



# Ukraine: A Conflict That Should Not Be Forgotten

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Within the international context, constantly becoming more dramatic, the war in Ukraine runs the risk of being converted into a 'forgotten' war. Nevertheless, it is our responsibility not to allow it to fall into silence.

Pope Francis, January 3, 2024

The international armed conflict between Russia and Ukraine has displaced millions of people, a fact that has constituted the greatest humanitarian crisis in Europe since the Second World War.

According to the United Nations Office for Refugees, from February 24, 2022, they have registered more than six million refugees coming from Ukraine into the rest of Europe, and another almost 400,000 to places outside of Europe. Of the Ukrainian refugees in Europe, more than 4.3 million

have registered to receive temporary protection or, in other countries, where there are similar forms of protection.

For their part, the International Organization for Migration calculates that in Ukraine itself there are 3.7 million people who are internally displaced. It has also stated that more than two-thirds of those displaced (70%) have been displaced for a year or more.

During this more than two years of conflict, 4.6 million people have returned to their habitual place of residence after a significant period of displacement either from a foreign country or from inside of Ukraine. The data from the IOM indicate that the people who have returned from outside of Ukraine represent only 22% of the total. Of these, it is estimated that 298,000 continue to be displaced inside of Ukraine.

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In spite of the great efforts made by the United States and the European Union, the war has brought on serious consequences of a world-wide scale, foremost of these being an energy and food crisis. The drastic fall in production and exports has affected the least favored economies. It should be recalled that Ukrainian exports, especially those of wheat, have been crucial for some Asian and African countries. That is exemplified by data showing that between 2016 and 2021, they received 92% of Ukrainian wheat.

Also, on a larger scale, the conflict in Ukraine has morphed, on the one hand, into a war of low intensity with the growth in the number of Russian troops in Ukraine, and, on the other hand, into the beginning of “Ukraine fatigue” on the part of some Western countries. Concretely, this happened with the emergence of other international conflicts such as that of Israel and Gaza, Lebanon, South Sudan and Myanmar. Nevertheless, the situation in Ukraine continues to be critical. The impact on the civilian population is becoming devastating and it is urgent to find diplomatic and humanitarian solutions.

The European Union has shown solidarity with Ukraine and it has adopted measures that are unprecedented. Since February, 2022, members of the Union have gathered periodically to debate the situation from different perspectives, demanding on various occasions that Russia put an immediate end to its military actions, to withdraw its troops unconditionally from Ukraine, and to respect the territorial integrity, the sovereignty and the independence of the country.

As a response to the military action, the European Union has gradually broadened the sanctions on Russia through different packages, adding a higher number of

persons and entities to the list of sanctions and adopting restrictive measures. In spite of that, these measures are having a limited effect given that Russia has found other allies in order to avoid the said sanctions.

Despite the weariness and the tensions in the last months, the European Union has demonstrated unity and strength, having approved at the beginning of 2024 a new package of aid for Ukraine in four sectors: humanitarian, political, financial and military.

### **Solidarity Wins Out If There Is Political Will**

The arrival in Europe of more than 6 million Ukrainian refugees triggered on March 4, 2022, the activation of the directive with regard to temporary protection, an emergency mechanism whose objective is to alleviate the pressure on the national systems for asylum and to allow the displaced persons to enjoy rights that are the same throughout the European Union. Among those rights are residence, access to the labor market and housing, medical attention, social assistance and the access of minors to education. This mechanism was initially granted for one year, but on September 28, 2023, the European Council agreed to extend temporary protection from March 4, 2024, until March 4, 2025.

Thanks to temporary protection, Ukrainian citizens obtained residence almost immediately. This situation gave them a stability that helped them to look to the future with hope, giving them a way to enter the labor market, to gain access to housing and the educational system. The fact that they can choose freely in which member State to establish themselves, in practice promoted a balance in the welcom-

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ing efforts of the member States which, in turn, reduced the pressure on the various national systems of reception.

We have definitely seen that if there is political will, within a few weeks the European Union was able to confront an unprecedented emergency to deal with the refugees and to fulfill an obligation in the matter of human rights.

The systems of welcoming that a good part of the European Union activated to receive the Ukrainian refugees have been communal and independent welcoming spaces. They were models which different entities had been developing and proposing for many years, as, for example, the networks of hospitality communities of the Servicio Jesuita a Migrantes España, or the Welcome program of the Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) in France, among others.

