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WAR IN UKRAINE: REFUGEE EDUCATION IN EUROPE

Summary

Russia's invasion of Ukraine precipitated a significant refugee crisis, disproportionately impacting Ukrainian women and children. This article aims to elucidate the extent of the aid Ukrainian refugees received from European countries, Great Britain and the USA. The author primarily focused on describing the assistance, as well as the educational provisions, that European governments offered to Ukrainian students. Additionally, this article delves into the predicament of foreign students enrolled in Ukrainian universities and describes the challenges they encountered after their displacement.

Keywords: conflict, refugees, migrants, education, support.

1. Introduction

Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 triggered one of the largest refugee movements the world had witnessed since the end of the Second World War. According to statistics, an estimated 4 to 5 million displaced persons from Ukraine have benefited from Directive 2001/55/EC on minimum standards for providing temporary protection in the event of a mass influx of displaced persons and measures promoting a balance of efforts between member states (Council of the European Union, 2023). However, according to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), this figure has now reached 8 million (UNHCR, 2023). In terms of numbers, the Ukrainian refugee crisis eclipsed the 2.5 million influx of refugees from Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan, who arrived in Europe in 2015–2016 during the presumed "refugee crisis in Europe" (Eurostat, 2017). After fleeing from the Russian invasion, Ukrainian refugees have joined the group of 84 million forcibly displaced people worldwide (UNHCR, 2023). The Russian invasion disrupted the normal lives of the Ukrainians, forcing them to leave all their possessions in their country of origin and head toward an unknown future. The said future entails two options: return to the home country or stay in the host country (Dryden-Peterson, 2017). Their choice will depend, inter alia, on financial resources (work, rented accommodation), level of language proficiency, culture and the policy of the host country and the attitude of its citizens towards refugees.

This article aims to present the state of assistance provided to Ukrainian refugees, including Ukrainian students. It also depicts the situation of the foreign students who attended Ukrainian universities before the outbreak of war and the issues they encountered after fleeing the country.

2. Refugee, migrant, immigrant – Introduction to the concept

The term *refugee* has two meanings. In a general sense, it denotes a person who has been forced to leave their place of residence for reasons beyond their control, while the second meaning is related to the political aspect (Szymczak, 1981, p. 573). Article 1 of the Geneva Convention (1951) defines a refugee as a person who "owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it". Persecution of those who choose to flee their homeland is a consequence of differing political views or participation of individuals in a particular social group. One of the main causes of refugee phenomena worldwide is armed conflict, the same as in the case of refugees from Ukraine (Wierzbicki, 2003, p. 96). Several categories of refugees can be distinguished as follows: *conventional refugees*, foreigners recognised as refugees

due to the provisions of the Geneva Convention; *mandated refugees*, people under the care of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees; *de facto refugees*, people who cannot be identified as convention refugees because, in many cases, they do not face direct persecution but cannot return to their country of origin due to ongoing conflicts in their home country; and *internally displaced persons*, people who have been forced to leave their place of residence but remain within the borders of their home country or permanent residence (Florczak, 2003, p. 377). The latter encompasses Ukrainians who have moved from Eastern Ukraine to Western Ukraine (e.g. Luhansk Oblast [region] to Ivano-Frankivsk Oblast), which is safer during the war.

The word *immigrant* carries a different meaning than the term *refugee*; an immigrant is "a person who decides to leave his/her home country in favour of living permanently in another new country; [...] a person who migrates in search of work and usually from rural areas to urban environments. Resettlement is voluntary [...]" (Bullock et al., 1999, p. 325).

According to Long (2013, p. 23), there is also a difference between the terms *refugee* and *migrant*. UN Refugee Agency documents state that "an international migrant is someone who changes their country of habitual residence regardless of the reason for migration or their legal status" (United Nations Refugees and Migrants, 2023); it is considered "any movement of a person, outside of their home country except for business or tourism purposes". Migrants who permanently settle on the territory of a foreign country are referred to as *permanent migrants*. However, people who stay in a given territory for a defined period are referred to as *temporary migrants* (Jaroszewicz & Szerepka, 2007, p. 6). It is evident that refugees are vulnerable to labelling, and their rights should be protected as they are more disadvantaged compared to migrants (Bernburg, 2009, p. 6).

