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The integration challenges of Ukrainian refugees in the Netherlands: What's next?

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This policy brief analyses the rapid reaction of the Dutch government regarding the influx of refugees from Ukraine. It focuses on integration policy measures taken in housing, language learning and health and also on the challenges that have been experienced in this process. A qualitative research method has been used to collect data. The policy brief also proposes several policy recommendations for overcoming these challenges.

1. Background

After the Russian illegal invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, there has been an unprecedented massive exodus from Ukraine to other countries in search of safety. The Council of the European Union has activated the Temporary Protection Directive with the Council Implementing Decision on 4 March 2022, to assist quickly and effectively with the massive influx of people who fled Ukraine because of war. Under the Temporary Protection Directive, people who fled Ukraine, as beneficiaries, have been granted certain social, social, legal, and economic rights, such as:

- A residence permit that allows the beneficiaries to stay in the country of arrival for the entire duration of protection (EU Home affairs state that the duration period can last from one year to three years)
- Access to the asylum procedures,
- Access to suitable accommodation or housing,
- Access to medical care,
- Access to education for persons under 18 years old,
- Free movement in EU countries for 90 days within 180 day-period after a residence permit in the host- EU country is issued¹.

The Directive and the Commission implementing decisions are being enforced with operational guidelines which are issued by the EU Commission².

“For stronger European coordination on welcoming people fleeing the war from Ukraine”, the EU member states agreed to implement ‘the 10-point Plan’ in order to exchange information, to help people who fled Ukraine with transport and information, to ensure health care, accommodation, and security, to meet their needs, and help them unite³.

According to UNHCR data, a total of 11,536,470 Ukrainians have fled to neighbouring countries, while a total of 3,933,695 Ukrainians have been registered under the ‘Temporary Protection’ as agreed by the Member States of the European Union or national protection programmes (data as of 23 August 2022)⁴.

2. Dutch government's response to Ukrainian refugees

Persons who fled Ukraine can obtain temporary protection in the Netherlands through the European Union's Temporary Protection Directive. To apply for temporary protection, there are several essential requirements, such as holding Ukrainian nationality, having a residence permit or being under international, or temporary national protection in Ukraine on 23 February 2022⁵.

As of 15 August 2022, the number of people fleeing Ukraine who have registered with the municipalities in the Netherlands is 73.930. However, there are also people with no identification documents, and these people cannot register in any municipality⁶.

Refugees from Ukraine who are not Ukrainian nationals and had temporary residence permits will no longer be covered by the Temporary Protection Directive unless these refugees fall under the EU Qualification Directive. These people will not be eligible to receive help for accommodation, allowances, education, and medical care. Nonetheless, those who were legal residents in Ukraine and registered on The Dutch Personal Records Database before 19 July 2022 will continue to be covered by the Temporary Protection Directive⁷.

The approach of the Dutch government in the reception of people who fled Ukraine is to work together with municipalities, security regions, and involved partners such as the Netherlands Red Cross, Association of Netherlands Municipalities (VNG) and Central Organisation for Reception of Asylum Seekers (COA), and in order to provide the coordination and the information exchange, The Ukraine Information Coordination Point (KCIO) has been established⁸. KCIO is a part of the National Coordination Centre for Refugee Dispersal (LCVS) which helps refugees find places to live and work. This collection point summarises the available municipal reception locations on a supra-regional/national scale and has a coordination role among them.

Ministry of Justice and Security (JenV), working with the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport (VWS), Ministry of Education, Culture and Science (OCW), Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment (SZW), Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations (BZK), Association of Netherlands Municipalities (VNG) and the other partners outside the central government, has drawn up 'The Municipal Reception of Ukrainians (GOO) Guide' for every municipality, and the organisations work with the municipalities to describe the elements and aspects of the reception of displaced persons from Ukraine and how to organise and deployment of the GOO⁹. GOO is being updated regularly according to the course of the situation.

3. Challenges of early integration in the Netherlands

The Dutch government cooperated with NGOs for the reception of Ukrainian refugees. As uncertainty about the volume of the refugee influx from Ukraine existed, the Dutch government has asked its partners and volunteers to organise and provide accommodation, language courses (in case of need), and health care for refugees who fled Ukraine. This part focuses on major issues such as housing, language and communication, and health measures and analyses the challenges concerning these measures.

Housing

From the beginning of the reception of people who fled Ukraine, the Dutch government has been prepared for a large-scale reception. The safety regions, municipalities, and involved organisations that would be responsible for providing basic accommodation and shelter have made available as of 30 June, around 52,000 beds¹⁰. Refugees from Ukraine are supposed to be registered in the municipalities to receive accommodation. Accommodation is provided for 6 months but can be extended. Besides, there are also NGOs, such as 'Takecarebnb', providing temporary accommodation and volunteers who open their homes to people who fled Ukraine for up to three months and help them¹¹.

The Dutch government provides refugees who stay at reception centres with a full board 55 euros for personal expenses. Refugees who stay at reception centres are entitled to without a full board of 205 euros for food and drinks during their stay in the Netherlands. Ukrainian refugees who stay with private individuals receive 475 euros for food, personal and living expenses¹². However, these allowances are stopped if Ukrainian individuals get a paid job¹³.

