



UKRAINE:

THE WAR TOLD VIA THE STORIES
OF THOSE FLEEING CONFLICT



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REPORTING THE FACTS. BUILDING A SHARED MEMORY

ANDREA OLEANDRI

Chief Operating Officer CILD

On February 24, actions leading to the destruction of the lives of millions of Ukrainian citizens were commenced. On that day, the Russian army began its invasion of the country, bombing and invading the cities.

Millions of people, particularly women, children and the elderly, have had to collect the few things they could and set out for the borders to leave their country. Leaving behind their lives, desires, their dreams and the people they loved.

In the first 40 days, according to UNHCR data, more than 4 million people have fled the country or approximately 10% of the population. Most of them have reached Poland where, so far, 2.47 million people have found shelter. The next most commonly reached country is Romania, which is currently hosting 15.3% of displaced refugees.

Poland and Romania are followed by Moldova (the number of people crossing the border towards Transnistria has not been counted), Hungary and Slovakia.

During this time, Italy has been the destination of over 83,000 displaced people from Poland. Among these, 90% were women (42,879) and children (31,670).

The European Commission responded to these migratory flows by activating the Temporary Protection Directive to guarantee immediate protection, derogating from normal asylum procedures, which the huge flow in a short period of time could have put at risk.

There has been an extraordinary mobilisation which, however, has also raised questions about the overall management of migratory flows across Europe.

Many have pointed out that there has been an activism for Ukrainian refugees which was missing in response to similar crises involving citizens of other countries. One of those pointing this out was Elio Vito, a Forza Italia deputy who tweeted on April 3: "67,000 migrants arrived in Italy in 2021. 81,000 Ukrainian refugees arrived in a month, for whom there is the right, proper welcome. Italy therefore can and knows how to host [refugees]. Crying out that the [prior] landings are a scandal is, therefore, the worst type of propaganda, it's inhumanity".

Furthermore, neighbouring countries that are most exposed to flows, in some cases have treated non-Ukrainian citizens escaping Ukraine, mainly from Africa and South Asia, differently to other refugees from Ukraine.

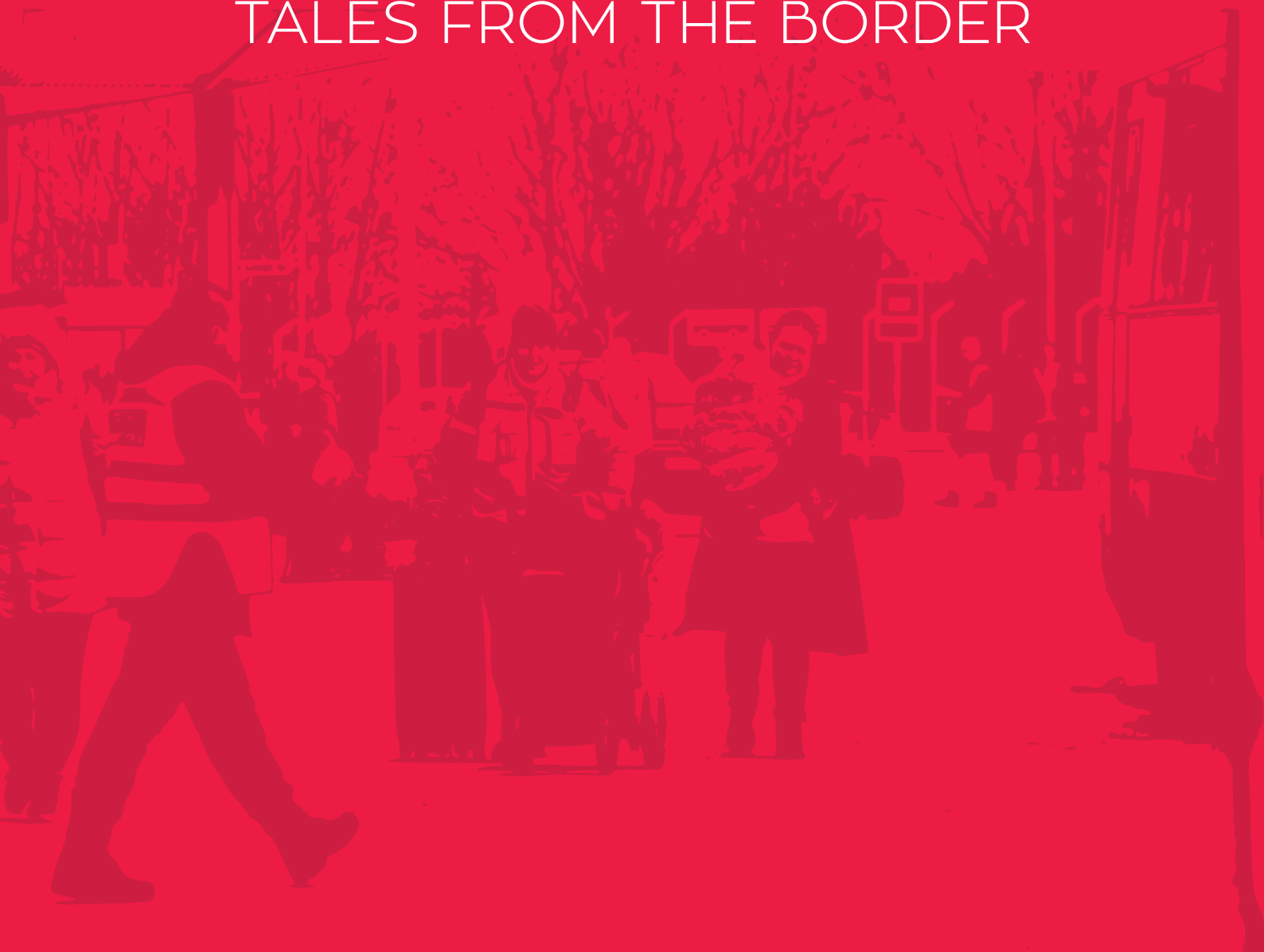
Through Open Migration, we have told, from the very first moment, of all these incidents. We did this thanks to reports and insights brought to light by our contributors who, at the forefront, collected voices, stories from the borders or from refugees who arrived in the countries that welcomed them, and followed and evaluated the political responses offered by European and Italian institutions.

We have decided to create a collection of stories in this e-book, to offer a broad picture of what is happening, what the war means, and the reasons that in Ukraine, as in other parts of the world, push people to run from their nation homes. We also reflect on how much the "willingness to welcome" counts. Our aim is to attentively follow the facts today and build a shared memory for tomorrow that helps us avoid mistakes made in the past.





TALES FROM THE BORDER



Millions of lives changed forever

ELIRA KADRIU



Train journey while fleeing Kyiv. All photos in the article were authorised by the interviewees.

On Tuesday 8 March, Filippo Grandi, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, claimed that more than 2 million people have fled Ukraine, which makes the current crisis “the fastest growing crisis since World War II”. Dramatic numbers, behind which lie the stories of so many women and men whose lives have changed forever. Elira Kadriu spoke to a few of them.

“Mum promised me that we wouldn’t sleep in the bunker anymore, I want to sleep in my bed, I don’t want to hide from the bombs”.

This is the daughter of Marina Isaeva, 39. She and her mother are now safe in Wroclaw, Poland. Marina left Kyiv on 25 February, the day after the war started.

“Thanks to the help and hospitality of a Polish family, my daughter will go back to school on Tuesday”, Marina told me. When I asked her whether the new language would be a problem, she explained that Ukrainian and Polish are quite similar and that the children adapt quickly.



Marina safe in Poland.

Marina's husband, though, could not escape with them as he had joined the Ukrainian armed forces.

"I don't know where he is and what he is doing. I talk to him on Telegram, a few minutes in the morning and a few minutes in the evening, sometimes I show him the baby on camera. I talk, he listens, that's about it. He's not allowed to tell me anything," he explains.

When she heard the first explosion, they lived in a flat on the 16th floor in the eastern part of Kyiv, near the Dnipro River, Marina says.

"After hearing the sound of the first bombings, I took my daughter and spent the first night in the bunker. My in-laws did not come with us because they kept insisting that it was nothing serious. During the night I looked at my daughter and realised that she was very scared. I went with my intuition, my instinct. That's when I decided that I would leave Kyiv at dawn".

Marina travelled from Kyiv to Lviv with only 20 hryvnias in her pockets. Due to problems with the banking system, she could no longer withdraw cash from her card. After a night in the bunker in Kyiv, Marina spent a second night in a bunker in Lviv. From there she travelled by train to the Polish border, where she finally felt safe.

"As soon as the train stopped, the Poles started to pass food, clothes, hygiene products, toys, and shoes through the windows. During this period, many relatives turned into strangers, while many strangers whom I would never have known if the war had not broken out, turned into relatives. I will be forever grateful to them," Marina concluded.

Tanja Bondarchuk also managed to escape the war and reach Romania with her 2-year-old child. Prior to February 24th, she lived in Irpin and was a baker.

"I was scared to death when the explosions began and the whole house was shaking. I had no place to hide with the baby because we don't have a basement. I didn't sleep for two days in a row".

She confessed to having made the decision to leave after hearing the massive explosions at Gostomel airport, which is close to her home. Tanja travelled alone with her child for five hours to the town of Zhytomyr where her husband's family lives. Then, she was accompanied to Chmelnitsky by her father-in-law.

"My husband was in the United States on business and came directly to Romania, to the house of some friends where we are temporarily staying. He chose to stay close to his family and to not go to war," she explained.

The only people allowed to cross the Ukrainian border are migrants. Juan Victor Aguilar, 37, moved from Peru with his family to Krakow, Poland. He lived with his Ukrainian wife and their son in Rivne for five years.

"It took me a long time to cross the border, because the land area between Ukraine and Poland is a hell. There are three checkpoints and each crossing takes at least two days," he explained.

On the other side of the border there are Poles waiting for the refugees and driving them to any city they want to move to. Some also offer rides to the Czech Republic, Romania, Hungary or wherever else they want to go.

“We are now considering staying here, but if we apply for refugee status it will be hard to find a job. The alternative option is to move to Peru, which is my home country, where I would have more opportunities, but the idea is to go back to Ukraine as soon as possible and I don’t know if it is worth moving so far away.

Juan still believes in peace and reconstruction:

‘I haven’t lost hope, everything can be rebuilt, but I can’t deny that it was a big shock. It will definitely take a long time to recover,’ he concluded.



The Ukrainian-Polish border.

Ukraine-Poland: travelling across the border

ILARIA ROMANO

The distance from Lviv to the border with Poland is about seventy kilometres. A route that would have taken a couple of hours before the war, but today can take up to 8 hours. This path is the main escape route from the violence of the conflict and among the thousands of people who travel along it every day is our very own Ilaria Romano.

“In Ukraine it has become impossible to book a bus to leave the country, even if hundreds of them depart from here every day; tickets can no longer be purchased in advance, via the internet, as was the case until the 23rd of February”.

Irina among those looking online, trying to reserve a spot on a bus to reach the other side of the border. A friend of hers has to leave, so she asks for help for her via a message to one of the many groups of volunteers who in recent weeks have sprung up on Telegram, Whatsapp and Facebook to coordinate aid and often help transport people on the run. “Tomorrow I might need it too - she explains - better to have the information in time”.

From Lviv, in addition to the trains connecting the main cities of Ukraine and Poland, before the war it was possible to take cheap buses and minivans to most European countries. Interminable journeys that ran smoothly, and were the ideal solution for those who carried heavy luggage with them. Today the means have multiplied, but also the numbers of people who set out on the road have skyrocketed: since the beginning of the war about 3.5million re-

fugees have left Ukraine (UNHCR data updated to 21 March).

Meanwhile, Irina has found a way to get the ticket: the solution was to buy it from a Polish travel company, and pay for it by credit card at the price of 100 dollars, an enormous amount compared to the normal rates for a 150 km route in one country where an average salary is around 200 - 250 euros. Of course, there is always the option of trains and buses made available for free, but the risk is that you may end up stuck waiting (possibly even for days), before being able to catch one.

Near the railway station, every parking lot, street, open space, and even dirt road, has become a new stopping point for vehicles heading out of the country, as well as towards cities under siege.



Photo by Ilaria Romano

The bus on which Irina booked seats is headed for Prague and departure is scheduled for three in the afternoon, but it is so full that the doors close an hour earlier, while the travel assistant checks the handwritten passenger list on a piece of paper. The driver leaves and ventures into Lviv traffic, which he slowly leaves behind. Seventy kilometres separate the passengers, refugees from half of Ukraine, from leaving behind their country; not knowing when they might be able to return.

A girl in a wool hat and tracksuit sits with a plastic carrier on her lap. There is no space to leave it on the ground, between the two rows of seats, at least until everyone takes their seats and manages to arrange their bags, containing the food they have brought with them for the trip, as best they can. If there are no delays, delays which are almost certain at the border crossing, the arrival in Prague will take place on schedule 26 hours from now. Rzeszów is the first stop, from there continuing to Krakow, then Katowice, Ostrava, and Brno before Prague.