However, the literature employs the term *forced migrant*, which means "a migration movement in which there is an element of coercion, linked to a threat to life (e.g. refugee movements and internally displaced persons due to natural or environmental disasters (chemical and nuclear or famine)" (Perruchoud & Redpath-Cross, 2011). Zetter (2019) suggested that forced migration encompasses the complexity of factors, processes and effects in a more holistic way when compared to refugee movements.

Assmuth et al. (2021), while describing the phenomenon of refugees, employed the term *everyday security* to highlight the challenges and problems refugees faced on a daily basis and thus acquire some experience. The concept of everyday security is closely linked to the concept of well-being (material status, level of relationship establishment and ethical dimension). Security is a term traditionally associated with the absence of any threat, especially the absence of threat from other states, the assurance of public order, the proper functioning of state institutions and the conduct of the state (Rychły-Lipińska, 2017). Currently, the concept of everyday security is widely used in the literature and is synonymous with the concept of individual security. An individual's sense of security consists of not only the absence of external threats but also the presence of some other factors, such as a stable material situation (steady employment and

a salary sufficient to ensure an average standard of living), assured medical and social care, the prospect of a decent life at retirement age and law enforceability (Rychły-Lipińska, 2017, p. 34).

The everyday security of forced migrants, as well as their families, is perceived as a reality, i.e. the way individuals interpret events, learn the meaning of new experiences and try to create security in their daily lives (Cochrane & Wolff, 2021). White (2010) argued that maintaining a sense of everyday security is a multidimensional process concerning well-being. Ukrainian refugees who chose to remain in the host country automatically became forced migrants.

3. War in Ukraine – Refugee crisis

Morrice (2022, p. 252) pointed out that "there is an important difference between the refugee crisis resulting from the war in Ukraine and other refugee crises in the perception of the events of societies". First, the war began in the heart of Europe. For the first time in more than 70 years, European nations faced a crisis that they had long been managing at a distance (UNHCR, 2023). Second, this crisis challenged the deeply held assumption that wars only break out in certain geographical areas or territories and involve certain types of people. Third, the war revealed that refugee movements can occur in developed countries too, not just in poor countries. Fourth, the group of refugees included women and children. Last, Ukrainians were archetypal refugees, i.e. their image corresponded to the definition of the refugee image adopted in the 1951 Refugee Convention:

"A person who owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality" (Article 1 A(2); UN, 1951).

Unlike recent waves of refugees from the Middle East, the Ukrainians received warm welcomes and accommodations. This influx had unique characteristics, as it included mainly women, children and older men, while males between the ages of 18 and 60 fought in the war. Interviews with Ukrainian refugees conducted by UNHCR depicted that the adult refugee population was 86% female, of whom 84% were of working age (18–59 years). UNHCR interviews also indicated that 49% of Ukrainian refugees had tertiary education (UNHCR, 2022).

From the outset, Ukrainian citizens were granted freedom of movement across EU borders and the right to temporary protection, work and study in EU countries. The Polish government helped Ukrainian refugees meet their basic and immediate needs of using free public transport, receiving school and pre-school care, continuing their studies at universities and receiving free medical services. Ukrainian refugees were granted the right to apply for access to social benefit packages for minors, e.g. the Good Start Programme 300+ (subsidy for school supplies at the start of the school year); the 500+ programme (subsidy for a child's current needs) (Journal of Laws of 2022, item 583. The Act of 12 March 2022).

The UK was the second country to significantly help Ukraine manage this crisis. Under former British Prime Minister Boris Johnson, the UK provided significant military and humanitarian support to Ukraine. It launched the *Homes for Ukraine Scheme* (https://hoa.org.uk/2022/03/homes-for-ukraine/) and the *Ukraine Family Scheme* (https://settled.org.uk/ukraine-family-scheme-frequent-asked-questions/), which enabled refugees to come to the UK and stay in the country for at least three years while also receiving family support (Home Office, 2022).

