Executive Summary

Background

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 registered for temporary protection (TP) or similar national protection schemes on the continent.[1]

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. While a quick end to the war is hoped for, the conflict may become prolonged, and therefore, displaced Ukrainians will likely continue to reside in neighbouring and other European countries.

Social services and systems were already stretched before the war, and pressure on housing, health, and education systems is increasing. Other challenges are likely to arise as the conflict protracts and people's needs and concerns evolve, particularly in the context of inflation continuing to rise (for example, consumer price inflation was 13.2 percent[2] in 2022 in Poland and with highs of 30.2 percent[3] in December 2022 in Moldova). In addition, incendiary and misleading narratives, including by Russia-aligned stakeholders and disinformation campaigns,[4] can potentially exacerbate 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. Some early signs point to support for Ukrainian refugees beginning to erode in some countries. For instance, polling from December 2022 indicated that only 42 percent of Slovakia's population viewed Ukrainian refugees positively.[5] 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.[6] Looking ahead, with the invasion ongoing, the priorities of organisations that currently support Ukrainian refugees might change, resulting in a drop in funding available to support refugees and communities hosting them.

Despite these challenges, disruption to the status quo leads to clear opportunities to improve the situation and general living standards for refugees and local communities.

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[1] UNHCR (2023). *Operational Data Portal*, accessed 12 April 2023.
[2] European Commission (2023). *Economic forecast for Poland*, accessed 2 April 2023.
[3] Statistica Moldovei (2023). *Evolution of consumer prices in the Republic of Moldova in December 2022 and in 2022,* accessed 31 March 2023.
[4] 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.
[5] GLOBSEC (2022). *New report shows that the V4 population supports Ukrainian refugees with some reservations*, accessed 22 March 2023. Although there has been debate about methodological approaches to polling conducted by GLOBSEC and the Slovak Academy of Science, such as noting the different scales given to participants to respond to questions (1–5 or 1–10) and how responses were collected (online—in-person); even when the question posed is the same. See GLOBSEC (2002). *New poll: Slovaks want Ukraine to win the war, Not Russia*, accessed 22 March 2023.
[6] Chastand, J-B. (2022). *In the Czech Republic, the social crisis has awakened pro-Russian forces, Le Monde,* accessed 23 March 2023.

Objectives

Several months into the war's second year, this report aims to help understand the factors that might undermine cohesion between Ukrainian refugees and host communities in the region in the medium term and provide recommendations to relevant organisations for what they could do to mitigate those factors. 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.

Approach and methodology

The research was conducted between November 2022 and March 2023. The team carried out desk-based research, followed by research workshops in the five countries of focus (the Czech Republic, Moldova, Poland, Romania, and Slovakia) with 229 experts from government, multilateral organisations, local and international non-governmental organisations, and academia. These research activities focused on (1) characteristics that can make refugees more vulnerable to discrimination, exploitation, and difficulty accessing services; (2) incendiary and misleading discourse about Ukrainian refugees in the country; and (3) tensions that might arise between refugees and host communities in the medium term (by September 2023). The research team followed up with a survey that asked key experts to rate the effectiveness of various programmatic responses for mitigating the five tensions that are most likely to affect community cohesion by September 2023 and to share programmatic lessons learnt that could be useful for others working in this space. The team then supplemented the findings from the workshops and surveys with additional desk-based research.

Structure of the report

The report considers the characteristics that have increased (or can increase) different Ukrainian refugees' vulnerabilities to exploitation, discrimination, and ability to access necessary services (Chapter 2); the incendiary and misleading discourses about Ukrainian refugees that have been noted and have the potential to be spread further (Chapter 3); tensions that might occur between Ukrainian refugees and host communities in the medium term (Chapter 4); and various programmatic responses that could be applicable in the region to mitigate the risks at each stage of the refugees' journey (Chapter 5).

Each chapter covers six stages of Ukrainian refugees' journeys in the 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 enables 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.

Key findings

This report draws out a range of vulnerabilities, discourses, and potential tensions that might materialise in the region; the country-specific reports provide greater detail on these. Three overarching observations can be made

regarding the nature of the risks to community cohesion that might materialise in the Czech Republic, Moldova, Poland, Romania, and Slovakia in the medium term.

1. Economic concerns are a key driver of potential tensions.

Polling in Europe consistently shows that, since mid-2022, the population is primarily worried about economic factors such as the rising cost of living. For example, an October 2022 European Union (EU) poll showed that 93 percent of survey respondents in the EU (rising to 95 percent for Slovak respondents) were worried about rising living costs, including increasing food and energy prices.[7] Moldova's inflation rate was the highest at 30.2 percent in December 2022[8] after a year of stability between 2.5 percent and 3 percent.[9] With the increase in fuel and energy prices in all the research countries, discourses such as 'What about our citizens?' or 'Ukrainian refugees are draining our social system as domestic citizens are being crushed by inflation' appear.[10] The narrative that rich Ukrainians siphon aid they don't need from the 'needy' has existed since the beginning of the Russian invasion.[11] One news report quoted a resident volunteering at the border in March 2022, saying, 'You feel uneasy about it, seeing someone in a Lexus get a free lunch'.[12]