The lady occupying the seat behind her gestures for her to leave that "luggage" in the corridor, no matter how tight it is, and whoever needs to get up will step over it. The girl then lets her cat out, picks him up, wraps him in a sweater and places the container near his feet. The animal does not make a sound and remains crouched on her lap, while she tries to let him drink some water. He is missing an eye and looks around with the other. She, the cat, her son and her elderly father who sits next to her, near the window, come from Kharkiv.

A little further on, a mother sits with her teenage daughter who is travelling half-lying down: her legs are burned, and she can't keep her jeans on for too long. So she is forced to remove them, at least up to the border, where she will have to get out of the vehicle for passport inspection.

It takes one hour to arrive at the border, and everyone realises it because the bus begins to slow down, until it stops in a long line of vehicles waiting to pass from one country to the other.



Photo by Ilaria Romano

Along the sides of the road there are some workers who are building wooden structures where other spaces will probably be created for first reception. In the meantime, dozens of people walk past the queues, some with children by their hand, others dragging their luggage. "Normally it takes about two hours to Rzeszów - explains the steward who in the meantime has gone down to look for something to eat and has just returned with two paper cups full of chocolate flavoured cereal - with the war, times have become incalculable they depend on how many people arrive at the same time, with all the passports to be checked one by one".

As hours go by, it is impossible to advance even by a metre. The sun goes down and the lights of the small kiosks on the side of the road are switched on. The wooden gazebos have been completed, only the tarpaulins are missing but now the darkness does not allow for the continuation of work. People on foot continue to arrive, leaving a few kilometres behind the "drivers" who stop before the border. Some get off the bus to stretch their legs and breathe a breath of fresh air because the space in the bus has become increasingly narrow over the hours. A Polish Red Cross doctor comes aboard to check in with the girl with the burns - she has brought bandages that will protect her skin from contact with the rigid fabric when she has to get dressed.



Photo by Ilaria Romano

There are a few metres to the border: another three hours pass, and by now it is ten o'clock at night. By now everyone needs to eat and use the toilets. Nobody talks, the girl with the cat falls asleep. Mrs. Nataliya, who left Kyiv two days earlier, tries to read a book, the only one she took with her on her escape. At midnight the border police finally get on board: two young women in camouflage make their way through the corridor and collect all the passports one by one; they say to wait on board.

The bus advances at a walking pace until it reaches the shelter of the Ukrainian customs offices. Many people decide to get off, even if it is not necessary for the checks. Inside the offices, there is a line of dozens and dozens of women, children and elderly people waiting, who pass an empty entrance and then find themselves crowded into this dimly lit space, with two dim neon lights on the walls, but which has nonetheless been adapted to provide a modicum of welcome. On the right are stalls with some volunteers handing out borsch [common soup in Eastern Europe and Northern Asia], while others approach to offer packs of chips and chocolate bars. The border police return on board

and deliver the documents to the assistant of the bus company, who calls all passengers by name. Three are missing as they're in line for the bathroom, but they arrive shortly after.

The journey restarts as the three lines of vehicles must necessarily be reduced to one, and this bottleneck marks the entry into Europe, in Poland, from the Korczoza crossing. In the meantime, almost another hour has passed. This time the passengers are invited to get off and to show their documents directly to the officers who remain seated in their boxed positions. Two long lines of people are created, each being asked for their surname and after the check, they pass into a waiting room where a table has been set up with sandwiches, bananas and hot tea.

The exit is on the other side, and the bus is parked a few metres away. People take their seats. Almost twelve hours have passed and a scant eighty kilometres have been covered. We leave, finally in Poland, and the traffic disappears in a few minutes. The border motel sign is the last light we see from the windows, then darkness returns. In a collective sigh of relief, all the

passengers seem to have dozed off, the border has been crossed, now the rest of the journey is ahead, another fifteen hours for those who want to reach Prague, less for those who stop in Poland, or continue the journey via other means.

Rzeszów is the next stop and the bus parks in the deserted yard of the terminal. A few steps away is the train station, which is still open with volunteers at work at half past two in the night.

Among them is Alex, who arrived from Montenegro with a Caritas delegation, and will stay here for eight days.

“When I heard what was happening in Ukraine, I identified with the fate of these people - he says - because my country too has a difficult recent past, with the war in the Balkans, the recognition of independence from Serbia, the disputed territories; the suffering. Every week a group of volunteers arrives. We sleep in a hospital in Przemysl because there are no beds elsewhere. There are women and children who spend the night here at the station, but no one should arrive until five o'clock today: we will have time to prepare more tea and put away the last packs of food.”

Lviv is a Transit Point to Flee Ukraine

ILARIA ROMANO



Lviv central station. Photo by Ilaria Romano

All the refugees fleeing Kyiv, Kharkiv, Chernihiv, Mariupol, Kherson, and other cities assaulted by the Russian Army stream through Lviv, where they wait for hours to board a train to a safe destination. How is the city preparing to help them?

Chernivetska Avenue is right in front of the Lviv railway station, a masterpiece of Galician Art Nouveau, used as an example in the early 20th century for the construction of railway stations in Prague and Vienna. Accessible on foot or by tram, it teems with people moving both towards the tracks and in the opposite direction, headed to the city. Some pick up the pace because it is snowing, while others just stop for a few seconds, exhausted, to catch their breath, pick up a child, or grab the handle of a suitcase that has fallen to the ground. Lviv train station is a transit point between East and West, a link between other Ukrainian cities and Europe with just over 1.2 million passengers a

month. In less than two weeks, almost the same number of refugees has been here, starting from February 24, the day that changed the way Ukrainians perceive time, and marked the difference between 'before' and 'after' the war.



Photo by Ilaria Romano

All the refugees who every day leave Kyiv, Kharkiv, Chernihiv, Mariupol, Kherson, and other places under Russian bombing, transit via Lviv, after waiting for hours – crammed into the departure stations – for the few trains available, in an attempt to save their own lives. The arrival in Lviv, after an endless journey, is just as complicated, because the packed trains pour women, children, old people, and pets onto the platforms, which can no longer hold them all. From there, they slowly make their way down to the subway that connects the tracks to the station's entrance hall. It is only a few metres in all, where the stories of so many people intertwine. There are queues of refugees waiting for the next train to Poland, hoping to get on it, and those who have just arrived and are still trying to work out how to continue their journey – whether by train, bus or car, or whether to stay for a few days in a city that has now no more room to accommodate them. Hotels, primary schools, cinemas, theatres, and even

the private homes of families – who open their doors to friends and relatives, but also to strangers in need who have come into contact through help requests posted on Facebook or Telegram, or through word of mouth – are completely rammed.

Only one kilometre away from the chaos of the trains, the buses, the luggage piled up everywhere, the Red Cross tents, and the stalls distributing borscht, other soups, and hot tea, Lviv suddenly seems to take on the appearance of a city where for a few minutes the war can still be forgotten. But the reality is different. Some of the statues in the ancient squares have been covered with fireproof tarpaulins, as if to protect them in case of attack, and today they look like shapeless white puppets. Many shops, cafés and restaurants in the city centre are closed during the day, not just in the evening when the curfew is set to start at ten o'clock. Others have chosen to stay open, but the customers are dwindling on a daily basis.

"Nobody wants to go out for lunch with all this going on," says Vasil, a chef with international experience and the owner of a Mexican restaurant. "My business partners and I are staying here, but we have decided to help those in need, so every day we make hot meals for the refugees." At noon, a long table on the first floor of his restaurant is covered with plastic trays containing a serving of rice, meat, legumes, and a fresh salad. "No one expected the war to happen like this, overnight," he says, "but in an instant, everyone's life was turned upside down. And it doesn't matter that so far this city has been spared from the Russian attacks, because every one of us has at least one relative or a friend who can tell us about horrible things, or who has fled their home, or is still stuck somewhere".

Dima, a 30-year-old man from Kyiv, has moved his headquarters into a four-storey multifunctional building that used to house a number of photographic studios. It is now partly a dormitory for evacuees and partly an office for coordinating aid distribution and the evacuation of people in danger. Dima runs his own travel agency, which he opened eight years ago in his early twenties, but when the Russian invasion began, he decided to leave the capital with his family and close

friends – eighteen people in all – and arrived in Lviv five days ago. “Unfortunately, we have been forced to leave our home, but I’m not going to take up arms because I’ve never done it and I wouldn’t even know how to use a gun,” he says, “but I thought that the network of international contacts we’ve created over the years thanks to our job could be useful for raising funds for people like me who are fleeing the war and losing everything, and also for activating a social campaign using tools that we normally use for other things”.

Thanks to its crowdfunding, Dima has already raised over eight thousand euros, which have been used not only to provide shelter to the refugees, but also to spread through Instagram information on how to behave in case of attack, where to take refuge, how to choose information sources, and how to identify fake news. “We are also making short videos showing what is going on in squares around the world,” explains Dima, “where people are demonstrating to support us. It is extremely important, because we believe that spreading positive messages is the right thing to do”.

Meanwhile, at the Palace of Arts in Kopernyka Street, one of the main streets of Lviv, people are queuing up to donate something or to volunteer. This art gallery has become the biggest humanitarian aid hub in town, collecting food, medicine, clothes, mattresses, and blankets from private citizens and associations, both local and foreign. “What we do here is collect supplies and deliver them to those in need,” explains Yurii Vizniak, the volunteer manager. “We have been here for ten days now, and we try to send basic necessities not only to civilians but also to the military at the front. There are more than 300 volunteers here, operating round the clock, seven days a week. We work in synergy with other hubs that are closer to the areas affected by the fighting, for a more widespread and effective distribution.”

Upstairs, the cinema has become an endless pile of clothes that a group of young people examine and sort by size and type, before placing them in cardboard boxes or large plastic bags, which another team carries down the stairs, forming a human chain all the way to the courtyard, where there is always a lorry ready to be loaded.



Photo by Ilaria Romano

“In the last two days alone,” Yurii says proudly, “we have packed 300 of them. Unfortunately, we can’t get all the first aid material we need, but we do our best to make sure that nothing is left behind. We just hope that as days go by, the need for humanitarian aid may gradually decline.”

Medyka and Przemyśl, the last frontier

ILARIA ROMANO



Photo by Ilaria Romano

With Ilaria Romano we travel to the villages of Medyka and Przemyśl, along the Polish-Ukrainian border, to continue our report both on the drama of those fleeing the war, and also on how solidarity is responding to the emergency.

Medyka is a small town with a population of under three thousand, where houses are squeezed between the railway station and the border crossing with Ukraine.

Since the start of the Russian offensive, a continuous flow of people have been crossing this border on foot, by car or minibus; they either continue along the same road, on the Polish side, or stop in a large dirt road which,

over the days, has become an open-air self-organised reception centre. Dozens of volunteers have set up tents with food, drinks, animal feed and mobile phone charging stations. There is also a Médecins Sans Frontières tent with a small team of four, including physicians and nurses, who have arrived from Israel to provide first aid to those who have just faced an exhausting journey and will have to carry on from there.

Fernand Cohen Tannoudji, the Medical Unit Chief, said: "Here at the border, two types of assistance are needed: minor care for mothers and children who do not have serious physical problems because they have travelled by bus, or have been accompanied by family members, and people who have risked frostbite due to having



Photo by Ilaria Romano

walked dozens of kilometres in the cold, with very little food or water. We try to help everyone, and where necessary we take them to the nearest hospital. The very last case was a woman who had a heart attack; we had to take her by ambulance a short while ago.

Many wait for their friends and relatives to arrive, and stay for several hours on the road, in their cars, waiting to see them appear; there are also those who have just fled the war and have remained at the border to help other people arriving, like Yulia, a Ukrainian student who has set up a stall with other volunteers, they serve soup and hot tea.

“I fled from Kyiv a few days ago,” she says, “and I saw that there is so much need for help because people are arriving constantly. So I decided to follow my friends who were already trying to help. We came to support the Ukrainians, but in reality we found people of many nationalities, who are fleeing my country, and many others ready to welcome them here.

Anu and Mihdnun are two Indian students living in Warsaw. They arrived at dawn to wait for their compatriots arriving from Kharkiv and Kyiv. “We responded to an ap-

peal from our embassy,” says Mihdnun, “and we have come here to the border to liaise between the Indian students returning from Ukraine and their families in India, who just want them back home. Many young people leave to go to university in Ukraine, especially those who choose medicine and engineering, degrees that are recognised by our country, which allows them, as well as those of us studying in Poland, to return home and get a qualified job right away. But this war has changed everything.

Two Pakistani young men are also with them. They have just crossed the border and are waiting to receive their first medical care. They were studying in Odessa.

Those without relatives and friends who have reached the site must continue their journey with the many means of transport available, often private vehicles: Polish citizens who offer a ride to Przemyśl, the border railway crossing and the first town on the way to Rzeszów, and from there to other major Polish cities.

