

## Chapter 1: Introduction

The world was shaken by Russia’s brutal escalation of hostilities and full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022—and by the ensuing human suffering. By March 2023, European countries recorded more than 8 million people displaced by the violence in Ukraine, with more than 5 million having registered for TP or similar national protection schemes on the continent.<sup>32</sup> Poland has welcomed the highest number of Ukrainian refugees, while the Czech Republic welcomed the highest number per capita, as demonstrated in the table below.

**TABLE 1. Numbers of Ukrainian refugees hosted**

Characteristic	Poland	Slovakia	Czech Republic	Romania	Moldova
Refugees from Ukraine recorded in country as of March 2023 (UNHCR) <sup>33</sup>	1,583,563	113,024	504,352	104,823	106,485
Ukrainian refugees hosted as a % of total population <sup>34</sup>	4.2%	2.1%	4.5%	0.5%	4.1%
Total population (million) <sup>35</sup>	37.8	5.5	10.7	19.02	2.6

Ukrainian refugees have been warmly welcomed by host populations in Central Europe. Governments, non-governmental organisations, businesses, multilateral organisations, and ordinary citizens provided whatever support they could to Ukrainians fleeing the invasion. For example, in Poland, in addition to the government’s swift political and financial response, civil society organisations and individuals united to organise and support the response. A study by the Polish Economic Institute estimated that up to 77 percent of Polish citizens took individual action to support fleeing Ukrainians in the early months of the war.<sup>36</sup> A study by GLOBSEC estimated that up to 46 percent of Slovak citizens took individual action to support Ukrainians during this time.<sup>37</sup> In the five countries, immediate civil society support—such as hosting Ukrainian refugees—enabled the national and local governments to develop more systemic legal and operational responses. Such thorough action was taken despite the countries and the region more broadly having limited recent experience of, and infrastructure for, large numbers of refugees before the war. Each country experienced a 100- to 500-fold increase in refugees between 2020 and 2023.<sup>38</sup> While a quick end to the war is hoped for, the conflict may become prolonged, and it is therefore likely that displaced Ukrainians will continue to reside in neighbouring and other European countries.

Some social services and systems were stretched before the war, and pressure is increasing on the housing, health, and education systems in the host countries. Other challenges will likely arise as the conflict protracts and people’s needs and concerns evolve, particularly with inflation continuing to rise (consumer price inflation reached

<sup>32</sup> UNHCR (2023). [Operational Data Portal](#), accessed 12 April 2023.

<sup>33</sup> UNHCR (2023). [Refugees from Ukraine recorded across Europe](#), accessed 30 March 2023. Figures accurate as of 27 March 2023.

<sup>34</sup> Authors’ calculation, taking total population and refugee population figures provided in the table.

<sup>35</sup> Poland, Slovakia, Czech Republic, Romania: World Bank (2022). [Population – total, European Union](#), accessed 30 March 2023; Moldova: Statistica Moldovei, [Population](#) (2023), accessed 29 March 2023.

<sup>36</sup> Polish Economic Institute, [How Polish society has been helping refugees from Ukraine](#), accessed 24 March 2023.

<sup>37</sup> GLOBSEC (2023). [Despite challenges, V4 societies generally remain supportive of Ukrainian refugees, with more negative attitudes apparent in Slovakia](#), accessed 30 March 2023.

<sup>38</sup> UNHCR (2022). [Refugee Data Finder](#), accessed 30 March 2023.

30.2 percent<sup>39</sup> in December 2022 in Moldova). In addition, incendiary and misleading narratives, including by Russia-aligned stakeholders, and disinformation campaigns<sup>40</sup> can potentially exacerbate existing concerns and negatively impact community cohesion. In other crises, over time, tensions have led to increased polarisation of society and discrimination or hate crimes against minorities. This can decrease a society's resilience to disinformation and shocks more broadly and, in the worst cases, increase criminality and violence or conflict between communities and lead to human rights violations, including exploitation of vulnerable individuals and lack of access to basic services.