Challenges:

- Registration in the municipalities can take longer than refugees expected due to red-tape and the lack of officials working in the municipalities.
- Takecarebnb matches refugees with suitable volunteer families to stay at in order to ensure continuity of accommodation and facilitates an agreement between refugees and host families which might take longer than expected.
- Hosting by private individuals is for up to three months and after three months, Ukrainian refugees have to apply for a new host for their stay. However, a new host match may take longer or may not be found.
- Staying in the reception centres is up to six months and after six months, some Ukrainian refugees may want to rent a house from social housing. Renting a social house is a slow and laborious process. There are also available houses in the private sector and no need for queueing. However, rents are really high which people from Ukraine may not be able to afford.

Language and communication

The initial step of the Dutch government to overcome the language barrier for Ukrainian refugees arriving in the Netherlands who speak neither English nor Dutch is to introduce online translators. Municipalities work with face-to-face translators and interpreters together with organisations such as GlobalTalk or volunteers who know Ukrainian and Dutch¹⁴. Many municipalities and reception centres in the Netherlands organised language classes in cooperation with voluntary organisations and subsidised them financially. In other municipalities, there are

voluntary organisations which are independent of the municipalities to provide language courses¹⁵. Refugees from Ukraine do not get an allowance for paid language courses. If Ukrainian refugees prefer paid language courses, they have to pay for them themselves¹⁶. Yet, some organisations (such as universities) provide exemptions.

Challenges:

Language difference is one of the major challenges that Ukrainian refugees face for communicating with the locals. Although the translation technology is advanced, there are still problems with online translator or interpreter systems. Therefore, face-to-face interpreters or translators are preferred, but there are only about 20 interpreters registered at the government to help Ukrainian refugees. Lack of staff at the municipalities worsens the problem. Lack of motivation to learn local language(s) due to the uncertainty of the current situation in Ukraine is also another challenging factor for their integration. Although some organisations support refugees' language learning voluntarily, lack of structural government support makes it difficult to facilitate good quality courses.

Health

Individuals who have legal residency in the Netherlands are required to take out standard health insurance to cover the cost of, for example, consulting a general practitioner, hospital treatment and prescription medication. Those individuals are insured under the Healthcare Insurance Act (ZVW) and Long Term Act (WIZ)¹⁷. Refugees who fled Ukraine to the Netherlands and did not apply for asylum are not able to take out any health insurance and they fall under the Subsidy Scheme for Medically Necessary Healthcare for Uninsured Persons (SOV)¹⁸. Therefore, the healthcare costs can be claimed by healthcare providers from the Central Administrative Office (CAK) which is an independent administrative body that works with the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport (VWS) to reimburse the healthcare payments.

From 1st of July 2022, those who fled Ukraine or people who are subject to Temporary Protection Directive, and have a citizen service number (BSN) fall under a scheme called Ukrainian Displaced Persons Medical Care Scheme (RMO) which is more extensive and they are entitled to incur medical care from 1st of August 2022 until at least March 2023¹⁹. People who fled Ukraine without a BSN number do not fall under RMO and their healthcare costs will be reimbursed by CAK²⁰.

It is possible that there are traumatised ones among the people arriving from Ukraine. Therefore, they need to get emotional and psychological support. The support for people who fled Ukraine is offered by voluntary organisations for free, such as Slachtoffer hulp Nederland (Victim Support Netherlands). Moreover, municipalities offer psychosocial care in cooperation with NGOs such as Dutch Council for Refugees.

Challenges:

Medical system in the Netherlands is a challenge for people who have fled Ukraine. The health system in the Netherlands differs from the system in Ukraine. In Ukraine, people have direct access to the hospitals to get treated. However, in the Netherlands, there is no direct access to the hospitals. People go to the general practitioner first to be treated, then the general practitioners refer them to the hospitals if they deem necessary. This may lead to misunderstandings by Ukrainian refugees that doctors do not want to treat them. Better communication is necessary.

4. Policy Recommendations

In the aftermath of the influx, the Dutch government urgently adopted some policy measures regarding the reception of Ukrainian refugees and implemented these measures in collaboration with its partners. As in every country, challenges arose from implementing policies in the Netherlands.

Based on our research and interviews with the target group and practitioners, several policy measures are recommended to the national and local authorities and voluntary organisations to overcome these challenges that people who fled Ukraine face. Those are:

- Structural orientation programs can be organised at the local level for better informing and orienting refugees on issues related to administration, health, education, housing, language learning and local culture. These programs can include social mentoring (buddying) that matches them with volunteer locals (See Orient8 project as an example)²¹.
- Digital platforms and applications with necessary information at the local level in Ukrainian language can be also helpful and ease communication problems (See welcome application as an example)²².
- As the situation remains uncertain for a longer period, structural government support for language learning becomes a bigger necessity for a better integration of refugees in the host society in terms of communication, education and working. The number of Ukrainian-Dutch/English translators and interpreters should be increased. The low number of translators and interpreters may cause delays in

the processing of refugees who do not speak English or Dutch.

- Better communication and information on the current health system and housing procedures is a big necessity to overcome misunderstandings among the refugees. Info sessions, info sheets and digital platforms in Ukrainian language would be helpful as part of orientation programs.
- Housing is the greatest challenge at the moment and needs sustainable solutions such as opening new locations and facilitating rental accommodations.

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An online interview has been conducted with Marcel van Geel. He is an education consultant and he is working in the municipality of Zwolle. As an education consultant, he talked about the policy implementation of the municipality of Zwolle, especially in the field of language learning.

An interview has been conducted with Iryna Weide. She is an Ukrainian sworn/certified translator and she is working with GlobalTalk to assist with Dutch and Ukrainian translations across the Netherlands. As a Ukrainian and a translator, Iryna Weide has been helping Ukrainians from all over the Netherlands, and she explained both the complaints of refugees from Ukraine about the policies implemented and the problems they face in general.

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