Some grievances may be based on partial truth. For example, in Romania, there was a misconception that Ukrainians had been granted unlimited free travel within the country,[13] but, in fact, the free-fare period ran only from March until May 2022.[14] In the Czech Republic, Ukrainian refugees received some higher social benefits than locals. However, this was a temporary measure, and Czechs had access to a broader range of benefits that could add up to more than what Ukrainians received.[15] Workshop participants also noted that some respondents believed that local taxpayers paid for much of the support to refugees that was actually funded by the EU or voluntary charitable donations. The general public might also underestimate the benefits that Ukrainians contribute to their country's economy.[16]

This report makes the recommendations below to mitigate potential tensions around economic concerns. These and other recommendations are detailed in Chapter 5 of this report.

- Ensure and communicate equity in the distribution of resources among the Ukrainian and local populations in need, and publicise the additional resources (international funding and voluntary domestic donations) the country received to support the refugees.

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[7] European Commission (2023). _EP Autumn 2022 Survey: Parlemeter_, accessed 10 April 2023.

[8] Statistica Moldovei (2023). _Evolution of consumer prices in the Republic of Moldova in December 2022 and in 2022_, accessed 31 March 2023.

[9] Trading Economics (2023). _Moldova Unemployment Rate_, accessed 28 March 2023.

[10] See for example, Czech Elves (2022) _Monthly report – May_, accessed 20 March 2023; Vasilache, M. (2022). _Război în Ucraina: Campanie online împotriva refugiaților ucraineni din Republica Moldova_, accessed 29 March 2023.

[11] Czech Elves (2022). _Monthly report – November 2022_, accessed 20 March 2023.

[12] Brown, E. C. (2022). _The National News. Influx of wealthier Ukrainians raises eyebrows in impoverished Moldova_, accessed 29 March 2023.

[13] Bucharest research workshop 15–16 February 2023

[14] Romanian Insider (2022). _Romania to provide free rail transportation to all Ukrainians for another month_

[15] For the first 150 days, Ukrainian refugees are generally provided with humanitarian aid of CZK 5,000, and Czech citizens do not have access to benefits in this amount. The social benefit, which corresponds to the humanitarian aid, is the amount of the 'living minimum,' e.g., CZK 4,860 for an individual in a single-person household (there are different categories). (For more details on social benefits, see the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs website and the _Životní a existenční minimum section_.) However, Czechs can apply for other types of social benefits, such as unemployment benefits, housing allowance, and maternity allowance. Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs (2023). _Pomoc pro občany Ukrajiny a jejich zaměstnavatele_, accessed 12 February 2023; Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs (2023); _Pomoc občanům Ukrajiny_, accessed 13 January, 2023; Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs (2023), accessed 20 March 2023; Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs (2023). _Průvodce_, accessed 20 March 2023.

[16] EURACTIV (2023). _Slovaks believe Ukrainian refugees are making the country worse_, accessed 29 March 2023.

- Implement phasing programmes—that is, change approaches to target support to those most vulnerable as a conflict continues.
- Share positive stories on social media, for example, about Ukrainian and host community relationships, support and solidarity, and Ukrainian refugees' contributions to the country.
- Extend programs supporting refugees to more vulnerable local communities.
- Engage with businesses and organisations to help them make the most of a more diverse workforce.

2. Political discourses, fuelled by disinformation and historic grievances, have the potential to stir tensions.

Russian-aligned stakeholders have been active in spreading disinformation in all five countries. This includes anti-Ukraine narratives such as 'blaming Ukraine and NATO [the North Atlantic Treaty Organization] for the war and pinning high energy prices on their own government rather than Russia cutting gas supplies' and disinformation targeted directly at Ukrainian refugees. Slovakia and Moldova are particularly vulnerable due to larger pro-Russian populations and greater sympathy for Russia than comparable EU countries.[17] Alongside this, particularly in Slovakia, a prominent 'peace narrative' suggests that Ukraine should seek to end the war and 'unnecessary suffering', which might include compromises on the part of Ukraine. One study called this narrative 'a euphemism for stopping the military support for Ukraine'; the narrative has also been extended beyond the war to refer to support for Ukrainian refugees.[18] Moldova's sizeable Russian-speaking population typically consumes news produced in Russian, often from within the Russian Federation, and many have adopted more pro-Russian perspectives as a result. [19]

Historic tensions are being stirred up as well. Responses to the Volhynia massacre, during which it is estimated that up to 60,000 Polish people were killed between 1943 and 1945,[20] characterised Ukrainians as anti-Polish nationalists. Similarly, workshop participants in Moldova noted that discourses were emerging about Ukrainian nationals' role in supporting Transnistria in its conflict against the Moldovan state in the 1990s. Questions are asked about why Moldovans should support Ukrainians when the Ukrainian state was perceived to have historically fought against Moldovans' interests.[21]

Such narratives can particularly gain traction on anniversary dates, such as the 80th anniversary of the Volhynia massacre in the summer of 2023, as well as elections. Negative narratives about Ukrainian refugees were observed in the 2022 Czech election, suggesting that the Czech Republic was providing too much support to Ukrainian refugees.[22]

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[17] GLOBSEC (2022). *GLOBSEC Trends 2022: CEE amid the war in Ukraine*, accessed 11 April 2023.

