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THE EXPLOSIVE UKRAINIAN MIGRATION DUE TO THE RUSSIAN ARMED CONFLICT IN 2022: THE CASE OF BULGARIA

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Abstract: *In this work, we have studied the evolution of the Ukrainian refugee crisis in Europe during the first several months after the beginning of the armed conflict on 24 February 2022. We have also talked about the influx of Ukrainians into Bulgaria, where there has reportedly been the biggest wave of refugees in recorded history. By using official statistics and structured interviews with Ukrainian refugees in Bulgaria, we have analyzed the specific evolution of the immigrants, their profile, and the governmental policies for better integration of them into the labor market and within the society. Our key arguments are mainly related to the fact that such policies must be successful for most Ukrainian immigrants and refugees due to the similarities between Ukraine and Bulgaria regarding traditions, education, and historical ties. Our conclusion confirms these arguments but also mentions several problems related to the low wages, the limited childcare, and the heavy bureaucracy.*

Keywords: *Russia-Ukraine War; Ukrainian Refugees; Protection Scheme; Europe; Bulgaria*

INTRODUCTION

The Russian-Ukrainian armed conflict started in February 2014 following the Ukrainian Revolution of Dignity. Initially, it was related to the status of Crimea and Donbas. This included the armed conflict between Ukraine and the Donbas separatists, naval incidents, and cyber warfare.

The Euromaidan protests resulted in the removal of pro-Russian President Viktor Yanukovych in February 2014. In April 2014, demonstrations by pro-Russian groups in the Donbas escalated into an undeclared war between the Armed Forces of Ukraine and the Russian separatists, intermingled with Russian troops at the self-proclaimed Donetsk and Luhansk republics. After the controversial referendum in Crimea, Russia annexed it to the territory of the Russian Federation.

In 2021 and early 2022, major Russian military exercises occurred around Ukraine's borders. On one side, NATO accused Russia of planning an invasion. On the other side, Russian President Vladimir Putin criticized the enlargement of NATO as a threat to his country, especially the aspiration of Ukraine to join the organization. Moreover, he expressed his views questioned Ukraine's right to exist by stating that Vladimir Lenin established Ukraine. On 21 February 2022, Russia officially recognized the two self-proclaimed separatist states in the Donbas (Donetsk and Lugansk) and sent troops into their territories. On 24 February, the Russian Federation started a

direct armed conflict with the whole of Ukraine. This provoked a large-scale migration of Ukrainians abroad and inside the country and a strong rejection of the international community against Russia for violating a sovereign country. The latter led to the implementation of the strongest economic sanctions ever seen (GCT 2022; AHA 2022; EC 2022). Moreover, the European security architecture built over many decades has broken (NATO 2022).

The present paper mainly focuses on the beginning of the conflict and how it has affected the migration flows of Ukrainian refugees across Europe. A special emphasis is made on the case of Bulgaria, a country that experienced drastic migration flows of Ukrainians during the first several months after the beginning of the armed conflict.

THE UKRAINE MIGRATION IN EUROPE DUE TO THE UKRAINIAN-RUSSIAN ARMED CONFLICT AFTER 24 FEBRUARY 2022

The military conflict started on 24 February 2022 by the Russian Federation in Ukraine reflected a major humanitarian crisis and migratory flows in contemporary Ukraine and Europe of the XXI century. On 1 March 2022, the International Organization of Migration (IOM) started an appeal for Inclusive "protection measures" to mobilize teams in Ukraine and neighboring countries to respond to the growing humanitarian needs of Ukrainians forced to flee the country, those internally displaced and stranded third country nationals. Only in the first five days after the beginning of the military operation, more than 600.000 people fled Ukraine (IOM Response 2022). In March 2022, the EU adopted a temporary protection scheme for persons fleeing the war in Ukraine, which consisted in the decision that all citizens of Ukraine who have left the country since February 24 automatically receive legal status in the EU and will be allowed to live in the EU, have the right to work, access to social security, medicine, and education. This temporary mechanism is designed for one year, until March 2023. However, the EU Council can either extend its operation (twice for six months) or reduce it if the situation in Ukraine stabilizes (EU Protection 2022). Meantime IOM, with initial funding from the UN Central Emergency Fund, the European Union, Canada, Germany, and the Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance of the United States Agency for International Development, launched a cash-based program that will cover multiple regions in Ukraine to support vulnerable displaced persons and host communities (IOM Assistance). The large humanitarian response inside Ukraine at the border points and countries of first arrival and throughout final destinations of refugees involved not only the international community but also the civil society, donors, and international organizations to contribute with resources to help the crisis. The exchange of information regarding the Ukrainian refugees contributed to coordinating and planning this large and complex humanitarian response (IMPACT Initiative 2022). At the same time, the IOM scaled up the regional displacement tracking in response to the armed conflict in Ukraine by collecting and analyzing data on the mobility and vulnerabilities of displaced persons to ensure that assistance provided to affected populations corresponds to their needs (IOM DT 2022).