Some early signs point to support for Ukrainian refugees beginning to erode in some countries. In Slovakia, for instance, 'How are you Slovakia?' research project polling conducted by the Institute for Sociology and the Institute for Research in Social Communication, MNFORCE, and Seesame between March and December 2022 found that, during this period, the proportion of respondents who strongly disagreed that people from Ukraine should receive the same rights as others in Slovakia increased from 15 percent to 25 percent.<sup>41</sup> Those who disagreed that refugees should have the right to apply for asylum in Slovakia without annual limits increased by almost half, from 35 percent in March 2022.<sup>42</sup> In the Czech Republic in September 2022, energy protestors demanded the government "enter into direct gas supply contracts with Russia" and return Ukrainian refugees to their homes'.<sup>43</sup>

Looking ahead, with the invasion ongoing, the priorities of organisations that currently support Ukrainian refugees might change, which may result in a drop in funding available to support refugees and the communities hosting them. Despite these challenges, the disruption to the status quo leads to clear opportunities to improve the situation for both refugees and local communities. With the right information at hand and building on strong support throughout the third sector by governments and the public, there is an opening to strengthen community cohesion and progress on addressing longstanding issues throughout the region.

## Objectives

As the war enters its second year, this report aims to help understand the factors that might undermine cohesion between Ukrainian refugees and host communities in the Central European countries in the medium term.

We provide recommendations for specific programmes as well as programmatic and service delivery approaches that local, national, and international stakeholders could take to increase community cohesion and reduce the likelihood of these potential tensions occurring.

We understand **community cohesion**<sup>44</sup> as occurring in a society in which:

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<sup>39</sup> Statistica Moldovei (2023). [Evolution of consumer prices in the Republic of Moldova in December 2022 and in 2022](#), accessed 31 March 2023.

<sup>40</sup> Council of the European Union (2022). [EU Imposes Sanctions on State-Owned Outlets RT/Russia Today and Sputnik's Broadcasting in the EU](#), accessed 31 March 2023.

<sup>41</sup> European Commission (2023). [Slovakia: Slight decrease in public support for those displaced from Ukraine](#), accessed 2 May 2023.

<sup>42</sup> European Commission (2023). [Slovakia: Slight decrease in public support for those displaced from Ukraine](#), accessed 2 May 2023.

<sup>43</sup> Chastand (2022). [In the Czech Republic, the social crisis has awakened pro-Russian forces](#), *Le Monde*, accessed 23 March 2023.

<sup>44</sup> Slight variations of this definition are used by various schools and councils in the UK and are put forward by the Department for Children, Schools and Families, now called the Department for Education.

- All communities have a sense of belonging;
- The diversity of people's backgrounds and circumstances is appreciated and valued;
- Similar life opportunities are available to all; and
- Strong and positive relationships exist and continue to be developed in the workplace, schools, and the wider community.

This report considers community cohesion at the local, regional, and national levels.

## Approach, methodology, and structure of the report

The project team conducted research in five focus countries: the Czech Republic, Moldova, Poland, Romania, and Slovakia. In total, the team produced six research reports: this regional report and five country reports. This regional report summarises the findings of the country reports and draws out the key commonalities and differences in the potential tensions that might arise between the Ukrainian refugee and host communities. It also draws out regional trends and conclusions. For specific details on the topics discussed and country-specific information, please refer to the country-level reports.

To conduct the research, the project engaged a diverse team: a core team responsible for the overall research framework, methodology, and delivery across the five countries; country researchers in each focus country; and an advisory group of subject matter experts to provide specialist inputs. The team used the same approach and methodology for each country.

The research was undertaken in two phases. The inception phase took place in November and December 2022. The research team developed the approach and methodology and conducted initial desk-based research. This research examined the key relevant stakeholders in each country; existing programs in this space; and characteristics that can make different refugee groups vulnerable to exploitation, discrimination, and challenges in accessing services. Finally, the team completed an initial mapping of the tensions that might arise between the host communities and refugees in the medium term.