In the border area, we have set up five aid centres,” explains Konrad Fijolek, mayor of Rzeszów, “not only here in the regional capital, but also in smaller towns

such as Przemyśl, where most people are gathered. We try to keep track of everyone, to make sure they are not left without assistance, especially because there are many young children who have faced very long and arduous journeys with their mothers.”

The waiting rooms have become dorms, with dozens and dozens of mattresses placed side by side, blankets, water bottles, paper cups and luggage all over the place.

Above those resting on the floor are the boards with the timetables of departing and arriving trains, including the one that crosses the two countries, which leaves from platform 5; it is no longer accessible from the main entrance to the station, but can be reached from the back, between the fenced-off spaces reserved for military and emergency vehicles, where the offices of the border police are located – who still check the passports of those leaving and especially entering Poland. Until ten days ago this was merely routine work, but today it is almost impossible to manage, in a space that nobody would ever have imagined would be needed to host thousands of people at once. As a matter of fact, passengers wait in the cold, in a queue, even for hours, until the train that has crossed the Ukrainian border and entered Europe has been completely cleared, and everyone has been registered and helped to reach the other platforms of the station, or the coach parking area.

Once the entry procedures into Poland are over, we move on to the exit procedures, for those who are returning from Przemyśl to Ukraine, to pick up their families or to return to defend the country after securing their families. This train passes through Lviv, Ternopil, and on to Kyiv, for how much longer we do not know. The train sets off, but you never know how long it will take to get there, how long the checks will last, how many unexpected stops there will be. Igor has been brought here by a Polish friend, and now hopes to join his parents in Odessa, because they would not be able to face the journey on their own. They will return to Poland, and will be hosted by his friend, who after 20 years will return the hospitality he received when he was a young man looking for a job in Ukraine.



Photo by Ilaria Romano

Rzeszów, Poland's largest city on the south-eastern border, receives refugees from Ukraine

ILARIA ROMANO



Rzeszów station. Photo by Ilaria Romano.

Since the outbreak of war in Ukraine, the Polish border has already been crossed by several thousand people escaping the violence. Ilaria Romano traveled to Rzeszów, the largest Polish city on the south-eastern border, to tell us how they are getting organised and to collect the first testimonies of those who have finally reached Poland.

The Intercity train from Warsaw takes about six hours to reach Rzeszów, the largest town in south-eastern Poland, before heading on to Przemyśl, a few kilometres from the border with Ukraine, at one of the most heavily trafficked crossing points for refugees fleeing towns under attack.

Marco caught the train in Krakow, and is attempting to get as close to the border as possible, because his girlfriend, who left Kyiv four days ago, is about to arrive in Poland. The couple, he Italian and she Ukrainian, live

in the UK, but she was at her parents' house right when the conflict broke out, and getting out of the country following the closure of airspace has become fraught with difficulty.

"I just hope to reach her – Marco explained – we will stay for a few days in Krakow and then we will try to work out where we should apply for asylum, whether in Italy or in the UK".

In the meanwhile, during the last four days, Rzeszów station has turned into a first reception centre: trains, buses and private minivans travelling all across Poland leave from here, heading to the main cities of the country, where Ukrainians seeking refuge often have relatives or friends. The taxis in the large square have all moved back to make way for ambulances and buses that continue to carry Ukrainian citizens, most of whom are women with small children in tow, away from their homeland.

The waiting room inside is packed with luggage of various sizes, soft toys, shopping bags full of water, biscuits, chocolate bars and some fruit. At the entrance, an arrow indicates that the help point is on the left, behind the small newspaper kiosk, and dozens of volunteers keep a record of the people in transit and the places they are heading for. The first things everyone asks for are a power socket to recharge their phones and directions on how to continue their journey. Some children sit on their trolleys for hours, some of them burst into tears because they are exhausted from waiting and from the long journey they have already made.

Paulina is sitting in her pram, wearing a pink snowsuit that reveals only her hands. She is no older than a year and a half, and her grandmother Mirna tries to keep her entertained with a colourful book while telling her stories, while Anja, her mother, is searching for a volunteer who can confirm that the departing train is hers, even though the indicated destination is not Krakow.

"We left from Kyiv, where we live, but we are originally from Donetsk: this is the second time in eight years that I have left my home," says Anja, wearing a long quilted waistcoat pulled tight over her stomach" but

in 2014 I didn't have a little girl and another child on the way.

Seven months pregnant, she decided to leave the capital after a residential building was struck. "The building you saw on all the newscasts is opposite the one where I live," she explains, "and the fear was too much. My mother and I made the decision to leave, hopefully only for a month, two at most, because my husband is still there and my in-laws didn't want to leave the city either".

They are heading for Warsaw, with two suitcases, a paper bag with Paulina's toys, and a pram. From Krakow they will have to catch another train. "We have friends there who will host us for the time it will take," says Mirna, "and we are hopeful that everything will go well."



Photo by Ilaria Romano

Until a few weeks ago they were living ordinary lives. Like many others, they had to rebuild their lives in the capital after escaping from the Donbass, when the war between Ukrainians and pro-Russian separatists who eventually proclaimed the autonomous republics of Donetsk and Luhansk was just beginning.

Their train is late, and a young volunteer offers to take them to the platform. They do not speak Polish and he

does not speak Ukrainian. They use Russian as their common language to communicate, and they start talking about the situation that has unfolded, the fact that Ukrainians have been accused of being fascists, Nazis, and how none of this reflects reality.

Anja scrolls through the pictures on her mobile phone: Paulina's birth, an outing with her husband, her mother's birthday on Lake Garda. Then she grabs a blanket and puts it on Mirna's shoulders, because the train is late and they have been waiting on the platform for almost an hour in sub-zero temperatures.

In the meantime, another Anja rushes to the bus terminal, a few dozen metres from the train station, to catch the bus to Warsaw. With her are her three children. The eldest is ten years old and is almost as tall as her, while the youngest are seven and five years old. Each of them is holding a soft toy, and now they have bags and luggage to carry. Although they rushed off, the train had already left, and a young volunteer is trying to figure out an alternative: but here comes a minivan, it has four seats left. They will all be in Warsaw tonight.

Meanwhile, two girls arrive with their elderly parents following. Their father is holding their dog on a leash, and they each have a pet carrier with a cat. This is their luggage; they left almost everything else at home to travel with their pets, like many others do.

"We try to give help, but the flow of people is non-stop," explains Martin, one of those in charge of the reception point. "The offices of the station have been made

into storage places for the basic goods brought by the people of Rzeszów, which now need to be sorted. At the back we have created a canteen, where we offer hot meals and drinks, and a little refreshment before the onward journey. But the truth is that a lot more space is needed, along with more staff and information offices; in short, it's pure chaos. This is shocking for us as well, everything has changed in just four days and we are trying to do our best, learning on the job."

A tragedy within a tragedy: the racial discrimination suffered by non-Ukrainian refugees

OIZA Q. OBASUYI



Photo by AJ+. via Twitter

Since the breakout of war in Ukraine, more than 600,000 people have left the country, and many others are currently attempting to do so. Among these are people - mainly from Africa and South Asia - who are not Ukrainian but who live in Ukraine and who, just like the others, wanted to escape as quickly as possible. However, a growing number of pictures and videos show how unequal their treatment has been.

In the wake of Vladimir Putin's attack and military invasion of Ukraine, hundreds of thousands of Ukrainian citizens have made their way to the borders of neighbouring countries to escape the bombardment. Despite the fact that, according to international agreements, anyone fleeing danger – regardless of ethnicity or religion – has the right to cross borders and seek asylum, numerous reports from non-European and non-white citizens living in Ukraine have revealed the unequal treatment of first and second class refugees.

Many African activists and students have been trying to bring their plight to light on Twitter with the hashtag #AfricansInUkraine, and have also created group chats on WhatsApp and [Telegram](#) to offer help. Among those who have gone to great lengths to offer assistance to Afro-Caribbean citizens living in Ukraine is Korrine Sky, a medical student of Zimbabwean origin who, despite numerous difficulties documented on both [Twitter](#) and [Instagram](#), managed to make it safely to Romania. “Before the attacks, the situation was just normal,” Sky explains in [an interview](#) for *Okay Africa*, “[...]I realised that there were a lot of people [who had not come in through their embassies]. So I started collecting resources [by setting up fundraising pages for African students], creating a group chat so that people over here could stay in touch with each other. There’s also a lot of fake news being spread, so we needed up-to-date information from people who are actually in Ukraine’.

Many African citizens felt left behind by their embassies, whose actions in dealing with requests for clarification and urgent evacuation plans were reportedly untimely. But this is only one of the issues that made the escape of African people from Ukraine so difficult. A number of video testimonies show the violent and discriminatory attitude of the Ukrainian authorities at different border crossings. In one such video, as reported by *Lighthouse Reports*, who are collecting tweets and complaints from African citizens, a black woman is denied boarding onto a train.

In an interview for BBC, Ruqqaya, a Nigerian medical student, said she walked for eleven hours at night before arriving in Medyka, a Polish town. “When I arrived here there were black people sleeping on the street,” Ruqqaya explained, further commenting that armed guards told her to wait because Ukrainians had to be let through first, while only a handful of African nationals were being picked from the queue. After waiting many hours, she was finally let across the border and headed to Warsaw on her way back to Nigeria. The BBC also interviewed another student, Asya, from Somalia. She said she had a similar experience: when she finally reached Poland, she said she had been told that ‘hotel accommodation was only for Ukrainians’. Now she is safely in Warsaw, in spite of what she was told.

The number of reports of such discriminatory treatment keeps growing: “They stopped us at the border and told us that black people were not allowed. But we could see white people crossing the border,” said Moustapha Bagui Sylla, a student from Guinea, [interviewed by France 24](#). Sylla reported that he left his university residence in Kharkiv, Ukraine’s second largest city, as soon as the bombing started. Gifty Naana Mensah, a student from Ghana, has been studying medicine for five years in Ternopil, western Ukraine. The *Globe and Mail*, which has collected many similar testimonies, reported her story, highlighting that once she arrived at the Ukrainian-Polish border, she discovered that African citizens had to wait while Ukrainian citizens crossed first. Mensah spent almost two days in line, with little water and no food.

Segregation in the queue was also reported by [other newspapers](#) and by Equinox: Initiative for Racial Justice – an anti-discrimination NGO operating at the European level – which reported a range of abuses: from the fact that people from South Asia and Africa were placed automatically at the back of the queue, to the fact that the Bulgarian president made a clear distinction between Ukrainian refugees, defined as “European, intelligent and qualified”, and refugees from other countries, defined as “terrorists”.



Photo by AJ+. via Twitter



Photo by AJ+. via Twitter

While we hope that this mechanism will be activated, it should be made clear that EU member states and institutions must ensure that non-Ukrainian citizens escaping from such situations be granted equal protection and rights, that all non-Ukrainians leaving Ukraine have access to EU territory as well as that their rights and dignity be respected.

Further to these allegations, the first diplomatic statements were also made: the Nigerian government expressed solidarity with Ukraine, but also stressed the importance of treating all refugees equally and criticised the mistreatment; the African Union denounced the mistreatment of African people at the borders and reiterated that anyone fleeing a dangerous situation has the right to cross the borders. Finally, the UN (in particular the High Commissioner for Refugees) also admitted to being aware of the mistreatment of non-Ukrainian refugees at the borders.

Many non-governmental organisations, including the Italian Coalition for Civil Liberties and Rights (CILD), are signing appeals to make sure that the rights of all those fleeing Ukraine are protected. The EU is negotiating the possibility of implementing Directive 55/2001, the Temporary Protection Directive, which would guarantee temporary and immediate protection for all Ukrainian refugees.

Fleeing Russia's authoritarianism

ELIRA KADRIU



Photo via Twitter

As the Russian invasion in Ukraine intensifies, space for dissent within Russian society decreases more and more. Thousands of people, mostly youths, who wish to distance themselves from Putin's politics, are leaving the country. Over 10,000 Russian citizens have already moved to Georgia, but even once across the border, fears of the potential ramifications of this exodus remain.

Olga* and Vlad* are a young Russian couple whose relationship continues at a distance today due to the war that began on February 24th. Vlad is one of the

thousands of Russian citizens who, oppressed by an increasingly tense political climate, has decided to move to Georgia, while his girlfriend remains behind in St. Petersburg.

"I can't agree with what's happening in Ukraine, it's unacceptable to me. I can't live in a country that started a war in Europe in 2022", Vlad confesses.

According to the Georgian Minister of the Interior, Vahktang Gomelauri, from February 24th to March 16th, about 30,439 Russians arrived in Georgia and of these 17,801 left for other destinations, while 12,638 decided to stay.

“I feel like a political exile, within the Russian society it’s not that unusual. I read about Brodsky, Bunin, it’s a feeling that I’ve always known, that I learned about through literature, but I never thought it would have happened to me”.