In parallel, the diaspora's response to the war in Ukraine was also very strong and effective. By using financial resources and direct donations, members of Ukrainian communities abroad have been engaged in multiple non-financial forms to contribute their social, political, and intellectual knowledge (ICMPD Diaspora 2022).

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From the beginning of the conflict to 15 June 2022 more than 7.7 million border crossings from Ukraine have been registered, and more than 5 million Ukrainian refugees arrived in Europe. The major host countries were Poland (1.170.000) and Germany (780.000), as well as the rest of the neighboring countries such as Slovakia (78.500), Hungary (24.500), Romania (98.000), and Moldova (85.500) without taking into account the refugees to the Russian Federation and Belarus (UNHCR 2022). The countries of Western Europe, such as France, Italy, the UK, Spain, and the Netherlands, among others, have also been important host countries for helping the refugees, together with countries such as Bulgaria (80.000) and Turkey (70.000).

The situation on 19 July 2022 was similar when the number of refugees from Ukraine recorded across Europe was 5.988.696. "temporary protection" or similar national protection schemes in Europe registered 3,709,329. The number of border crossings from Ukraine from 24 February 2022 until 19 July 2022 has ascended to 9.567.033, and the border crossings to Ukraine since 28 February 2022 have been registered to be 3.793.403 (UNHCR 2022).

Poland continues to be the most demanded country for Ukrainian refugees on 19 July due to its geographic and cultural closeness with 1.234.718 people registered for temporary protection, followed by the rest of the neighboring Ukraine countries such as Slovakia - 85.771, Romania - 45.530 and Hungary - 26.932 (UNHCR 2022).

This situation is not without precedents. In 2015, Syrian and other asylum seekers crossed through Europe. During the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1992, over one million people fled their homes. When the war ended in 1995, almost half of the population had been displaced, many of them internally. One must remember the wars and armed conflicts during the XX century when numerous refugee crises occurred in Europe. During World War II, around 10 million ethnic Germans were expelled from East and Central Europe. Over half a million Ukrainians and one million Poles were displaced when the border between Poland and the Soviet Union was redefined. The invasion of Belgium (1914) and Serbia (1915) led to a migration of a similar scale as what is occurring in Ukraine nowadays (NYT 2022).

THE UKRAINIAN MIGRATION IN BULGARIA AFTER 24 FEBRUARY 2022

The Ukrainian refugee phenomenon in Bulgaria is very similar to that in the neighboring countries of Ukraine. Over 195,000 Ukrainian citizens had entered Bulgaria through the border with Bulgaria as of 18 April, and more than 91.000 of them, including about 35,000 children, had chosen to stay. Over 50.000 Ukrainian citizens were accommodated in hotels or state and local departmental buildings under the "Programme for the Use of Humanitarian Aid for Displaced Persons from Ukraine", which entered into force in mid-March. This indicates that most of these refugees have been hosted by Bulgarian citizens - more than a third. This initial national aid program was in force until the end of May, providing places for accommodation with 40 BGN (approximately €20) per day per refugee for shelter and food. Since the beginning of June, the Ukrainian refugees have been accommodated in different bases for recreation and relaxation.

Before this happened, most people were accommodated in hotels on the Black Sea coast due to the large number of accommodation facilities and the substantial Russian and Ukrainian-speaking communities in Varna and Burgas, which provided sufficient support (DS 2022).

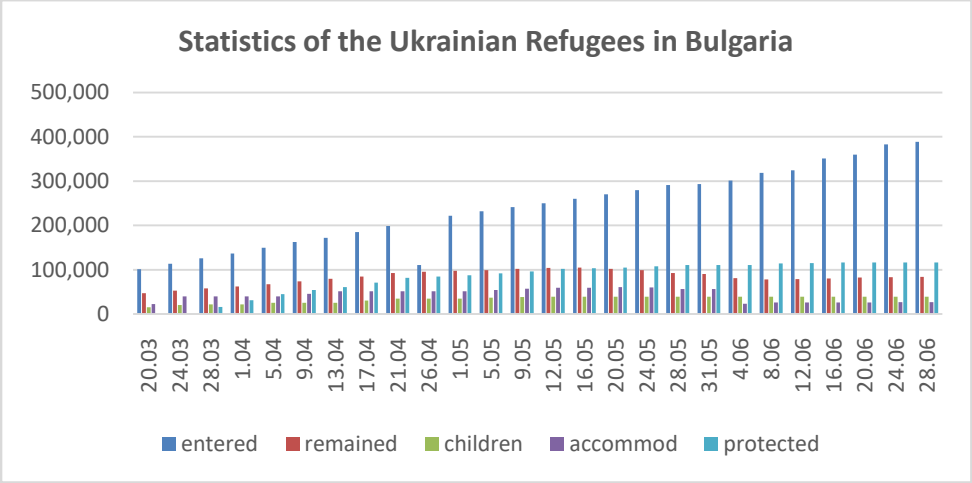


Figure 1: Distribution of the Ukrainian Refugees in Bulgaria March-June 2022: Entered, Remained, Children, Accommodated and Protected (Source: BfU 2022)

In Figure 1 one can see the number of Ukrainian refugees who have entered in Bulgaria from March 20th until the end of June 2022 as well as the remained refugees, the children, the accommodated persons, and the protected ones entered during the same period (BfU 2022). At the end of June 2022, there were nearly 120.000 people registered for temporary protection, with 84.000 women and 36.000 men. The age structure is also specific - 65.000 were people of working age (18-64), almost 40.000 were children (up to 18), and nearly 9.000 were older people (over 65) (BfU 2022).