The more geographically distant countries of Australia, the USA and Canada also responded in cooperation and support. Australia provided Ukrainians with three-year temporary visas and access to work, education and healthcare (Home Affairs, 2022). Canada introduced a priority immigration stream for Ukrainians with work permits (Government of Canada, 2022). The USA introduced a facilitated humanitarian procedure for Ukrainians, according to which refugees received financial, psychological and social assistance (Homeland Security, 2022).

The political will demonstrated to support Ukrainian refugees depicted the European people's reaction to the events in Ukraine and their willingness to help. However, it was noteworthy that these states had demonstrated a starkly different reaction following the Russian invasion of eastern Ukraine in 2014. At that time, Russia had received only political and economic sanctions which were neither noticeable nor harmful to their economy. In contrast to this delayed and "soft" reaction, the response of the EU states in 2022 was much stronger and entailed much higher costs for the member states for the refugees from Ukraine.

On the other hand, many refugees who arrived in Europe in 2015 and 2016 are still residing in limbo in camps or urban areas in southern Europe, especially in Greece and Turkey. The EU continues to invest in a powerful architecture for deterring migrants and refugees. This includes the construction of more than 1,800 km of walls, the strengthening of Frontex (the European Border and Coast Guard Agency) and the negotiation and signing of agreements to stop irregular migration with third-world countries (Müller & Slominski, 2021; Sajjad, 2022). Following the Australian model of offshoring – the processing of asylum claims – the UK government has decided to deport asylum seekers to Rwanda without the right to return to the UK (Syal, 2022). More than six months after arriving in the UK, around 12,000 Afghans remain in hotels, waiting to settle in communities where they could begin the process of rebuilding their lives and planning for the future (Taylor, 2022).

4. Access to education for Ukrainian students

Major discussions have taken place across varying types of media regarding the education of children. Furthermore, universities are researching the support provided to Ukrainian children, as well as the difficulties faced by early childhood education teachers and their adaptation in this regard (Pyżalski, 2022; Zbróg, 2022). Nonetheless, such

information on the education of the younger generation among a refugee population remains insufficient. The main problem that countries find difficult to tackle even now regarding a refugee population is ensuring access to education for young people. Education is an essential component of humanitarian action (Morrice, 2021). The growing number of refugees, combined with the prolonged refugee crisis globally, highlights the crucial importance of education for refugees. Since 2010, education has been one of the global strategic priorities of the UNHCR, which stresses the importance of education and how it enables refugees to have a decent livelihood. It is a long-term goal, particularly for young people, as it helps them integrate quicker into a new society and, most importantly, represents a future both in the host country and their own home.

However, access to education for refugees is rarely prioritised in host countries. Even in highly developed countries, refugees have difficulty accessing education (Morrice et al., 2019; Shakya et al., 2012). In 2021, more than one million students were attending higher education institutions in Ukraine (Вищаосвіта в Україні, 2023); moreover, 78,000 Ukrainian people studied abroad, and amongst them, 60% chose to study in the EU (ВійнаросіїпротиУкраїни: українськістудентивЄС, 2023). Following the outbreak of war and the declaration of general mobilisation, men aged between 18 and 60 were forbidden to leave the country for any reason, including studying abroad. Only women and men under 18 years of age were allowed to leave the country. Nevertheless, EU countries and the UK granted Ukrainian citizens the right to study and endeavoured to support Ukrainian students financially. At Austrian universities, tuition fees for Ukrainian citizens were abolished, and the processing of applications for the recognition of Ukrainian qualifications was accelerated. Finland covered the costs for the studies of around 2,000 Ukrainian students, while Romanian universities increased the number of free-of-charge places to support Ukrainian students. Germany established a platform to enable Ukrainian students and researchers to continue their education and research. The Scottish Government announced the creation of free places for Ukrainian students and offered them financial assistance (Scottish Government, 2022). Moreover, the Italian government arranged a special fund of EUR 5,000 to support Ukrainian students, researchers and academics (Ministry of University and Research, 2022).

According to Statistics Poland (Główny Urząd Statystyczny, GUS), 105.4 thousand foreigners studied in Poland in 2022–2023, most of whom belonged to European countries. The largest group comprised people from Ukraine (48.1 thousand, 45.6% of all foreigners), Belarus (12.0 thousand, 11.4%) and Turkey (3.8 thousand, 3.6%) (Szkolnictwo wyższe w roku akademickim, 2023).

