

The realities confronting Ukraine's six million refugees

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Six million people have now fled Ukraine, according to recent data from the United Nations Human Rights Commission. Another 7.7 million are internally displaced. Collectively, this represents about 31 percent of the country's population.

While the Western media has sought to portray the situation as if the women, children, and elderly men pouring out of Ukraine are walking into the loving arms of America and Europe's governments, all of the social and political problems of global capitalism in a severe state of decay—poverty, inequality, the breakdown of the health care system, low wages, human trafficking, anti-immigrant chauvinism and racism, and borders that cannot be crossed without visas—are manifesting themselves in the refugee crisis.

The United States, which just approved a \$40 billion package for Ukraine that is primarily devoted to transforming the country into killing fields, will admit just 100,000 refugees. The “United for Ukraine” program, while receiving 19,000 applications so far, has granted visas to just 6,000. Entrants must complete background checks, biometric scans and, most significantly, demonstrate that they have private sponsors in the US that have the financial means to support them.

Prior to the start of “United for Ukraine,” 20,000 refugees from the country were piling up along the southern border of the US. While they have mostly been dispersed, going to Mexico City or back to Europe, some are still being housed in temporary shelters staffed by volunteers. Washington insists that no Ukrainians will be admitted to the country or granted any legal status unless they complete the visa process off of US soil.

In the UK, a Home Office representative told the press on Wednesday that Ukrainians going to the country without documentation will be deported, possibly to war-torn Rwanda, to which African migrants are now being sent. Any Ukrainian entering Great Britain by transiting from Ireland to Northern Ireland and then to the British mainland will be treated as an illegal immigrant. The government official would not say whether those crossing the English Channel from France would also be included in this category.

News is continuing to come out about problems with Great Britain's “Homes for Ukraine” program. Migrants, predominantly women and children, have been placed in households for which there have been no criminal background checks, even though this step is supposed to be required. Currently, there are efforts to get 600 Ukrainian families out of places that have since been deemed

unsafe. Advocates are concerned that the vulnerable population will fall prey to human traffickers.

In addition, Britain's grossly underfunded National Health Service (NHS), while in principle accessible to those Ukrainians granted entry, cannot handle the needs of the population. Refugee advocates note that the migrants, particularly children, are in extreme need of mental health services. They face a two-year wait to receive any.

Canada, home to nearly 1.4 million people of Ukrainian descent and a breeding ground of far-right Ukrainian nationalism, has come under criticism for failing to provide any means to get to the North American country for those receiving temporary, three-year visas through the Canada-Ukraine Emergency Travel Authorization program.

In response, Ottawa announced that it is sending three charter planes in late May and early June to transport a mere 900 refugees. They can get seats on the planes on a “first come, first serve” basis. Once in Canada, “free accommodation will be offered to Ukrainians who do not have a suitable place to stay for up to 14 days,” an official told the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. What the individuals from one of Europe's poorest country are supposed to do with themselves after those two weeks is unclear.

Germany, which has declared that it will set no upper limit on the number of Ukrainian refugees it will take, is, according to the leading American journal *Foreign Policy*, kicking Afghans, who sought safe harbor from the Taliban, out of their apartments in order to make way for the newcomers from Ukraine.

Reporting on the circumstances of one Afghan household, *Foreign Policy* wrote, “Amiri and her family have already been moved twice since their March eviction and now live in a former hotel on Berlin's northern outskirts in Reinickendorf that is advertised as a temporary shelter for people who are ‘homeless’; it's the family's third home within a month.”

Germany is also refusing visa-free admission to Ukrainians who do not have biometric Ukrainian passports. They are stuck in Poland, which is the primary recipient of those escaping the Russian-Ukraine/NATO war. There have been 3,200,000 people who have crossed into its territory. How many are staying there or moving onto other places—or at least trying to—is unclear because the responsibility for managing this population has largely devolved to city and local-level governments that are struggling to get a grip on the situation.

Charities, non-governmental organizations, church groups and ordinary people are those primarily providing services, such as help finding temporary shelter, food and clothing, medical care, schooling and so forth. The mayor of Warsaw recently described the response as an “improvisation.”

He said that the federal government, while allowing Ukrainians to cross the border, has been giving little logistical support. Financing for many efforts is coming out of city budgets, but volunteers are frequently those stepping in to do the on-the-ground work, and the money allocated is not enough.