The research phase took place between January and March 2023. The team organised interactive two-day workshops with key experts from local and national governments, multilateral organisations, local and international non-governmental organisations (NGOs), academia, religious leaders, and the private sector. The morning sessions on the first workshop day were conducted with only Ukrainian refugees, discussing the characteristics that can make refugees more vulnerable. Representatives from academia and local NGOs joined for the afternoon sessions, which focused on refugee 'journeys'—the various aspects of setting up a life in the host countries. The second day included a broad range of participants and focused on incendiary and misleading discourses about Ukrainian refugees and tensions that might arise in the medium term. The workshops were conducted between February and March, on 1 and 2 February in Prague with 65 experts, 8 February in Warsaw with 22 experts, 15 and 16 February in Bucharest with 53 experts, 1 and 2 March in Chisinau with 52 experts, 7 and 8 March in Bratislava with 20 experts, and 14 March in Kosiče with 17 experts from a broad range of organisations. In total, the project engaged 229 workshop participants across the five countries. The workshops used September 2023 as a focal point to orient the discussions toward risks that might become significant in the medium term. The research team then followed up with key experts through a survey, asking respondents to rate the effectiveness of various programmatic responses to mitigate the five tensions that are most likely to affect

community cohesion by September 2023 and to share programmatic lessons learned that could be useful for others working in this space. Finally, the findings from the workshops and the surveys were supplemented by additional desk-based research.

The report is structured according to the different stages of Ukrainian refugees' journeys in each country: (1) entry, legal status, and registration for services; (2) healthcare; (3) housing; (4) education; (5) employment and income; and (6) community, social, and political life. This allows the report to more clearly bring out the links between misleading and incendiary discourses, the underlying challenges that such discourses exploit, the increased vulnerabilities of certain groups of Ukrainian refugees, and where tensions between Ukrainian refugees and host communities might emerge or become more significant, as well as to offer more targeted recommendations.

After this introduction, **Chapter 2** details the characteristics that have increased (and can increase) different Ukrainian refugees' vulnerabilities to exploitation and discrimination, including their ability to access necessary services. This chapter draws on the desk-based research and research workshop findings.

**Chapter 3** focuses on the incendiary and misleading discourses about Ukrainian refugees. This section is based on the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) Chain of Harm framework,<sup>45</sup> which maps the path by which disinformation, misinformation, and dangerous speech (DMDS) move through an information ecosystem, depicting how directed disinformation commonly amplifies hate speech or other divisive narratives to achieve its aims. The discourses section used three sources of data: (1) findings from the in-country workshops, (2) research from third parties on misleading and incendiary discourses about Ukrainian refugees, and (3) Facebook content found via CrowdTangle.<sup>46</sup> The approach led to recommendations regarding discreet intervention points where the Chain of Harm could be 'disrupted'.

**Chapter 4** summarises the tensions that might occur between Ukrainian refugees and host communities in the medium term. The chapter presents a long list of *possible* tensions to highlight the possibility of malign actors relentlessly promoting related discourses and of underlying challenges worsening sufficiently to increase tensions around a particular subject. This chapter draws on the desk-based research and research workshop findings.

**Chapter 5** discusses various programmatic responses that could be applicable in the region to mitigate risks at each stage of the refugees' journey. The programmatic recommendations are intentionally broad, but they include illustrative examples to enable a range of organisations—from governments and multilateral organizations to NGOs of various sizes, as well as small community initiatives—to consider and adapt them in their programming.

**Annex 1** is an acronyms and abbreviations list, and **Annex 2** presents data on the key political, economic, and demographic characteristics of the five countries, as well as statistics on the numbers of refugees hosted, their demographic characteristics, financial support received, access to services and employment, and host population attitude polling figures.

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<sup>45</sup> Reppell, L., and Shein, E., (2019). [Disinformation Campaigns and Hate Speech: Exploring the Relationship and Programming Interventions](#) IFES.

<sup>46</sup> The team used the CrowdTangle research tool to triangulate the findings from the workshops and third-party research and to identify examples to incorporate in the report. See Crowdtangle (2023). [Welcome page](#), accessed 22 March 2023.

Given that the political, economic, and broader context may change very quickly after the publication of this report, **Annex 3** is a summary of key links to relevant statistics that can be consulted for an up-to-date picture of the situation. Annex 3 also provides a range of recommended readings for deeper dives into the topics discussed in this report: Ukrainian refugees' needs and challenges, reports on discrimination, pressures on social services, public attitude polling, disinformation discourses, program lessons learned, and other topics.

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