[18] Učeň, P. (2023). *The Russia-Ukraine War and the radicalization of political discourse in Slovakia,* In: *The Impacts of the Russian Invasion of Ukraine on Right-wing Populism in Europe.* Ivaldi, G. and Zankina, E. (eds.). European Center for Populism Studies, accessed 26 March 2023.

[19] In 2016, 69 percent of Moldovans claimed to use Russian language news; and 40 percent of Moldovans claimed to find Russian language news as trustworthy or more trustworthy than domestic Moldovan news. Broadcasting Board of Governors (2016); *Role of Russian Media in the Baltics and Moldova*, accessed 28 March 2023. Some regions are particularly affected. for example, in Gagauzia, a recent poll showed support for the pro-Western Moldovan government was as low as 2 percent, with 85 percent to 90 percent of people reporting having trust in the Russian Federation. agauzyeri.com (2023) *Подробно об итогах соцопроса в Гагаузии*, accessed 28 March 2023.

[20] Tymińska, A. (2022) *Granice nienawiści. Mowa nienawiści w kontekście kryzysów humanitarnych na granicy polskiej (2021/2022)*, Helsińska Fundacja Praw Człowieka.

[21] Chisinau research workshop 2 March 2023.

[22] H. Ridgwell, Voa News (2023). *Czechs Prepare to Choose New President, as Rivals Clash Over Support for Ukraine*, accessed 28 March 2023.

To mitigate potential tensions that can arise due to political discourses, this report recommends:

- Conducting more activities to increase interactions that members of both communities enjoy (such as movie screenings or sports activities), providing opportunities for the groups to meet and get to know one another.
- Implementing strategic communications to reach target audiences and penetrate information bubbles.
- Creating additional free or affordable after-school activities for both communities' children, which also provide an avenue for parents to become acquainted.
- Improving the training of search engines and generative artificial intelligence to help reduce bias and potential abuse.
- Organising community dialogues around topics such as fear of insecurity and war, Ukrainian history and culture, and the realities of Russia's invasion of Ukraine.
- Producing radio and TV programming to address tensions, including 'edutainment' that uses fiction to help build inter-community understanding.
- Working with journalists to support quality journalism that does not contribute to the spread of incendiary discourses.
- Reviewing school curricula, including the teaching of history and digital literacy.

3. Many of the challenges are rooted in long-standing operational issues.

Our research has demonstrated that many of the concerns that host communities expressed, and the incendiary and misleading narratives shared by actors with malicious intent and some parts of the population, are rooted in longstanding issues such as a strained healthcare or housing system. Healthcare provision in each of the five focus countries had challenges before the arrival of refugees from Ukraine. These included staff shortages in the Czech Republic,[23] Poland,[24] Romania,[25] and Slovakia,[26] long waiting lists in Poland[27] and Slovakia,[28] and unequal regional provision of healthcare in Romania[29] and Slovakia.[30] The arrival of Ukrainian refugees has highlighted some of these longstanding challenges; it also can speed up their resolution, as these issues have become even more visible. In some cases, different sources of funding might become accessible to address the issues, which could improve the situation for both Ukrainians and host communities.

To mitigate potential tensions around longstanding operational challenges, this report recommends:

- Linking community-cohesion-focused work with broader efforts to improve operational concerns in each country.
- Conducting conflict and context analysis to inform programming and communication campaigns and implementing specific programs to improve access to services for the local and refugee populations where needed (e.g., by providing translation services for healthcare and mobile clinics or supporting

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[23] ČT 24 (2023). _V Česku chybí praktici. Zájem o studium oborů je velký, stát je ale dlouho nepodporoval, shodli se Válek se Šonkou_, accessed 26 March 2023.
[24] British Medical Journal (2022). _Poland's buckling healthcare system nevertheless welcomes Ukraine refugees with open arms_, _BMJ_ 2022; 377.
[25] _The Economist_ (2019). _Romania's health-care system, the EU's worst, struggles to reform_
[26] European Commission (2019). _Internships for doctors from third countries to address shortage of health professionals in Slovakia_
[27] British Medical Journal (2022). _Poland's buckling healthcare system nevertheless welcomes Ukraine refugees with open arms_, _BMJ_ 2022; 377.
[28] UNHCR, _Protection Risks and Needs of Refugees from Ukraine_, accessed 13 April 2023.
[29] The Economist (2019). _Romania's health-care system, the EU's worst, struggles to reform_
[30] European Commission (2019). _Internships for doctors from third countries to address shortage of health professionals in Slovakia_

social intermediaries in the rental process, guaranteeing rent payments and minimum tenancy standards.[31]

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[31] See, for example, Habitat for Humanity (n.d.) *Introducing Social Rental Agencies in Poland*, accessed 27 March 2023.