One Polish volunteer told the *New Republic* in mid-April, “At first, the laundromats would launder the sheets we needed for free; caterers wouldn’t charge for food. That’s starting to end,” but, he added, but “people are still coming.” The situation is particularly unsustainable because the ability of the citizenry to provide things like housing by opening up their homes to families in need cannot continue for months, much less years on end.

Poland’s capital has seen its population grow by more than 15 percent in two and a half months, with 300,000 Ukrainians now living in the city and making up one of out of every five residents. Rents, reports the *New Republic*, “rose 15 percent in the first two weeks of the war—in Kraków 26 percent and in Wrocław 33 percent.” Inflation, running at 12.3 percent as of April, is now the highest it has been since 1998.

Warsaw, which now has 120,000 Ukrainian children to educate, is hiring refugee teachers to educate them at a rate of \$40 a day for six hours of work—a little over \$6.50 an hour. This is not enough to even cover the average rent of a one-bedroom apartment. Many refugee households, moreover, do not have two earners, as working age men are not allowed to leave Ukraine.

After Poland’s banking system started to enter a crisis in March because it was unable to handle the volume of near-worthless Ukrainian currency that refugees were trying to exchange for Polish zloty, a policy has been instituted whereby migrants are guaranteed the ability to exchange 300 euros worth of Ukrainian hryvnia for three months. What happens after that time is unknown.

Other countries are also buckling under the weight of the refugee crisis. The tiny country of Moldova—home to 3 million people and along with Ukraine one of the poorest countries in Europe—has seen 430,000 refugees transit through its territory, of which 95,000 have remained. With anemic economic growth, inflation running at 22 percent, soaring natural gas prices and the lasting effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, it simply cannot provide for this population.

Remittances from Moldovans working abroad, which amounted to \$1.5 billion in 2020, or 10 percent of the country’s GDP, have also collapsed. The International Monetary Fund has even appealed to foreign powers to simply give Moldova money, so that the country, of geostrategic significance in the conflict with Russia, does not implode.

In March the EU decided to grant Ukrainian refugees “temporary protection status” (TPS), which allows them to live in member states, as well as potentially receive some social benefits and possibly work on a legal basis. It was portrayed by Brussels as a great humanitarian act. Indeed, it is more than desperate migrants

from the Middle East and Africa—left to drown in the Mediterranean, locked up in detention facilities, water-cannoned at the border, abused by the police, and deported—have received.

However, the length of stay allowed under TPS varies from country to country, from as little as 90 days to one year. Sometimes, but not always, it comes with the possibility of renewal. In the meantime, refugees have to apply for longer-term work permits or permanent asylum through completely overloaded official channels with endless waits and bureaucratic obstacles. Many will be denied and shipped back to Ukraine, regardless of whether or not it is safe.

In addition, it is clear that some within the EU largely view Ukrainian refugees as a profitable, low-wage workforce. “We can already see how many people from Ukraine are working legally in Poland, often filling in jobs that Poles don’t want, so it’s evident that the help is mutual,” said Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki recently. The jobs that Poles “don’t want” are those with substandard wages and working conditions.

Furthermore, TPS status is being denied to those who cannot prove Ukrainian citizenship, such as Africans who were studying in Ukraine when the war broke out and refugees from the Middle East who were using Eastern Europe as a transit point. Roma with dual citizenship are also being refused EU entry. The Czech Republic, for instance, just instituted new rules for refugees to show proof of identification with the express aim of keeping them out.

When noted in the press, these facts are frequently attributed to racism. This plays a role, with EU states having long promoted the most disgusting forms of anti-Arab, anti-African and anti-Roma prejudice and discrimination.

But the central issue is not the skin color or origins of the refugees. It is the fact that Ukrainians are fleeing a war allegedly created in its entirety by dictator Vladimir Putin and his hatred of “freedom” and “democracy.” The Ukrainian refugees, pawns in America’s and Europe’s quest for domination, are thus easily used in the anti-Russian propaganda that is laying the groundwork for the US and NATO to launch a direct war against Moscow. Thus, they for the moment receive relatively sympathetic treatment in the media and some governmental assistance.

Refugees from Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, Syria and elsewhere, however, are attempting to get out of areas where the driving force is the total destruction of these regions by the US and its allies. And those fleeing Africa are trying to escape violence and desperate poverty that are the products of the colonial and neo-colonial rape of the continent. Apart from their usefulness in whipping up anti-immigrant chauvinism in an effort to divert social anger in a right-wing direction, for Washington and Brussels, these refugees are treated largely as human trash.

As the crisis unleashed by the war spirals, Ukraine’s refugees, like their country, will also be brutalized.



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