Vlad chose Georgia because it is easily accessible by Russians; it allows for visa-free entry and Russians can stay up to a year without issue. Georgia is not the only country with easy access, the 21-year-old adds – other countries such as Armenia allow Russian citizens to stay without restrictions for up to 90 days.

Before moving to Tbilisi, Vlad worked as a research engineer in the field of artificial intelligence. He arrived in the Georgian capital on March 11. After sleeping on his friend’s floor for a week, he rented an apartment.

“Sometimes I feel very sad that I can’t go back, because I love my country. I hate the government, but I love the country; I miss it a lot. Sometimes I am disappointed by what is happening and by the responsibility that Russian society has, because, somehow, it is our fault too”.

He says that the stories of many young people on the Russian border or in airports are similar to his own. Police forces may check people’s photo galleries and social networks to see if their political beliefs are opposed to Putin’s.

“It is not safe to go back to Russia and live there because a few weeks ago they changed some laws that mean I could be imprisoned for up to 15 years, just for posting something on Instagram in favour of Ukraine or posting photos of the war crimes we are committing on my social networks. It is dangerous even to donate to Ukrainians – all of this is already illegal”, he concludes.

Olga is also trying to get a passport to join him in Georgia.

“It’s difficult to plan everything because prices are rising every day. I’m not sure if the borders

will still be open, there are rumours that they want to close them because there are thousands of people leaving,” says Olga.

According to the 22-year-old, it is difficult at the moment to obtain a passport in Russia as there are many requests from citizens. This difficulty, according to Olga, may also be politically motivated.

“The prices of airline tickets have doubled or tripled: for example, tickets to go to Georgia used to cost 10 thousand rubles, now it costs 100 thousand rubles, 10 times more” she explains.

As for social media, Olga says that in Russia these channels are disabled and she uses Instagram only with a VPN, which changes a machine’s IP address and thus means that bans can be circumvented.

“I can’t wait to leave; I would like to do it as soon as possible. I’ve been panicking because a girl I shared a cell with when we were arrested for protests against Putin told me that the police had gone to her house after they released us and checked everything.



Photo via Twitter

I deleted the conversations, I deleted the photos from my phone, from my PC. I've spent my days looking out the window waiting for the police" confesses Olga.



However, many Georgians are intimidated by the influx of Russian citizens, afraid that this could turn into an excuse for Putin to invade Georgia. The country had already known war in 2008, when Putin sent combat troops to South Ossetia with the motivation to support citizens of Russian descent.

* Names have been changed for confidentiality reasons.

The Romanian model: grassroots hospitality for Ukrainian refugees

ELEONORA CAMILLI

On the border between Romania and Ukraine, a policy based on regular routes of entry, visa liberalisation and widespread reception is making it possible to avoid the occurrence of a “migration crisis” at the borders of the Union. A report by Eleonora Camilli.

Every evening, when he finishes work on a construction site, Emanuel wears a yellow reflective harness and heads towards Siret, on the border between Ukraine and Romania. He waits calmly for people to arrive, then when the bus fills up, he shuttles between the border and Dumbraveni in Suceava, his hometown, where the mayor has equipped a sports hall to welcome refugees. “Since the war broke out I have come here to the border in my car. I wanted to do something. At home, I have a four-year-old boy and I couldn’t stay and watch what was happening just in front of the TV” he explains. The first few evenings, towards the end of February, the temperatures dropped below freezing: “while speaking with other guys we wondered what could be really useful for the hundreds of people we met every night. And since it was too cold at night in the tents, we thought we’d find a place to let them stay. The Municipality has made available a structure with capacity for 300 people and so we have begun to transport the refugees there”.

From the beginning of the Russian invasion of Ukraine (on 24 February) to 20 April, more than five million refugees have fled the country. In taking in more than 710,000 people, Romania is the second-largest host

country in Europe, after Poland (which is hosting 2.8 million). Never before has the Bucharest government faced such an enormous influx of refugees. Most are women with children, but there are also many elderly refugees and refugees with disabilities. Almost all of them pass through the country with the intention of reaching friends and family in other European states - they stop for a day or two and then continue their journey. Others stay longer in the centres scattered throughout the territory so as not to stray too far from the border, with the idea of returning home as soon as possible - if not in their own city, at least in the areas bordering Romania, far from bombarded areas.

For everyone, the very first welcome begins close to the border: a hot tea, some chorba [a broad class of stews or rich soups found in national cuisines across the Middle East, Central Europe, Eastern Europe, Central Asia, Middle East, Balkans and the Indian subcontinent] and a bottle of water. Many volunteers are present to work inside the tents where stocks are stored, including biscuits, drinks, baby diapers and medicine. “There are people arriving who also have serious medical problems - explains Grigore, a Red Cross operator, “I have seen people with various illnesses, who needed to go to the hospital to undergo dialysis or seek treatment for other problems, even for a transplant in one instance. There are also many children who get colds and need to be treated so that the cold doesn’t progress”. As we speak, the operator continues to arrange the medicines in the tent. Occasionally someone comes along asking for water, food or directions to find out where to sleep at night. A tent is reserved for pets,



Dumbraveni di Suceava sports hall, a small Romanian town, used as a first reception center. Photo by Daniele Napolitano.

which many decided to take with them while fleeing the war. There is everything from treats to sprays to veterinary medicines.

Along the road leading to the border, there are malleable structures for refugees: the orange are reserved for women with children, the blue have a label affixed to the outside with the name of the country of destination where once inside, one can wait for someone to arrive and offer them a ride. "At first, all types of people came here, even some men looking to take advantage of the situation," explains Emmanuel. "The locals banded together and sent the traffickers away. It was also decided that we would record all passages: those who come here by car or bus to offer a ride must leave their details so that no traces are lost. We tell the refugees to be careful and not to trust anyone, especially advising them to let relatives know about their movements and to call the police if they feel they are in danger".

When the bus is full it is ready to leave. Emmanuel with his yellow uniform takes the lead. He speaks in perfect Italian about his past in Villalba di Guidonia, a town near Rome. After years of work as a bricklayer he decided to

return to Romania: "I owe a lot to Italy, but there always comes a time when you have to go home - he says - I understand these people who are forced to leave everything; I moved to work, they are forced to because of war. But it is never easy to leave your country". The distance from the border to the sports hall is about fifteen kilometres. Upon arrival, volunteers help people to get off the bus, especially the elderly with mobility problems. Then their names, surnames, documents, and city of destination are registered. In the perimeter of what until two months ago was a basketball court there are mattresses lined up and lying next to the luggage, children's toys and clothes. Outside, on the football pitch, some children play football. A woman approaches asking for information for her friend: she has a tumour, has stopped chemotherapy to flee her country but now needs treatment. The volunteers take notes, and they tell her that they will let her know shortly how to get adequate medical assistance.

"When we saw these people reach our borders, we immediately organised ourselves. First of all they needed a hot meal and a sheltered place to sleep" - says the mayor of the city Ioan Pavel - "I didn't ask anyone for

anything, I organised it myself, relying on my citizens. I created a simple Whatsapp group, asked for help and wrote the list of what we needed. The rest came by itself: everyone mobilised immediately. It was truly extraordinary”.

In recent weeks, arrivals from Ukraine have decreased, there are also reverse flows of return, especially towards the cities of the country not affected by the conflict. But in recent months the reception has been truly “extraordinary” in Romania. Private citizens, small municipalities, hotels, schools, gyms - everyone has taken grassroots action to help refugees. The centres, including the government-mounted ones, were equipped in record time, not only for reception purposes but also as makeshift transit hubs. An experience that could also be used as a model for the management of migratory crises in other countries of first landing. As Alexander, one of the officials of the immigration office who we met in the Siret stadium explains, what helped the management was a completely new policy towards refugees.

Even before the activation of Directive 55/2001 which gave the green light to immediate and temporary reception for Ukrainians, people were free to move, as never happened before, also thanks to an exemption from the obligation to have a visa which is active since 2014. “As in the other countries of first entry, we offer people the opportunity to apply for asylum, for those who want to access protection we do the photo-identification and then follow the procedure, after 15



Siret, Romania-Ukraine border, bus waiting for departure. Photo by Daniele Napolitano.

days there is the first interview then in the 30-day turnaround decision. But most of the Ukrainians, 90% he estimates, want to move to Germany, France or Italy, explains the official. It is not mandatory to stay, they can choose. If they have a biometric passport, they can legally stay 90 days in Romania or other EU countries, without seeking asylum. In any case the borders are open for them, they are free to move. The Dublin Regulation does not apply to them”.

How much this will affect the future of European immigration policies is still difficult to imagine. The double standard of protection and reception that currently occurs in relation to asylum seekers from other contexts is a sad reality that is still evident on the Balkan route, in Lesbos, on the border between Poland and Belarus. Certainly, what has happened in recent months, and not only in Romania, has been a laboratory of replicable practices and a demonstration of what many migration experts have been requesting for some time: a policy based on regular entry routes, visa liberalisation and hospitality makes it possible to avoid the occurrence of migratory crises which are often created by the bad choices made by the European Union rather than the migrants who are forced to flee.



Siret, Romania-Ukraine border, bus waiting for departure. Photo by Daniele Napolitano.

The LGBTI+ community in Ukraine is in the grips of war

MANUELA MACARIO



Photo by Wikipedia

Martial laws prevent any male person from leaving Ukraine (if they are Ukrainian by nationality). It matters little to officials, in times of war, if it is not biological sex that determines gender identity. We present an in-depth study by Manuela Macario, head of work and marginality in the Arcigay national secretariat.

There are “wars” within the war that do not make headlines and do not make it to the front pages of newspapers. This is the case for the women who are raped by invading soldiers, of the sick who no longer have the right to, or access to treatment, and of mi-

norities who, even in conditions of peace, fight a daily battle, but in wartime find themselves battling exclusion, marginalisation and discrimination alongside the atrocities of the war.

We have observed this in other wars and sadly this scenario is occurring also in the current conflict that has engulfed Ukraine and its people. As the news regarding migrants, non-Ukrainian citizens, especially those coming from Africa or the Middle East blocked at the borders keeps arriving, so does news of transgender people who are not only not allowed to leave the country, but who are violated for establishing their identity.

These are the wars within the war, the stories of people who would be invisible if the power of many online information channels (social networks, chat functions etc.) did not exist which, in these cases, have overcome borders, bombs and censorship to give a voice to those who otherwise would not have one.

The atrocities facing transgender people in the Russian-Ukrainian conflict has reached us and Arcigay has intercepted the cry for help and immediately mobilised, networking with other Italian and European LGBTI+ associations (especially in the Balkan area and neighbouring countries) to try to find solutions both on a diplomatic and a practical level to the situation currently facing trans people (particularly MtoF transgender people). In fact, martial laws prevent any male person from leaving the country - laws which see as irrelevant scenarios where biological sex have not matched gender identity. Although in Ukraine there is a legal process for recognising one's status as a trans person, even this is not enough to allow one to leave the country if one has not embarked on a path of sex reassignment. In short, at the borders there is no need to show any document certifying one's elective identity, even if it is a legal identity - what matters is the genital organs one carries.

There are several stories of people who have contacted European LGBTI + associations for help, trans women who have been touched and rejected at the border even when in possession of the necessary documentation in Ukraine to evidence their transition. As victims of abuse and abuses of power, Ukrainian trans people ask for help from the rest of Europe, while the rest of the Ukrainian LGBTI+ community is committed to the frontline to defend their country, their democracy and the freedom of LGBTI+ people. If it is true that only with the election of Zelensky the situation for LGBTI+ people in Ukraine seems to have improved, it is equally true that prejudices and social stigma, especially in times of war, are rising again.

In addition to having opened a dialogue with other LGBTI+ associations to create a network of welcome and support for all LGBTI + people from war zones, Arcigay provides beds in some shelters that it ma-

nages on the national territory (Udine, Rome, Naples, Reggio Emilia) and makes these available to all branches of the Migranet Network which, from north to south, already provide support to asylum seekers and refugees from other forgotten wars. The first requests for housing have already arrived and are destined to increase if the conflict is not resolved soon.

Arcigay is also mobilising at political and diplomatic levels, trying to put pressure on the Ukrainian government to guarantee trans people the right to leave the country safely and without suffering physical and psychological abuse, especially for all those who have the documentation that evidences their transition path.

The network created with European associations, especially with those of countries that are on the escape route from Ukraine, is essential not only to provide support and hospitality, but also to guarantee protection. In fact, it is known that countries such as Poland and Hungary have explicitly anti-LGBTI positions also at the institutional level. But the same thing applies to other neighbouring countries such as Moldova and Romania, where the conditions of LGBTI+ people are not simple, social condemnation is still very strong and the activism of the LGBTI + community very weak.

Slovenia and Italy, together with other countries of the Balkan area, play a fundamental role: the networks we must continue to build will need to be robust to respond to a second wave of migration in which the number of LGBTI + people seeking refuge is likely to grow.