Notably, the majority of Polish higher education institutions offered financial support to Ukrainian students; provided legal and psychological assistance, a flexible approach to the educational process, and assistance in situations requiring individual solutions; and allowed for the postponement of the deadline for payment of fees in time and the payment of tuition fees in convenient instalments and applying for a non-repayable allowance intended to meet essential social and living needs and for a scholarship

(Ukraine Aid for Students, 2023). For instance, the Crisis Management Team "Support Group for Ukrainian Citizens in the Field of Didactics and Education" ["Grupa wsparcia obywateli Ukrainy w zakresie dydaktyki i kształcenia"] at the University of the National Education Commission in Cracow developed rules for the continuation or commencement of studies by Ukrainian citizens. After considering the curriculum differences that were determined on the basis of the list of courses completed at the home university, a student could continue their studies at the university based on the documents required by the University and the Declaration Polish Language Command (Zasady kontynuowania/podejmowania studiów, 2022). In 2022, the Polish National Agency for Academic Exchange also joined in to announce a call for applications for the "In Solidarity with Ukraine" programme, aimed at students and PhD students who had decided to continue their education in Poland. The Jagiellonian University in Cracow launched the SPLOT UA Residency programme for Ukrainian women and men aged 18–30, who would work under the guidance of experts and facilitators on three themes based on the Ukraine Reconstruction Plans: healing the city, rewilding the night, and revitalizing education (Program rezydencyjny, 2022). Students were provided a chance to participate in a free Polish language course, which was organised at all universities. In addition, Ukrainian students were able to apply for various types of scholarships, such as Social Scholarships for Foreigners, Future of Ukraine Scholarships, the Professor Franciszka Ziejka Scholarship Fund, Scholarship Program for Young Academics – 21st edition; the Lane Kirkland Scholarship Program for the 2023/2024 academic year; Artist residencies for people from Ukraine; and Cracow: Artistic and Translation Residencies of the Institute of Literature (Scholarships for people from Ukraine, 2023).

The aid that the Ukrainian students received was immense; however, this aid was not delivered to the students who were affected by the war in Ukraine but were not Ukrainian citizens.

5. The fate of foreign students studying at Ukrainian universities

Before the war, 81,136 foreign students from 155 countries around the world studied in Ukraine, with the most students originating from India (18,095), followed by Morocco (8,832), Turkmenistan (5,322), Azerbaijan (4,628) and Nigeria (4,227) (Іноземністуденти в Україні, 2023). Notably, Ukraine used to be a popular choice among students belonging to Africa (Nigeria and Algeria) and post-Soviet countries (Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan). Many students from Africa and Asia attended Ukrainian universities back in the 1960s. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine had made promoting Ukrainian higher education at the international level a key priority. The Ukrainian government had invested considerable resources in the sector and offered flexible terms to those who could not afford expensive European and American universities (Shamanauri, 2023). Besides offering affordable studies, Ukraine's favourable location held a particular appeal for foreign students. Ukraine's proximity

to both Europe and parts of Asia opened up several opportunities for international students. Ukrainian universities were perceived as a gateway to the European labour market, offering affordable prices, simple visa conditions and the possibility of permanent residence (Ali, 2022). As Ukraine is a member of the Bologna Process, the degrees conferred by the country are recognised across Europe (Morrice, 2022). Furthermore, numerous Ukrainian universities conducted their courses in English.

