find the office closed and the next available appointments the following week in Prague, Czech Republic. VACs are scattered in around 140 countries, but access to them is through a privately run portal run by visa outsourcing outfits such as TLSContact or VFSGlobal. Refugees, who have left their homes in mortal danger and without documentation are being shunted from one to the other in pursuit of biometric data and correctly completed forms.

Marianne Kay, whose 79-year-old mother is trying to reach the UK, described the atmosphere at a VAC in Rzeszow, Poland, near the Ukrainian border, where people are gathering from early morning in freezing temperatures. Marianne told the BBC people were "desperate", "shouting at each other all time". Staff were overwhelmed and "there is absolutely no way that people who work here can process so many applications. So it's not working. People are very frustrated, very angry. They ran out of patience. If this continues for much longer, it does feel like there will be riots."

Marianne had to wait two days in Rzeszow to even get

the visa application processed. She and her mother will now have to travel to yet another VAC in Warsaw to see if their application has been successful.

At the Brussels VAC just 60 visa applications per day has overwhelmed the poorly staffed service. Politico.eu reported an A4 sheet stuck to the VAC office door apologising “if we are unable assist (sic) all of you quickly”. A couple with two children and a mother in law were turned away because only one of them had filled in a form. They would have to return later with correctly completed forms to get fingerprinted. The family had driven 2,500 km from Irpin, near Kyiv, when bombs starting falling, have been sleeping in their car and have run out of money.

An Afghan man, with Ukrainian citizenship, his wife and three children abandoned his cosmetics shop to flee Odesa as the war neared. The family had been waiting for hours outside the VAC. He said that the UK “always has been the most difficult country to get in for the refugees.”

Over 300 refugees hoping to reach the UK have arrived at Calais, France only to be turned back by the UK Border Force or French police and told they too had to go to Brussels or Paris for their biometric data to be taken. The Home Office, with its massive resources, had set up a trestle table offering bottled water, crisps and biscuits.

A temporary VAC was supposed to be set up in Lille, France—over 100 km from Calais—to which those turned back by the border forces were to be referred. Summing up the anti-immigration agenda that social policy is geared to, Home Secretary Priti Patel said the Home Office had not set up a VAC in Calais on the pretext it might attract people considering the desperate trip across the English Channel by inflatable dinghy.

The *Daily Mail* reported hundreds making their way from Calais to Lille only to find that the “pop-up” VAC did not yet exist. 22-year-old Roksolana, told the *Mail*, ‘We were told that the visa centre would be open for business on Thursday but nothing’s happened. It’s just one of the many lies that we’ve been told by the British Government.’

Official brutality quickly generated broad disgust, with 182,000 people signing a petition calling for visa restrictions to be waived, forcing the matter to be debated in Westminster today.

Labour’s Shadow Home Secretary Yvette Cooper called for the army to be used and more processing centres to be opened and various Tories, including Brexit hard right MPs such as Steve Baker, urged action in line with their support for NATO’s proxy war in Ukraine.

So determined was the government to keep Ukrainians out that Patel raised concerns with the Irish government—who have allowed refuge to over 2,500 people fleeing war—The Independent reported, “Priti Patel told Dublin she was concerned that the country’s welcoming policy towards Ukrainian refugees would allow them to reach the UK by the back door.”

By late last week, the government conceded marginal changes. Patel allowed that biometric data could be collected after refugees had arrived in the UK, although confusion persists over whether a second route beyond the Ukraine Family Scheme will be opened. Patel’s Home Office was reported as having conceded that families of people already in the UK on temporary visas could travel to the UK. This, however, was too much for Johnson. Instead, a scheme to allow third parties, such as employers and local authorities to “sponsor” refugees is to be introduced.

Once they arrive, desperate Ukrainians are to be utilised as cheap labour for Britain’s collapsing services and building industries, all of which have been reporting disastrous post Brexit labour shortages, intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic. Founder of building firm Redrow, Steve Morgan, personal worth £881 million, announced he intended to fund 1,000 Ukrainian refugees. Late February, immigration minister Kevin Foster tweeted, later deleted, a comment that refugees could apply to the “seasonal worker scheme”, mostly aimed at recruiting fruit pickers for backbreaking work in farms.



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