Political front



WHO STAYS AND WHO LEAVES



Stay or leave? The doubt of Alexandra and the people of Lviv

ILARIA ROMANO



Alexandra and her family prepare tourniquets to treat the injured. Photo by Iliaria Romano.

To stay and prepare to resist the bombing, or to escape the violence and face a very long journey with a small child? Alexandra's family, like all those in Lviv, is living hours of waiting and anguish. Iliaria Romano met them for us.

Every night before going to sleep, Alexandra hurries to close the curtains on the window of the study overlooking the street, in this early twentieth-century building in a residential area not far from the central station, that has now become a place of transit and accommodation for people displaced by the war. Then she piles

up blankets and pillows in the hallway and hopes she does not have to wake up, as is increasingly the case, to the sound of air-raid sirens. "They told me that this is the safest part of the house, between the two load-bearing walls," she explains, "so I prepare everything and in case of an alarm we sit here on the floor. Our neighbours prefer to go to the basement instead, but it is too cold, and you have to take into account the time it takes to run down the stairs. I do not know what is best, in moments like these everyone does what they feel is right."

Alexandra, a lawyer and partner in a law firm, shares her home with her husband, a four-and-a-half-year-old

daughter, her mother and her sister. Since February 24, they have been sleeping in their clothes – in tracksuits that at least would allow them to escape quickly without going out in their pyjamas – and with suitcases ready, although everyone hopes they will never have to use them. So far, there has been no need hurry away from Lviv; on the contrary, the refugees from the rest of the country have arrived here, and in just a few days the city has become the largest reception centre in Ukraine, as well as a logistical hub for sorting civilian and military aid, both local and international.

At least so far, because the war has also arrived here, in western Ukraine, just a few kilometres from the Polish border and Europe. Last night, after a few days of truce, the sirens went off again, and Ivano-Frankivsk to the south and Lutsk to the north of Lviv, less than 200 km away, were targeted.

Alexandra's mother cannot sleep any more, she gets up early to turn on the TV in the kitchen and make breakfast for everyone. The screen alternates between images of the bombings and tanks, President Zelensky's speeches and the comments of the journalists; then comes the graphics showing the vehicles shot down by the Russians, the dead soldiers, the new prisoners and the civilian victims. Around eleven in the morning the siren sounds again. Alexandra is out of the house, she has taken cover in a 'shelter' inside a club. The managers say the building is made of reinforced concrete, and therefore safe, but she is sceptical, because it is not underground and is also located on one of the highest areas of the city. She calls her mother, makes sure she is in the hallway with little Emma, and that they do not move from there until she calls them back to tell them that the alarm has ceased.

Young people here also have a smartphone app that alerts them in case of danger, which has become a useful safety tool in addition to the sirens.

On the night between Saturday 12 and Sunday 13 March, for the first time, the sound of the alarm was followed by the sound of missiles exploding a few kilometres from the city. The target was the Yavoriv military base, the Peacekeeping and Security Centre,

along the road leading to the border with Poland, a crucial route not only for the exit of refugees but above all for the entry of supplies. A place where soldiers, both Ukrainian and international, are trained, and where it seems that trainers of different nationalities were also present. There were at least 35 deaths.

The suitcases of Alexandra's family are ready, suspended like their lives and those of many other people who do not know what the best choice is: to send their young daughter abroad with her grandmother and stay here? To leave all together, or rather all of the women, because the husband could not leave the country anyway, and go to their friends in Poland who offered them hospitality and an independent space in their house? So to be guests, without work and without a project, with heart and head in their own country? And for how long?

"So far I have decided to stay," says Alexandra, "because my home is the place that makes me feel safer, but since the latest news, with the worsening of the situation and this sense of impending danger, I no longer know what it means to be safe. Would I be safe in Europe? If this war caused a nuclear accident, we would all be in danger. So is it worth it to escape? I have a lot of friends who left Lviv at the end of February, many of them regret doing it so early, and today they say they could have waited. I am waiting, but now I am afraid that when I make up my mind, it will be too late."

Her great-grandmother was of Russian origin, and she was the first teacher to open a school in Lviv. The family language has always been Russian, and she herself learned Ukrainian in primary school and became perfectly bilingual. "The problem never arose, because language does not identify nationality. I am Ukrainian, born and raised in Lviv, and I would not want to live anywhere else."

In the life she now calls 'normal', Alexandra had a family and a job that fill her days. In today's distraught life, she spends most of her time at home, with her sister and her mother, making handcrafted tourniquets to send to soldiers at the front who do not even have first-aid kits. "Everyone here is working hard, and no

one is backing down," she says. "Now we need these tools, but it is impossible to buy them, so we have come up with the idea of using old sheets. We cut them into strips, fold them in half, and sew them by machine, then we smooth wooden sticks with a cutter and insert them into a specially created loop of fabric that can be tightened to stop the blood, like professional tourniquets. The principle is the same, although the looks are more rudimentary." They have been working for days like a perfect assembly line, with scissors, an iron, a sewing machine, and plastic bags for packing the finished pieces individually and putting them into boxes.

"Now we are starting to run out of medicines, even the most ordinary ones," she adds. "We have managed to find a few dozen boxes of ibuprofen. We will send them to the front, too."

The other day we heard from a relative who lives in Russia, who told us to join her in Moscow. They do not realise what is happening there, and many families tell that their relatives don't even believe them, so much brainwashing has taken place over the years. They do not believe in this war; they think the images they see are created by anti-Russian propaganda. How else could they even think that any of us would want to go there now?"

Alexandra's husband, who in his 'other' life worked in an oil company, now coordinates the aid that arrives at the Art Palace on Kopernika Street, which has become one of the main centres for collecting and sorting food, medicine and clothes, as well as offering a hot meal to those in need and toys to children. "We often talk about what is best to do, and depending on the news that arrives, he encourages me to take our daughter away from here," says Alexandra, "but we have not decided anything yet, because the truth is that I am afraid for my daughter's safety, but I am also afraid to make her face an endless journey, to a place she does not know, with a language she does not speak or understand, for an indefinite period of time where we would remain suspended anyway. It comforts me that we are still here because I know I can be useful to those in need. My friends who have left the city sound

very demoralised on the phone, more so than I, who am learning to manage fear."

The little girl and her grandmother have not been outside for days, since they were last alerted by the alarm while in the supermarket. "We paid for our groceries as fast as we could and ran to the car to go home, while we hoped that nothing would happen, because we would not know where to go. Staying is starting to scare me, but the idea of that journey I see people make when they arrive here and leave again also terrifies me."

Alexandra has not been near the station since the flow of refugees began: "I cannot look at those children and think that my daughter might soon be among them. Twenty days ago she was attending English school, now she is at home with her grandmother, asking when the war will end. I do not know what she grasps about the situation," she says, "but she hears the sirens and knows that we have to run to the hallway and sit still."

It is dinnertime, and Alexandra's mother is preparing borsh, roast beef, salad, and eggs. Until last week, they were hosting a family on the run with three children: "All we did was cook for everyone, at all hours," they joke. "There were ten of us, and we who were used to a hectic life and to not coming home for lunch, found ourselves stocking up on food like never before, and also on hygiene products."

In the bathroom there is a pile of toilet paper packs, and the bathtub has been filled with water. Just in case of an emergency.

Another speech by the President is broadcast on TV. "My opinion of him has changed over the last days," Alexandra reveals. "I was not one of his supporters, I did not even vote for him in the elections, I did not give him much credit because he came from the entertainment world, yet he turned out to be a brave person. The Americans offered him the chance to run away but he stayed here, like one of us, for his country. I do not know what will happen now, I obviously keep hoping that all this will end, but I do not believe in negotiations, I do not believe in humanitarian corridors because hi-

story repeats itself: they grant them and then they target defenceless people. Putin wants to scare us, to force us to surrender, maybe, but he has not understood that the Ukrainian people will not bend, it is not made of cowards who would sell themselves to be spared.”

After dinner, they go back to the tourniquets. Normal life is so far away, yet it was only twenty days ago, a time that has already carved a furrow between a before and an after. If the sirens sound again, it is back to the hallway, in the dark, and by the light of the mobile phone, little Emma will make Chinese shadows with her hands, before falling asleep on the floor.



Alexandra and her family prepare tourniquets to treat the injured. Photo by Ilaria Romano.

Escaping Chernihiv: Iryna's story

ILARIA ROMANO

Iryna is 30 years old, a mother of two children aged nine and five, and has temporarily moved to Lviv. She is staying at a friend's house after leaving her hometown in the north of Ukraine, which is only eight kilometers from the Russian border. Chernihiv has been under siege for a month and isolated after an air raid destroyed the bridge over the Desna River, the exit route from the city centre. Iliaria Romano interviewed her for us.

“Until a month and a half ago, I was working in a private primary school in Chernihiv and I was planning to move into a new house in the coming year. I had a normal life with my family. Since the end of December, there had been talk of Russian troops gathering along the Ukrainian borders, but no one would have thought that they would invade our territory. We thought it would be a demonstrative action, a show of force, a scare tactic, but nobody imagined that we would have a war on our soil.”

But on 24 February everything changed

24 February was supposed to be a day like any other; the children had to get ready for school and we would then go to work. We usually get up at seven o'clock but that morning the phone rang earlier; I picked it up and it was a friend who kept shouting, saying we had to get ready to run away because the Russians were coming into Ukraine; in short, the war had started. I couldn't

believe it, so I told her I was going to call a military friend to ask; but in the meantime, the news about the war was even spreading on Viber, in the chat room of my son's school. Three minutes later the air-raid siren blew, the first one I had ever heard in my life: I can't even describe how I felt, I was petrified. All of a sudden, we had to find shelter underground. The problem was that there are no real bunkers in Chernihiv, only the basements of the buildings, which don't guarantee real protection if a bomb is dropped on the building.

What did you do then?

First, I called my mother and my sister, who live in two different parts of the city. We decided that my mother would come and stay with me, to be together whatever decision was taken. I told her to pack the bare essentials and leave the house, but the buses stopped running, so she had to walk eight kilometres under the sound of sirens. Meanwhile, friends over the phone and via chat were saying that we should leave, but many did not have a vehicle. Anyway, I still couldn't believe that the war had really started, my mind was rejecting it. I never thought that the Russians could hit the civilians; I thought they would just hit some military targets and nothing more.

When my mother arrived, we tried to figure out what we should do, whether we had to buy food, stock up. It was crazy, people were terrified and didn't know what to do. At first, we were calm because we had food, but after a couple of days the food began to run out; the grocery stores became empty and were no longer being supplied. Then I started to panic.



Foto by Chora Media via Twitter

When did you decide to ‘move’ down to the basement?

We spent the first day in total hesitation, but from the second day onwards, the Russians started targeting the city, initially with ground vehicles, and from the third day on with aircraft. We had no choice but to go down to the basement, even though the building was old and the conditions down there were terrible, with mold and dust. My neighbourhood was the first to be attacked because it is on the northern outskirts. After the first bombings, the shooting started in the streets; what really upset me was that the children quickly learned to distinguish the sounds of the bullets, where they came from, and the weapons used.

When we had to cook or get something from home, my mother and I took turns so that my children could always be safe in the basement with myself or with her. Cooking could take up to five or six hours, because every time the alarm rang, you had to turn off the cooker, leave everything and go back downstairs. Every two or three days I would bring my children upstairs to

wash them, trying to do it as quickly as possible. That was in the beginning when we still had water and gas.

Then what happened?

The mayor announced that no house, not even on the lower floors, was safe, because the attacks were intensifying. From the small windows in the basement, we could see Ukrainian tanks returning fire, which made us realise that the Russians were getting very close to the city. The first time they hit the building next to mine with a bomb, I was at home, on the fifth floor. The vibrations were so strong that I thought everything would collapse. I have learned that from the sound of the aircraft to the explosion of the bomb is about ten seconds: that's the time you have to make any decision, without knowing if it's going to save your children's lives.

In the beginning, there were people who, despite the siren, kept queuing in front of supermarkets or pharmacies. Many died like this, waiting to buy some food or medicine.



Foto by Chora Media via Twitter

When did you start planning to leave Chernihiv?

The fighting in the streets lasted 24 hours a day, there was no respite. Except for one morning, after several days, when there was silence again. It was then that my mother remembered that she had forgotten her papers at home when she had come to me in a hurry on the first day of the war. So we had to find a way to get them back as soon as possible. I don't know how, but we found a taxi who was still working, who managed to take her not exactly all the way home, but halfway, which still saved her four kilometres. That same day, four planes arrived together and started dropping bombs all over the city. But the next day I received a phone call from my sister telling me that she had found a vehicle to leave and that she had only one more free seat: I decided that my mother should go with her, but there

was no way to convince her; she was crying because she couldn't think of leaving me and her nephews under the bombs while she tried to save herself. So, I told her that the more people we were together, the less chance we had of escaping. Eventually, I convinced her, and as she was leaving my house, a Russian plane was shot down by Ukrainian forces and crashed into the garage where the car that would take them away had been parked just a few minutes before. It all happened in front of my eyes.