In February 2022, international students at Ukrainian universities had to make the difficult decision to return to their country of origin, stay in Ukraine or continue and complete their studies in Europe. However, the last choice involved many difficulties. Many students told the BBC podcast in an interview that at some universities, authorities refused to organise online classes despite repeated requests. These students were told that they would be fined if they missed classes (Ali, 2022). Jessica Orakpo, a sixth-year medical student at Ternopil National Medical University, had four months left to complete her studies when the Russian army invaded the country. She was unable to continue her studies because the university had all her documents as per Ukrainian regulations, wherein a student in the process of enrolment hands over their original documents to the university until graduation. European countries did not offer assistance to foreign students attending Ukrainian universities as the war took place in Ukraine. Only Hungary and Ghana announced that some of the foreign students who had fled Ukraine would be allowed to continue their education at Hungarian universities and provided space and resources, with the students being required to pay the same fees as they did in Ukraine (Ali, 2022). Georgia also joined this initiative in 2023. According to data that the National Statistical Office of Georgia published in 2023, the number of foreign students at Georgian public and private universities has almost doubled from around 14,000 to over 25,000 (Shamanauri, 2023). However, the generous welcome offered to Ukrainian students was not extended to international students in Ukraine who were in the same situation while fleeing the war. These students encountered several obstacles in Europe when trying to fulfil their educational aspirations. Entangled in the complexity of the migration laws of European countries, students from third-world countries have fallen into the trap of suspension. Tuition fees in the countries they fled to were too high, and scholarships were offered to mainly Ukrainian students. While returning home was not a viable option for many students, they were also excluded from access rights under the new European Union programme. They might have fled the Russian invasion in the same way as their Ukrainian peers, but they were not considered indigenous to the war-torn country. European governments have been kind, but not kind enough to treat African students in the same way they have treated Ukrainians, as observed by Enebechi Macaulay Ebuka, vice-president of NIDO, a Poland-based organisation that supports Africans who fled Ukraine (Shamanauri, 2023).

Students from third-world countries also faced a very different immigration landscape than that in the case of Ukrainian citizens, which further complicated their efforts to find jobs, healthcare and housing. To cope with the massive influx of refugees

from Ukraine, the European Union granted "temporary protection status" to all Ukrainians. However, the programme did not cover those who "could return safely" to their country of origin. For these people, each EU country applied its own rules of allowing a stay of up to three months. However, a short-term stay did not guarantee such a temporary right (Pietromarchi, 2022).

6. Conclusions

The refugee crisis of Ukraine has demonstrated that the issue of refugees' access to education, including higher education, has not received much attention from European governments. The Eurydice report highlighted the lack of a solution to the issue related to the inclusion of refugees and asylum seekers in higher education. Despite the increase in refugee numbers, only a few countries have developed large-scale policies and actions regarding refugees, such as Germany. Germany's approach to the integration of asylum seekers and refugees involves policymaking at several levels (federal, regional and institutional). This thorough approach has ensured that asylum seekers and refugees have access to adequate tertiary education provision (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2019, pp. 24–25). Only six countries (Croatia, Belgium, Luxembourg, Austria, Italy and Germany) monitor the participation of asylum seekers and refugees in higher education, and a few other countries have implemented specific strategies at the national or regional level to facilitate access to higher education (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2019).

A common feature of the Syrian, Afghan and now Ukrainian crises has been the extraordinary wave of support from volunteers, community groups and civil society, including universities. In the UK, the number of universities offering scholarships to forced migrants has increased significantly over the past decade, especially since 2015–2016. More than 70 tertiary institutions now offer scholarships to those seeking refuge, compared to only 11 in 2011 (Murray, 2022). In response to the current crisis, universities around the world have been developing guidelines to promote, welcome and support displaced students and academics as well as support the viability of the higher education sector in Ukraine. The guidelines encourage the university community to create additional opportunities to help and support students. Universities are also encouraged to consider how they can support higher education in Ukraine in the long term, such as through partnerships with universities or a sponsorship model to develop educational pathways for refugees and their families (Parry & Ansems de Vries, 2022).

The brutal war in Ukraine has revealed the global humanitarian response to refugee crises. It represents a historic moment in the way European nations respond to refugee flows. The opening of borders, provision of aid and support and the recognition of the significance of access to higher education for refugees depict how a challenge that once seemed impossible becomes possible with political will and public support. The needs of refugees are reflected in state aid programmes, including higher education

institutions. Universities are forming new support pathways for students, academics and researchers. Doors to higher education are opening up for refugees, although on a scale much smaller than the demand. The activities conducted by governments, citizens, volunteers and educational institutions to provide Ukrainian refugees with assistance and Ukrainian students with opportunities to learn can provide a considerable volume of knowledge that can be learnt.

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