The uncertainty caused Ukrainian immigrants to actively leave the country prior to the resettlement at the end of May 2022. The number of those leaving the country remained higher than those entering. However, since June, the increase of those who decide to remain in Bulgaria has increased continuously (see Figure 1).

After 31 May 2022, as discussed above, the number of accommodated Ukrainian refugees has dropped drastically by half as many refugees have found their accommodation or have left the country (Figure 1). Similar to the remaining Bulgaria Ukrainian refugees, the number of accommodated ones has been increasing continuously since June (European Times 2022; Reuters 2022).

Finally, the number of Ukrainian refugees who have entered the country and those who applied for protection has increased continuously since March, when the refugees started to enter massively. The number of Ukrainian children has remained constant (around 40.000) since mid-May 2022. Comparing the number of Ukrainian refugees in Bulgaria to those of the Middle East refugees, the former is ten times larger than the latter. The applications for international protection filed by refugees from the Middle East is 8.327, with 1.423 of them being by unaccompanied minors (BNR 2022).

By 15 July 2022, around 7.400 persons who received temporary protection in Bulgaria had started to work, representing 11.4% of all working-age persons who have been granted temporary protection. About 64% started working in the hospitality sector, while the other sectors are represented by trade (8%) and manufacturing (7%). Other 179 people (2.4%) started

work in the information technology sector, and 41 persons (0.6%) started in finance. The regional breakdown shows that nearly ¾ of all working persons who received temporary protection were employed in the sea region and mostly in the municipalities of Nessebar (2.437), Varna (1.376), Balchik (419), and Primorsko (352). In addition, the leading municipalities in employing Ukrainians were also Sofia (868) and Plovdiv (219). Although there is a lack of personnel in many other regions, they have not been particularly successful in attracting Ukrainian citizens. The districts in which the total number of employed persons who received temporary protection is less than 20 were Vidin, Vratsa, Kardzhali, Kyustendil, Lovech, Montana, Pernik, Pleven, Silistra, Targovishte, Shumen, and Yambol (Dnes 2022).

Despite the former government's social policy, several difficulties obstructed the quick integration of the Ukrainian refugees into the labor market. The main difficulty is related to the economic part since most jobs offer to pay the minimum wage, which is insufficient to cover the monthly needs of refugees, mostly women with one or more children. Additionally, childcare is complicated for the mothers working, considering the shortage of municipal nurseries and kindergartens throughout the country (DS 2022). This has been reflected in a massive leaving from the country (European Times 2022).

In order to see the real adaptation of the Ukrainian refugees in Bulgaria, we have conducted several interviews with them in the capital Sofia and the northern part of the Black Sea resorts. All of them have started working in the tourist, service and entertainment sectors and have succeeded in adapting very quickly and learning the Bulgarian language at a relatively good level. Moreover, those who worked in the tourism sector had a good background in other languages, such as English and Russian. The owners of the companies who hired Ukrainian workers were also very satisfied with their professionalism and previous experience in similar fields.

Regarding the integration of Ukrainian citizens in a larger European context, one can cite the general problem of skills assessment and recognition of qualifications of refugees and immigrants in Europe. Sometimes, due to problems with recognition of their qualifications, skills, and work experience, many refugees and migrants are underemployed or are staying unemployed (EC Integration 2022).

The IOM recently launched a freelancing platform helping displaced Ukrainians find remote, online work, facilitating their entry into the job market. This allows for identifying unemployed job seekers in Ukraine and its neighbors who possess the necessary abilities for the employment market and assists those interested in starting their own businesses as online freelancers (IOM freelance 2022).

CONCLUSION

In this article, we have analyzed the explosive character of Ukrainian immigrants and refugees, a phenomenon that occurred after the Russian military operation in Ukraine on 24 February 2022. We have discussed the destinations of the Ukrainian migration flows across Europe during the first fourth months after the armed conflict's beginning and the previous historical events which ended to this magnitude.

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We proceeded later to investigate the Ukrainian migration in Bulgaria. For this case, we have analyzed the dynamics of Ukrainian immigration in response to the governmental policies after the beginning of the armed conflict. The effect of Ukrainian immigration on the Bulgarian labor market has also been discussed. There are still issues with the low wages, the limited childcare, and the bureaucratic barriers that prevent foreigners from entering the job market, even though the adaptation of immigrants and refugees from Ukraine can be a quick process due to the good background and preparation of the majority of them, the similarities in languages and traditions, as well as the efforts of the government and business for better integration. Nevertheless, by 15 July 2022, around 7.400 persons who received temporary protection started to work.

Finally, some attempts to improve the recognition process of the immigrant's qualifications, skills, and work experience have been mentioned in a general European context.

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