Did they manage to leave at last?

Yes, although they had to wait many hours. Before the Russians blew it up, there was a bridge in Chernihiv that you had to cross to get out of the town. Everyone who tried to leave had to cross it, but it was often closed because of the intense shooting. My mother and sister also found it closed and had to wait on a nearby road for our military to give the cars the green light again. We spoke again when they arrived in Kyiv, it was 7 March. My sister, who has a six-month-old baby girl, told me that she thought they wouldn't make it during the whole trip. She said there was no real humanitarian corridor open from Chernihiv for the entire month of the siege, and any attempt to evacuate was always a huge risk. Many were killed trying to leave, even those who had written "children" on their cars.

You were left alone with your children. It was your turn to try and leave

I found someone on Instagram who had two or three minivans and wanted to make them available to evacuate people, but you had to arrive at the spot in thirty or forty minutes at the most. Pregnant women had priority, then women with small children would get on, and then the others, as long as there was room. So no one, even if they managed to arrive in time, knew if they would actually leave.

To reach the spot you had to walk four kilometres, sur-

rounded by gunfire and the danger of more bombings, so I decided that I could not take the children to die. It seemed safer to stay underground, but it felt like I was choosing the place where we would be buried.

Calling for help became more and more difficult because we were almost always without power and connection, the phone would run out of power and it was not always possible to recharge it. One day I managed to hear from a friend from Kyiv who was evacuating civilians from Irpin, and when I explained the situation to him, he told me he would come to pick me up in Chernihiv. He had eight, maybe nine places, so I called some friends to tell them about this opportunity, but some of them didn't want to leave their husbands. In the end I convinced two of them. The meet-up with him was after the bridge because they wouldn't let him in the city, so we started walking that morning. When we arrived at the checkpoint, the military told us we had to go back because there was a very heavy attack going on. It was horrible because we had to walk back again along that dangerous road while my friend was waiting on the other side, and I had no connection nor battery to tell him. All hope of leaving was gone. I stayed with my friend Svetlana because we decided that we would try again the next day if he had waited for us, so we went to his house, which was closer. It was 8 March, Women's Day, but of course, we weren't even thinking about that, although it's a very important holiday. But a Ukrainian soldier wished us well at a checkpoint.

At Svetlana's, we slept in a house for the first time since the war began, and after all those days it felt great. That evening I managed to get in touch with my friend from Kyiv: he was alive but had moved back about eighty kilometres from the bridge because the shooting was too intense. He had found a place to sleep and the next morning he was heading back to the city. Just like the day before, we started to walk to the bridge, but the military told us that the situation was the same and they could not let anyone pass because we would all die, us and the children. This time my friend wouldn't have had enough fuel to make a third attempt, otherwise, he wouldn't have made it back to Kyiv. There was no hope for us, I can't describe how

I felt: thinking that a person had come so far to save us and had to go back without us was devastating. I looked at the children and didn't know how long we would still be alive.

What happened next?

That night I stayed at Svetlana's, but the next day I went home because there were 13 people there and there was very little space. We went back to the basement but there was too much dust, mould, the children wouldn't stop coughing, so I decided to sleep in the house, between the load-bearing walls, on the floor and away from the windows. In the evening, for four or five hours, there was an unusual calm that was even more frightening. Then, around midnight, I began to hear the aircraft: I woke the children up as fast as I could and shouted at them to go down the stairs to the basement. I stayed in the house for a while to get something to eat, clothes, blankets, but after a few seconds they started bombing and we were still on the stairs and didn't know if we would make it to the basement. Then I heard that minivans would be coming the next morning to evacuate the civilians, so I called Svetlana who didn't want to leave because she was too terrified to cross the city again. In the end, her brother offered to drive her and I managed to find a taxi. There must have been more than 150 people at the meeting point, but we were told that only three minivans would be arriving. The local defence units told us that it was foolish to try to go outside, because the Russians would certainly shoot at us. While we were waiting, it started to snow and about half of the people decided to go home. Finally these volunteers with vehicles arrived and said that those who had been waiting could come aboard. We were on top of each other, but no one was left behind.

Normally it takes an hour and a half to drive from Chernihiv to Kyiv, but it took us more than five hours because we bypassed the most dangerous main roads and went into the woods. In the capital, we were dropped off at the station, where there were other volunteers looking after the children, asking us whe-

re we wanted to go and giving us directions to the trains. I said I wanted to go to Lviv. I got on the train with the children and people were all over the place, even on the ground, but we didn't care because we were safe.

Did you leave any relatives in Chernihiv?

My father stayed there, and he told me that two days after we left the situation got even worse. They were left without electricity, water, or heating. The city is destroyed. The people who were killed were buried in the backyards of houses and buildings, because even the cemetery had been targeted. Now that the Russians have been pushed back, the municipal service is able to deliver water to people's homes in tanks, ten litres per person. After our trip I heard that a convoy of civilians was targeted and there were more victims.

How do you live today in a city that is not your own, but in better security conditions?

The feeling of fear remains, as does the feeling of disorientation, of constant tension, as if you were facing a new crisis any minute. Here in Lviv, the first time I went into a shop, it seemed incredible to me to see the shelves full and the instinct to stock up on supplies, milk, eggs, was very strong, because I'm still terrorised that my children will be left without food. Leaving my home was difficult, and even though I've been welcomed here, I still feel like a guest. Leaving Ukraine would have been even worse. Svetlana did, she is now in Belgium and her children have already started school again. My mother and sister are in the countryside near Ivano-Frankivsk. One day soon, we will all be back in our Chernihiv.

Escaping Bucha: Tanya's story

ILARIA ROMANO

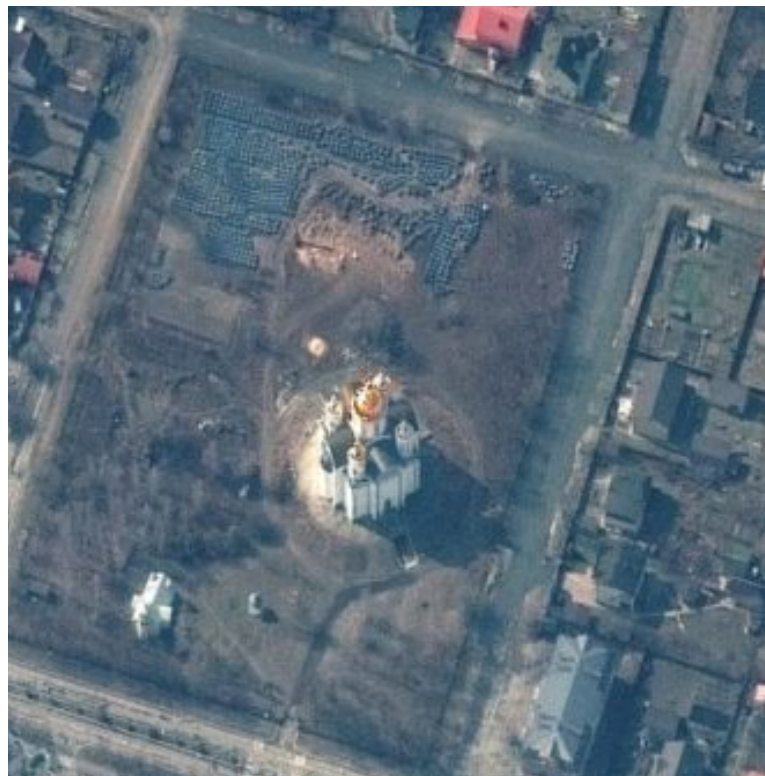
Tanya was able to leave the suburbs of Kyiv and now she has temporarily moved with her family to Truskavets, in the Lviv oblast - a town with a population of just under 30 thousand. Iliaria Romano interviewed her for us.

“I was born and raised in Bucha, where my parents were still living, but I lived in Hostomel, near the airport, until February 24. That morning at dawn my friends from Kyiv called and told me that the war had started, but I refused to believe it. Then my daughter's class chat also got a series of messages from worried moms and dads, who didn't know if the news was true or just an exaggeration, and if they should send their children to school or not. Then the first blasts hit the area where I live.”

What did you do when it became clear that the war had really started?

There had been rumours for months that there was a risk of war, but none of us believed it was possible. We believed that at most some military targets would be hit, but never civilians. That's why we decided to move away from our house, too close to the airport that could be a target, and move to Bucha, to my parents' house. Also because should we have planned to leave, we would have already been all together.

Bucha is only six kilometres away from Hostomel, but the first thing we did was refuel our car. Even from my



mother's house we could still hear the explosions, but we couldn't accept the fact that a war had truly begun, so we decided not to leave the city, but to stay all together in the old apartment where my parents lived before they bought their new independent house. We went over to that apartment building again because it had a basement, and an engineer friend had told us that in case of bombing that would be a safe place.

While we stayed in the house the first night, we set up to sleep in the basement from the next day.

How long did you stay in the basement and how did you live those days?

We slept underground for fifteen days. At the beginning, we were able to go out in the morning, to go home to cook, get some clothes, a blanket, or go to the grocery store, which was still open, to buy food. There were ten of my family, plus eight other tenants of the building. They were the only ones remaining, because the others had already left.

We would take turns to cook for everyone, as if we were one big family. We had one single spoon, which we passed to each other, and we ate the borsh directly from the pot, which we could only wash with wet wipes. Bread was never lacking because there was an elderly lady in the building who didn't leave her home. Every day she baked some and shared it with the other tenants who had moved into the basement.

During the first three days we had electricity, after that we used candles and flashlights from our mobiles. But we were so frightened that the Russian soldiers would come in that we tried to stay in the dark as long as possible. We also had to cover the only small window that looked out, to make sure they wouldn't notice us. More than the air raids, our fear was the constant shooting in the street, just a few steps away from us. The only thing that would calm me down was listening to the prayers of the two young men who had recently rented a house in the building, until they decided to leave for Irpin, without knowing that even there the situation would escalate.

One thing that really struck me was that groups of volunteers immediately formed in the neighbourhood, risking their own lives to move from one building to another to deliver food, drugs, and things useful for the children. Before the war, some of them were considered wild kids, alcoholics, drug addicts, but they were those who did more than anyone else.

The war overturned the "normal" order of life: people who were once distant became family, and others who

were close became distant. This experience made me look at things in a different way, but I am happy because we survived, so many can't say the same.

When did you realise you had to consider leaving Bucha?

We had learned that the morning when we heard silence and the birds began to sing, was the right time to leave the basement. But life down there was getting worse each day, especially for the children; I felt very guilty for not taking them away right away. My daughter, 11 years old, couldn't really understand what was going on, but she read the messages of her classmates who were already abroad and kept asking me why we were still there. Meanwhile, the situation was getting worse every day, and when we went out in the morning we started to see the dead bodies on the road, and my little girl kept asking why we hadn't left. We had told my four-year-old grandson that sleeping in the basement was part of a game, until one day he saw a dead body and said he didn't want to be killed like that.

What was the most frightening moment during those days?

We stayed so long in the "bunker" at the beginning that we almost never saw the Russian soldiers. The first time we had them in front of us, in front of the door of our apartment building, we were frozen. I told the others that running away would be worse because they might think we had something to hide. Plus they knew where we lived in any case. It would have been useless. Eventually, they looked at us but didn't come closer. The second time I thought I was going to die was one night, around ten o'clock. We heard loud knocking on the door and shouting in Russian to get out because there was a fire. We thought it was the military trying to get us to open the door and break into the basement, but it was the neighbours from the building next door that had actually been hit by a missile and was on fire. They were worried about us. We apologised to them countless times for not believing them right away and wasting their precious time.



What news was coming to you from the other neighbourhoods, or from nearby towns?

Every day was just the same, we counted the days starting from the first day of the war, the second, the third and so on; no one knew anymore if it was Sunday or Thursday. We got used to the gunfire, to the soldiers passing by just a few metres away. Luckily, we met volunteers who were driving around bringing aid to civilians who, like us, were trapped underground.

One of them, whom we later discovered was a soldier of the Ukrainian Army in civilian clothes, went every day to the hospital where there were generators and also charged our power banks so that we could use our mobiles. The whole city was without electricity. One day he didn't come, so we thought he was dead. Then he came back: he had been in the suburbs of Bucha and he told us that we were lucky because the Kadyrovtsy, Kadyrov's Chechen militiamen, were there and it was a real hell. They couldn't stop crying because of what they had seen, it was full of bodies on the street, and many people had been shot just for getting in their cars and trying to leave. Families had written "children" on their car windows, some with tape, others with toothpaste, using any means possible; however, it did not save their children.