The experience gathered during these years demonstrates that the models of welcoming based on an independent lifestyle, which assures that encounters between the recently arrived and the local community offer the best opportunities for a successful integration. With the Ukrainians, then, Europe seems to be on the right path.

For their part, both the Directorate for Welcoming of the European Union, and the development that is being carried out by many of the countries of the European Union, promote detention, push the recently arrived into the spaces for reception in the large centers, many times on the peripheries of the cities, and not always under conditions which allow for an adequate community and social insertion. There are stories of old military bases being rehabilitated, of minuscule islands or reception centers on ships in the middle of a cargo port.

The new European Agreement on Migrations and Asylum focuses on obligatory

border procedures that will probably concentrate thousands of people – including children – in de facto detention centers along the exterior borders of the European Union.

## **Lessons Learned**

An important lesson that we have learned is that the Ukrainian people were given the freedom to choose their member State of destination and also they are allowed to move from one country to another while maintaining their temporary protection. This is not possible for other asylum seekers nor for other recognized refugees. This freedom of movement has shown that the system has collapsed and also that people have transferred to their preferred destination (where they had family or relatives, where they could find work, etc.), and this definitely helped their process of integration.

From the beginning of the armed conflict, at the JRS we have committed ourselves actively to receive and integrate Ukrainian people by means of an important project, called One Proposal, developed in Ukraine and in 13 other countries of Europe. It is coordinated by JRS Europe and the Xavier Network, and done in collaboration with local associates and NGOs. The Society of Jesus has given emergency aid, refuge, psychosocial help, education and integration among many other services.

All that we are learning about the emergency in Ukraine can become relevant to receiving refugees from other regions of the world, in spite of the differences of each of the conflicts. When the political will exists, with a point of view that places the individual person at the center, millions

of refugees do not pose a threat to Europe, but rather an opportunity to grow in our humanity. It is fundamental to guarantee a unified and coordinated focus to take on the needs of the refugees without taking into account their places of origin.

## **Medium and Long-Range Answers**

Arriving at almost three years of large scale war in Ukraine, it is forecast that the situation will be prolonged more and more, especially in the east and south of the country, where the bombardments and selective attacks against the infrastructure have become a part of Ukrainian life.

The data from the Humanitarian Response Plan (HNRP) indicate that 14.6 million people inside of Ukraine will need humanitarian aid of many kinds, among them some 3.7 million internally displaced by the war. Besides that, it is anticipated that the number of refugees that will seek protection in all of Europe will remain stable at around 5.9 million with continuous swings of the pendulum between Ukraine and the countries that receive them.

According to the latest data received from the UNHCR, almost 80% of the refugees hope to return to Ukraine someday, although only 14% hope to do that in the near future. The concern about security, along with access to basic services, housing and the means of subsistence, continues to be of greatest importance to the refugees and internally displaced at the moment of deciding whether to return or not.

Our experience with the One Proposal consistent with this data presents an important change in the response to the refugees. From the first day, we have committed ourselves to accompany them in an

integral way in the medium and long range. This means not only distributing food and emergency aid, which took place primarily in the first days, but also supplying in the medium range places to live, education and support in integration and formation for employment.

An element that continues focusing on the accompaniment of Ukrainian refugees is their composition, because it is characterized strongly by its feminization. The martial law that forbids the exit of men between the ages of 18 and 60 accounts for the fact that 80% of the refugees are women and children and a number of people who are old and vulnerable.

This ongoing situation of the separation of families has meaningful consequences for couples and even more for children. Also, this separation is aggravating the already extremely difficult situation of the men inside of Ukraine, especially for those who are on the front lines and who have had few opportunities for rest and relief.

The wear of a low intensity war, along with the elections both in the United States and the European Union in the course of 2024, can have crucial consequences for the development of a war in which Ukraine needs strong external support from its allies.

Olena, a Ukrainian refugee, received by JRS Rumania, helps us to keep hope alive. "Independently of the circumstances, it is crucial that we remain and continue being, good human beings. These things that are happening can easily tear down our hope and the goodness of our hearts. I want peace in the world, not only in Ukraine, and that everyone can return to their homes."

Alberto Ares  
Director of JRS Europa