Our neighbours from Hostomel had managed to escape, I don't know how, since the Kadyrovtsy were there. They made it to the gates of Bucha. The Russian military sent them back and then shot at their car: my neighbour and her one-and-a-half-year-old daughter were wounded. She, who had my number and knew I was in Bucha, called me for help. They wanted to be evacuated and needed a hospital. I called all the contacts I had to try and get something done, saying that amongst the wounded there was a small child, but each one replied that rescuers could not enter that area. The volunteers negotiated all day with the Russian military, and only in the evening did they manage to take them away, after a day spent huddled in the

back of their car, in the middle of the road, wounded and under the snow.

That's when I realised that the Chechens were the absolute worst thing, and I began to fear that if they had come over here too, the chances of staying alive would have been reduced to almost zero.

Not everyone gets me when I say this, but we were lucky because the Russian soldiers who were monitoring our area weren't ruthless; they required us to respect their rules but at least they allowed us to go out to collect water in the houses where there was still some left, and to light a fire in the courtyard to cook something. In other places, they seized the people they found in the basements, took away their mobiles and allowed them to call their relatives only once a day in front of them. And anyone who talked about the war was killed on the spot, in front of the others. A friend of mine told me that there were 19 of them in the basement of a building where a woman was killed. They didn't even allow the others to take the body out to bury it; they had it with them for ten days.

I've heard of women being raped and then hanged: in short, we've been through very little compared to major horror.

How did you manage to leave?

We had heard that a humanitarian corridor would be opened on March 9, although it was never officially confirmed. However, the municipal administration had already made minivans available, and people began to gather at the meeting point to leave. Only women and children could get on. We decided to try as well, following the buses, so my husband managed to get another vehicle that could accommodate us and the neighbours with whom we shared the basement. The night before we left, the Russians slashed the tires on all the minivans that were parked on the streets, so we were left stranded. That's when I thought about picking up an old car that was at my parents' other house, about a fifteen-minute walk away. I wrapped a white sheet around myself and started walking.



Photo by UN Women Moldova

The street was empty but you could hear constant gunfire. When I arrived, the car wouldn't start because its battery was dead. I started crying and shouting, and a neighbour heard me and ran to see what was going on. He tried to replace the battery, but this one was dead too.

So I went out into the street, completely out of my mind, and tried to stop every car that drove by, but everyone apologized and drove away. That is until a family stopped and we started my car.

I headed back trying to avoid the main roads where they were stopping at checkpoints, but one I couldn't avoid. So before they asked for my papers, which I didn't have on me because I had forgotten them in the rush, I got out of the car crying and yelling that they should believe me when I said the car was mine. Eventually, they just made a check, the toys and things I had loaded into the vehicle fell out of the trunk and they let me through.

That day, all the people who had decided to leave in their own cars were killed on the road. We were going

to try the next day. There was no corridor, so we decided to make a caravan of cars and go; there must have been two hundred vehicles. For the first time since February 24, I saw my city again and it looked like a movie: houses destroyed, set on fire, cars reduced to debris, dead bodies along the road. We passed seven Russian checkpoints before we managed to reach the first Ukrainian checkpoint. I can't even describe what I felt when I saw our flag again.

Where did you go?

We went to Kyiv. It took us seven hours to travel twelve kilometres and there we found a whole other world. At such a short distance there was no more destruction, there were even a few stores open, and buses were passing by. We couldn't believe it; it was very hard to accept that our city was a place of death and destruction.

We continued on to Vasylkiv, where we found shelter in a church that had been used as a refuge for the displaced. The next day we arrived in Bila Tserkva, and

we stopped in a hotel that was packed with people sleeping on the floor under blankets. From there we continued westward to Truskavets, where we are now.

How has your life changed in these weeks?

We were a well-off family, I am the chief accountant in a Canadian power company, and my husband had his own business. We had built ourselves a nice home, we travelled abroad a lot because we could afford it. Now the only one who is still working is me, remotely, but we don't know until when because one of the power plants my company runs was destroyed. My husband has lost everything. When the phone rings I hesitate to pick it up because it could be bad news: the other day a neighbour from Hostomel called to tell me that my aunt was killed while she was cooking in the yard. A friend of mine originally from Donbass, who had already escaped the war in 2014, was shot in her car while trying to flee a second time from Irpin. She and her husband were wounded, and her teenage daughter and elderly mother were killed.

This is how we live, with bated breath and guilt, only waiting to return home. Now that Bucha has been cleared, a neighbour went to see our home and said that only the walls are left, because inside it has been completely ravaged. It may take a long time before we are able to return, but we are ready, even if there won't be anything left.

A new beginning for Ukrainian refugees in Prague

ROMINA VINCI

Ukrainians are the largest foreign community in the Czech Republic, with almost 197,000 legally resident at the end of 2021. The Czech people have rallied around them and immediately mobilised to help the people at war and those fleeing the country. Romina Vinci reports from Prague.

Minivans leave all the time, at all hours of the day and night, because the *Dům národnostních menšin* centre, in the heart of Prague's New Town, is operating 24 hours a day. It has been since Thursday, February 24, the day the Russian invasion of Ukraine began.

Boxes containing canned food, medical supplies, and basic necessities are picked up and loaded onto vehicles. Once the minivans are full of donations they leave, heading for the Polish border. After unloading the packages at their destination, they bring back refugees trying to escape the war.

The way home

Victor arrived here thanks to the Ukrainian embassy. He is 25 years old, and has been working in the capital of the Czech Republic for five months. Now he is looking for a way to go back to his country. "My friends are fighting, my parents are under the bombs, I cannot stay here, I want to go back to them," he tells us. He spends more than half an hour in the organization's office. They tell him that he is in the wrong place, because they don't offer passage to go back, they only send material. Victor, however, does not give up, and finally

wins; he gets permission to 'accompany' the driver of a minivan. He will have to fit among the boxes, putting some on his lap, and others in the legroom, so he does "not take away space from the aid," but he will travel that route backwards.

When we meet him, he has already joined the chain of arms that carries the packages from the inside to the outside of the building, so as to speed up the loading process. He has the eyes of someone who has finally managed to find a way to leave, but knows at the same time that he is going to war, and he may be about to start a journey with no return.

This centre is located one stop from the *Muzeum* metro, the beating heart of the city.



Photo by Romina Vinci.



Volunteers at Prague Central Station. Photo by Romina Vinci.

It is here, on this avenue that leads to the old part of the city, that the big gatherings are held. Last Friday, at 6 p.m. on the dot, Ukrainian President Zelensky thanked the Czech Republic for its help during a Skype call from his bunker in Kyiv. The place was overflowing with people, more than 30 thousand poured to the avenue to listen to his speech from the big screen.

And right here, next to the imposing bronze statue of St. Wenceslaus, protector of the nation, a reception point for Ukrainian refugees is open night and day. It is a modern building, a large open space where people can charge their phones, surf the Internet, have something to eat and get all the information they need. It is run by UEP, Ukrainian European Perspective, a non-profit organization that has been working for over ten years to support the Ukrainian population in Prague.

A large community

Ukrainians represent the largest foreign community in the Czech Republic. According to the Czech Ministry of Interior, at the end of 2021 there were almost 197,000 legally resident Ukrainians in the country. "There has always been a large Ukrainian community here," explains Yevgeniy. "The men mainly work as taxi

drivers or in the construction sector, the women are employed in domestic services." Yevgeniy is 35 years old, has lived in Prague since 2016 and is originally from the Odessa region. "My dad is Russian, my mum is Romanian. I am 50% Russian and 50% Romanian, which makes me a perfect Ukrainian," he tells us with a smile. His parents and grandparents are still there, they are safe at the moment, and he is in constant contact with them. He follows the battles on various Telegram channels, more or less official, so that he can give them fresh updates on the movement and progress of the Russian troops. At the UEP centre, he helps out as a volunteer, working shifts of eight hours or more. "Women, children and elderly people arrive here. Most of them already have contacts and a destination to reach, but there are some people who are completely lost, who do not even know where they are, have never heard Czech, and have no idea what to do – especially young mothers with small children in tow," he says. At the centre they always find a hot meal, soup or rice cooked by the volunteers using only Ukrainian recipes. "We offer them some refreshment, a temporary place to stay, as well as clothes and basic necessities, especially for the children," Yevgeniy explains. All the supplies and aid that continue to arrive are stored downstairs in the building.

Piles of clothes

Clothes are arranged in long rows, piled up on the ground, and form a zigzag path where anyone can take their time to look for something in their own size, and also in their own taste. It is difficult to distinguish between volunteers and refugees, and it is difficult to understand who is trying to fold shirt after shirt, to give some sort of order to the piles, and who is rummaging through the garments because they have nothing left to wear. There is also a children's play area with carpets, crayons and toys in the corner. There is not much space, and the rules on social distancing that have marked the last two years have been dispensed with. A mother arrives and lets her little girl slip out of her arms, she immediately takes hold of a plastic tricycle and starts slaloming through the rows of clothes, bringing joy to the whole room.

Yevgeniy has a degree in International Relations, so he also tries to explain to these women their rights, what refugee status means, what opportunities they have. In Prague, he is employed in a large telemarketing company and his boss has given him *carte blanche*, allowing him days off to concentrate on aid. "I have been lucky," Yevgeniy admits, "other volunteers continue to work their normal shifts and come here as soon as they are off. We sleep an average of 2-3 hours per night, but we can never truly switch off, our minds are constantly in the war. I have told the company that I will not go back to work for them, because for the first time in my life, I feel that I can be useful to my people and give meaning to my studies".

More than one hundred thousand Ukrainian refugees have arrived in the Czech Republic since the beginning of the conflict. The Minister of Interior, Vít Rakušan, stated a few days ago that about 57,000 people have already received special visas, more than half of which are children. About a quarter of the refugees are in the capital Prague.

The reception effort is considerable. In *Praha Hlavní Nádraží*, the largest railway station in the Czech Republic, the municipality has set up a tent to serve as an

information point. The volunteers are easily recognizable by their yellow and blue bibs. "We do not have to cope with large numbers of people coming off the trains," Nikola, a volunteer on her fourth day of service, tells us. "Yesterday three hundred refugees arrived on the same train. We have a database of available accommodation: hotels, Airbnbs, but also normal families that have made rooms and houses available for the Ukrainians, and we try to find the best solution for each of them."

Sitting on a bench, her eyes fixed on her 8-year-old son, who is using a giant trolley to engage in improbable races with other children his age, turning the hall into a small rally, Olga does not want to look back. She is 38 years old and her husband has stayed behind in Kyiv: "He used to be a security guard at the airport, now he fights in the Ukrainian army," she says. She has lived in the Czech Republic before, kept in touch with some people, and is now waiting for a friend to come and pick her up. She has travelled for five days, crossing Poland and Slovakia in buses that took endless hours. But she does not want to hear about rest. Tomorrow, if all goes well, she will start working.

"I'm not going to sit here and wait for time to pass, I want to work hard and send as much money as possible to my people," she says resolutely. "We are fighters, we are heroes, we will not bend, we will not give up."



POLITICAL FRONT



Temporary protection for Ukrainian refugees

PAOLO RIVA

How and why the European Union came to a historic decision, and what could happen next. An article by Paolo Riva.

Historical. This adjective has resounded in many parts, since EU Commissioner Ylva Johansson and the French Minister of the Interior Gerald Darmanin announced the agreement on the directive for temporary protection in relation to the war in Ukraine. In fact, it is the first time that EU member states have agreed to use this legislative instrument introduced in 2001, after the conflicts in the Balkans, to regulate the massive influx of displaced people and provide them with protection.



Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, European leaders have made more than one unprecedented decision. Now, they have also done so in the matter of migration, after civil society had invoked Directive 55/2001 without success for years on the occasion of the crises linked to Tunisia, Syria and Afghanistan. Within a week, however, the twenty-seven states have agreed and, today, the text of the official decision will be made public, accepting the appeals made by many organisations.

“The European Union has done what it had to do. This directive is not perfect, but it guarantees immediate protection and has several positive points, such as work and education”, Salvatore Petronella, an expert in migration policies and author of a study on 55/2001, explains.

What the directive provides for

The directive guarantees displaced persons temporary protection of one year, renewable for up to three, which should allow them “to enjoy harmonised rights throughout the Union”, to obtain “a residence permit, the possibility of obtaining employment or being self-employed, access to adequate housing, necessary social assistance, medical or other assistance, and means of subsistence”, as stated in the Commission’s proposal.

“Without this instrument of immediate protection, hundreds of thousands of people would have had no choice but to apply for asylum in the country of their first arrival. This would have led to further overloading of national reception systems, which is something that no European country can afford at the moment” explains Alberto-Horst Neidhardt, an analyst at the European Policy Centre.

The directive will cover Ukrainian citizens, third-country nationals with a long-term permit and holders of international protection residing in Ukraine. Temporary protection, on the other hand, will not be guaranteed to third-country nationals with short residence permits, like the many non-European students who have repor-



From left to right: Ylva Johansson (European Commissioner for Home Affairs), Gérald Darmanin (Minister for the Interior, France). Photo by European Union.

ted episodes of racism in the last few hours: for them, the Commission says that the borders remain open and that they will be supported in their return in their countries of origin.

What the directive does not provide for

Directive 55/2001 does not cover border procedures, for which the Commission has only published guidelines. Nor does it provide for solidarity mechanisms: no quotas and no compulsory relocation, as in the past. The approach will be “fluid”, an official of the EU Commission explained: each state will evaluate its reception capacity and assessments will be made once people fleeing Ukraine settle into different countries.

In fact, since 2017, Ukrainian citizens have been able to enter the EU and stay for 90 days without the need for a visa (only a biometric passport). This has allowed refugees to move within the EU, stopping where they see fit, perhaps with friends or relatives, where the diaspora is more numerous, as in Italy. It is a huge diffe-

rence from past and current policies which, under the Dublin regulation, oblige asylum seekers to apply for international protection in the country of entry.

Why?

The change, in terms of content, albeit limited to the Ukrainian crisis, is evident. “The unanimous adoption of the directive is a historic decision and is in stark contrast to the divisions between member states that have undermined consensus in recent years,” adds Lucas Rasche, an analyst at the Jacques Delors Centre in Berlin. “We have gone from a very repressive scheme to one in which people are free to move and make choices”, sums up Lina Vosyliūtė, a researcher at the CEPS think tank.

According to Petronella, the reasons are different. One may be geographical: “Ukraine is on our doorstep, with a long land border and no sea border. The Syrian crisis was buffered thanks to Turkey, which was in the middle. There is nothing between us and the current crisis and therefore it must be faced”.

According to Vosyliūtė, “for the EU, welcoming Ukrainians is the second-best option, after it has decided not to intervene militarily to defend the country”. Not only this but “they are refugees fleeing a Russian invasion: towards them, there is a lot of understanding and solidarity in the former Soviet countries that are now part of the Union,” continues the researcher, who is Lithuanian.

“Looking at past decisions and recent statements by some political leaders, one may think that some member states are not as willing to show solidarity with those fleeing countries with distinct cultures, ethnicities and religions,” Neidhardt reasons. Of course, he continues, “the suffering a few kilometres away from the European borders has contributed to a different perception of the responsibility to which the EU has been called”.

What now?

The UNHCR estimates that the number of people who could leave Ukraine could rise to four million, but these are difficult predictions to make and much will depend on the progress of military operations. What is certain, Rasche continues, is that “a million Ukrainian refugees arrived in the EU in just one week, while it took a year to bring so many refugees from Syria to Europe”.

It is therefore essential that the recently approved Directive 55/2001 is transposed in the best possible way. “Each state will decide how to implement it, but we are in an unknown scenario here. As the directive has never been used before, everything is new. And it will have to be monitored with great attention”, concludes Petronella. Vosyliūtė agrees and speaks of “practical challenges, such as home, work, school, integration”. “Europe could look to Latin America: in countries like Brazil or Colombia there are good practices, adopted especially for Venezuelan refugees”, she proposes.

Finally, there is another level on which the decision of the EU Council could have an impact, that of the reform of the EU rules on immigration, which has been at a standstill for too long. According to some observers, the Ukrai-

nian precedent could become a positive one, to break the deadlock that has loomed for months on the Pact for Asylum and Migration, presented by the Commission in September 2020.

“Many have already said and written about the war in Ukraine as a tipping point for European architecture in matters of security and foreign policy. The same could also be said for migration and asylum,” explains EPC’s Neidhardt. Rasche of the Jacques Delors Center, on the other hand, is more cautious: “some last-minute reservations from Hungary about a possible transfer of beneficiaries indicate that positions have not fundamentally changed in Eastern European countries. There are good reasons to be cautious in thinking that the adoption of the directive on temporary protection will lead to a paradigm shift”.

17 billion euros from the EU for refugee reception (but uncertainty prevails on relocation and quotas)

PAOLO RIVA

These funds will go towards supporting the reception of over 3.8 million refugees who arrived in the European Union between February 24 and March 28. While the number of arrivals has stabilised at around 40,000 people a day, uncertainty remains around quotas and relocations.

Within the [EU's 10-point plan](#) for welcoming refugees from Ukraine, the most important is probably the last point: that regarding funds. In the plan proposed by the EU Commission and [unanimously approved](#) by the Ministers of the Interior of the 27 EU countries, it is stated that "the efforts of the Member States to address the immediate and long-term scope of this challenge will have to be financially supported at the EU level". Specifically, an EU official explained, member states, especially those bordering Ukraine, will receive "about 17 billion euro".

This is not the definitive amount of money, but an initial allocation, supported by the "[funding](#) that is still available from the 2014-2020 program under the [Cohesion Policy and Home Affairs](#)". It is also supported by funding under REACT-EU – in particular, its 2022 allocation of 10 billion euro". "If there is a need, we will do more," said Gerard Darmanin, Minister of the Interior of France, who is also the current president of the Council of the EU.

3.8 million refugees

The funds will support the reception of over 3.8 million refugees who arrived in the European Union between February 24th and March 28th. "Half of them are minors," explained the Commissioner for Home Affairs, Ylva Johansson. "The number of arrivals is falling, from the peak of 200,000 per day to around 40,000 today, but we must continue to prepare plans. We don't know what will happen. We need to be ready for several million more people who may come," she added.

The document approved by the Ministers of the Interior also provides for:

- A common IT platform for refugee registration, implemented by the EU LISA agency;
- Hubs for information and transport, supported by the European Asylum Agency;
- A mapping of the reception capacity of member states;
- An index to establish which countries will be under the greatest strain in welcoming refugees, and not only from Ukraine;
- Standard procedures for minors;
- Measures against trafficking in human beings, in particular women and children, to be implemented together with EUROPOL, thanks to the EMPACT platform.



Extraordinary Justice and Home Affairs Council Roundtable with the Ukrainian Minister of Interior via vtc. Photo by European Union

Countries that border Ukraine are under pressure

Both the Commissioner and Darmanin have repeatedly stressed the willingness of many Ukrainian refugees to stay as close as possible to their country, in the hope of being able to return once the conflict is over. What seems to confirm this fact is that temporary protection, guaranteed by the implementation of the EU directive 55/2001, was requested by 830.000 people of the nearly 4 million who arrived.

It is an understandable choice, which, however, despite Ukrainian citizens being able to move freely within the EU, demonstrably puts border countries under pressure. Poland, for example, is home to around 1.5 million people. Moldova, which is not part of the EU, has welcomed a number of refugees that are unsustainable for one of the poorest countries in Europe. One of the ten points approved, in fact, addresses support for Moldova, which also includes the very limited relocation of 14,500 refugees to EU states.

“Unity and solidarity”

The ten points on reception came after the EU Commission presented a series of proposals for the inclusion of refugees in health, education, work and housing the previous week and after the EU heads of state and government met in Brussels for the summit on March 24th and 25th. “The European Council – as it is reported in the conclusions of the summit – recognises all efforts already made to welcome refugees fleeing the war in Ukraine, invites all member states to intensify their efforts in a constant spirit of unity and solidarity and invites the Commission to take all necessary initiatives to facilitate these efforts”.

“Unity and solidarity” are words that Johansson also used, speaking of “a positive, constructive and pragmatic approach” on the part of the Ministers of the Interior and underlying the difference with respect to past divisions in the field of immigration. The differences with respect to the management of the phenomenon in past years are evident. However, some critical aspects still remain and could grow, depending on the evolution of the conflict and the situation.

What about quotas and relocations?

It is not clear, for example, how the EU Ministers of the Interior have evaluated the proposal by Poland and Germany, to allocate one thousand euros to the host state for each refugee for six months. Certainly, there is no mention of this in the final document. The idea is linked to that of quotas, to redistribute refugees in a proportionate manner among all member states. For now, it seems like this option has not been taken into consideration, or at least this is what several EU officials have declared.

Paradoxically, Poland, which would benefit from it, seems to oppose the measure because it would set a dangerous precedent. Warsaw, in fact, in the past years has always rejected this type of proposal for refugees arriving in Mediterranean countries such as Italy and therefore would now prefer to receive substantial funding for reception or to see at least some of the people who arrived from Ukraine to leave spontaneously. Hungary and Czech Republic seem to share the same views on this issue.

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Delays in regularisation are affecting Ukrainian workers

CLAUDIA TORRISI



Photo by Ero Straniero

The promised 2020 regularisation of foreign workers for the domestic and agricultural sectors is proceeding very slowly. Among the requests that have been submitted, about 20,000 involve Ukrainian nationals, placing Ukrainians first in the rankings of applicants by nationality, who now face being unable to leave Italy without their regularisation request being rejected. An article by Claudia Torrissi.

Although almost two years have passed since the closure of applications for [regularisation](#), the promised 2020 regularisation of foreign workers within

the domestic and agricultural sectors is proceeding very slowly. The deadline for the applications was the 15th of August that year, and yet, according to the latest data updated at the beginning of March, only 60.24% of the 207,870 applications have been processed. This delay has caused a bureaucratic [limbo of precariousness](#) and uncertainty for applicants.

Among the requests sent, about 20,000 were submitted by Ukrainian nationals, ranking their nationality first among all those who applied.

Since the beginning of the war, some organisations have denounced the situation of Ukrainian workers (mostly female) and male workers who have applied

for regularisation, however, they have not yet received any updates and thus are unable to leave Italy without risking that their application may be rejected. The *Ero Straniero* association received reports of workers waiting for a residence permit who wanted to travel quickly to the countries bordering Ukraine to reunite with fleeing family members or return to their country. Similar phone calls were also fielded at Assindatcolf, the National Association of Domestic Employers. The law provides that during the regularisation procedure “foreign citizens must not have left the national territory after 8th March 2020”.

The Ukrainian community residing in Italy is the largest in Europe, with 236 thousand people living and working in our nation. They are, for the most part, women – about 80% – working – in 65% of cases – in the domestic sector. “We have received several complaints where great distress is showing. It is an absurd situation after almost two years of waiting. Not only for Ukrainian people but all applicants”, explains Andrea Zini, president of Assindatcolf, who recalls estimates that 85% of the total number of regularisation applications submitted in August 2020 concern domestic work and care.

In order to make up for the situation, on the 8th of March the National Labor Inspectorate issued a document recommending that local offices “ensure priority” processing for Ukrainian nationals “in order to facilitate their territorial mobility and any family reunifications”.

Because of the reports coming from associations, the government has included in Article 6 of the temporary protection directive – adopted for Ukrainian refugees and signed on March 29th – the possibility for citizens who have applied for regularisation to “leave or return to the national territory for the sole purpose of providing assistance to their families”.

However, the issues are far from being resolved.

According to lawyer Francesco Mason, who is monitoring the procedures concerning regularisation, along with ASGI (Association for Juridical Studies



on Immigration) and Ero Straniero, “the situation of Ukrainians is emblematic of the absurdity of a regularisation initiative that takes more than two years to be completed, considering the assumption of wanting it to be a tool to provide documents to a great number of foreign workers during the pandemic”. In large cities such as Rome, Naples or Milan, where the number of requests is higher, the percentage of applications examined is 25%. “There is a sentence of the Tribunal of Lombardy which recognises the 30-day deadline for issuing the residence permit. Here we are at 700 days. There is something that does not work, structurally speaking”.

According to Mason, the reasons for this enormous delay are diverse. First of all, there is a very cumbersome path envisaged by the legislator: “the future employer had to submit an application to the Prefecture, wait for a binding opinion from the police headquarters, only for them to be summoned again to the prefecture to fill in a form to be sent to the police headquarters for the issuance of the residence permit. There are at least four to five steps”. Although the law that introduced the regularisation provided for the possibility of hiring additional staff, the hiring of temporary workers came in two instalments a year later, in March and April 2021. As Mason further explained, “staff were supposed to be trained and put into action in the Prefectures but the issues concerning the understaffed and disorganised police stations remained”.

The main weakness, however, is the concept of “emergency”: “on a legal level, the regularisation tool was interesting. But it had to be thought of as ordinary, a procedure whereby people calmly submit their applications when they meet the conditions, without having to deal with the concentrated numbers of applications that occurred in a month and a half. If you adopt an extraordinary regularisation tool you need extraordinary resources. Unfortunately, the concept of “emergency” is a great classic in our country”.

The *Ero Straniero* campaign has requested an intervention to overcome the serious delay in the examination caused by the offices of the Ministry of the Interior, to try and put an end to the uncertainty of women and men who are still waiting. This last question for lawyer Mason is central: “The general assumption is that a migrant does not protest, he or she passively accepts the situation and they only have to say “thank you” because we give them a residence permit and the opportunity to share our well-being with us. Even at the administrative level, there is no fear of systematically violating their rights”. Having an answer in an acceptable period of time “is already a right in itself, and for these people, it is a problem for the protection of all other rights, from reunifications to any other procedure concerning migration. There are restrictions on the freedom of movement; issues in changing jobs. It always seems that the impact on people’s lives is an irrelevant variable”.



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