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Long-term protection in Europe needed for millions of Ukrainian refugees



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In the Ukrainian refugee crisis resulting from the Russian invasion on February 24th, 2022, Europe is facing the greatest protection mission in its own region since the Second World War. The European Union's historic decision to invoke the Temporary Protection Directive for the first time prevented the asylum systems in European countries from coming under extreme pressure, and gave displaced persons clarity relatively quickly about a temporary residence permit including access to the labour market and to education for minors. Until now, a nett total of over 6.9 million Ukrainians have fled their country, of whom over 3.9 million refugees have

registered for Temporary Protection or similar national protection schemes in European countries. Almost 500.000 Ukrainians have not yet registered for temporary protection, and are using their right to travel in the European Union (EU) without a visa for three months.¹

EU countries are still deeply enmeshed in this crisis mode, providing essential temporary accommodation and services. **Yet at the same time, a number of factors is forcing the realisation that for a significant proportion of this group the protection will not be so temporary, and that the number of refugees will probably increase.**

The net balance of new or returning refugees to and from Europe will depend on three main factors: (1) the course of the conflict – considering the intensity and duration of fighting, as well as the area occupied by Russia – and economic prospects in Ukraine; (2) onward migration from the initial country of arrival to other European countries; and (3) the migration and return intentions of the Ukrainian refugees.

The recommendation is to monitor these critical factors about the number of refugees and the expected duration of their stay, and to take into account in policy and in strategic communication that a significant proportion of the refugees will remain in EU countries for a longer period of time.

This means that a transition is needed from crisis management and a short-term orientation to more long-term policy and planning for structural capacity and support, both at European and Member State level.

Factor 1: Course of the conflict – protracted conflict means more refugees and few returns

After a large-scale Russian invasion from the north, east and south simultaneously, the conflict is now concentrated predominantly in the east and south of the country, with severe losses on both sides. While President Zelensky and the West continue to strive for a complete and quick victory for Ukraine, and the Kremlin still hopes to militarily impose its will on Kyiv, it seems more likely that the conflict will develop into a stalemate and a protracted war that could last for years.² If the pattern of the Donbas conflict of 2014-2022 is followed, temporary ceasefires, during which the forces of both sides regroup, will be alternated by periods of renewed intense hostilities. Possibilities for a temporary truce – being something different from a peace treaty – diminish, and it will not solve the underlying causes of the conflict. In this scenario, the Russian Federation will continue to fight in the east and along the southern coast, with the intention of formalizing its hold on a defensible area and in due course taking

new territory – and possibly dividing up Ukraine. Ukraine will also continue to try to recover its own territory through counter-offensives, making use of advanced western weaponry such as long-range artillery to disrupt Russian logistics and supply routes and mobilizing additional military personnel to locally outnumber the Russian occupying forces. Given the military capacities of both parties, the absence of air superiority, and the nature of the terrain (including various rivers), the defending party has a significant advantage. This increases the chance of an eventual stalemate occurring. Much will depend on the degree of western support to Ukraine, given its dependency on western weaponry and financial assistance to cover budget shortfalls.³ In addition, given Russia's military strategy, the fighting is associated with large-scale destruction of cities and infrastructure, and with the continuing threat of missile attacks on all of Ukraine.

Consequences for refugee flows

At present, Russia is occupying an estimated 20% of Ukrainian territory, an area roughly three times the size of the Netherlands.

The eastern area that sees some of the heaviest fighting is the most densely populated part of Ukraine after the capital Kyiv (see Figure 1). In February 2022, around 11.3 million people lived in the most heavily affected and by now occupied province of Luhansk and partially occupied provinces of Donetsk, Kharkiv, Zaporizhiya and Kherson.⁴ The majority of the present estimated 7 million internally displaced persons and 6.9 million international refugees come from these provinces. Besides these, another 1.1 million people are considering leaving due to the war.⁵

Concerning the factor occupied territory, there are broadly speaking five scenarios that can be distinguished for the 'end state' of the conflict.⁶ The maps in Figure 1 show the occupied area for each scenario marked in red, with the population density for each *oblast* prior to the war in shades of green. In the most probable scenario described above, a stalemate with protracted conflict, many refugees will not want to go back to an area occupied by Russia, not least due to the severe Russian repression and reported forced mobilisation of male inhabitants. The

persistence of hostilities and the continuing threat of destructive missile strikes on the whole of Ukraine, which undermine attempts to reconstruct, offer other refugees little perspective for return either. Many refugees do want, if in any way possible, to travel back and forth to Ukraine, for example because women are separated from their husbands by the state of emergency and general mobilisation in Ukraine. After a war of attrition lasting for years, it is also possible that men will want to join their spouses outside Ukraine, either if there is a temporary truce and Zelensky cancels the state of emergency, or possibly in defiance of it if the war lasts even longer. The final number of border crossings of this category of men is a very important variable since the number of refugees could rise significantly if the restrictions for this group were removed, making the final number of refugees difficult to predict.

Given the expectations about the course of the war and the most probable final situation, account must be taken of the limited possibilities for large-scale return to conflict-affected areas and of possible new refugee flows from Ukraine.

Factor 2: Onward migration

The number of refugees in destination countries in the EU is further affected by the arrival of Ukrainian refugees who arrived in the first instance in countries bordering Ukraine and decide to migrate on to (other) EU-countries. Due to the unique situation of a war in a neighbouring country with which the EU has an association agreement, refugees with a biometric passport may travel without a visa for 90 days (plus a single extension of 90 days). After this, to remain legally, a registration must be made for temporary protection or an asylum application must be submitted. Due to this unusual situation, the Dublin regulation – that stipulates that the EU Member State in which an asylum seeker arrives is responsible for dealing with the asylum application – does not apply to Ukrainian refugees. Displaced Ukrainians can thus receive protection in the EU country they opt for.

There is no mechanism provided in the Temporary Protection Directive to distribute refugees among EU Member States, to prevent for example the countries bordering Ukraine or favourite destination countries having to accommodate a disproportionate number. A solidarity platform (as it is called) has however been set up, where countries can pledge to contribute to the protection of refugees. Until now, this has only happened to a limited extent, particularly to relieve Moldova (with promises for around 20,000 transfers). Besides this, the United States, Canada and the United Kingdom are granting visas for refugees. Moreover, the European Commission has taken the initiative to display an index during the Justice and Home Affairs Council of 28 March, that calculates for each EU Member State the percentage of the State's population with respect to the number of Ukrainian refugees plus other asylum applications forms. At the end of March, Poland, Austria and Cyprus led this list of the most burdened countries.⁷ Very divergent scores on the index could indeed be a motivation for an appeal to those countries that are relatively less burdened, and therefore stimulate onward migration.

Since there is no legal ground for distribution of Ukrainian refugees among EU Member States, onward migration will mainly happen on the initiative of the refugees themselves. An initial proxy for future onward migration is the distribution of the Ukrainian diaspora in countries as it existed prior to the Russian invasion (see Figure 2).⁸ Refugees will tend to travel on to join family and acquaintances, so diaspora attract onward migration. In the Ukrainian diaspora distribution before the 24th of February, to the Russian Federation (3.27 million), Poland (273,000) and Belarus (222,000), the geographical, cultural and linguistic vicinity played a role in settlement. Germany (290,000) and Italy (249,000) have been favourite destinations as large economies with much employment, while the German ethnic resettlement programmes played a role in this as well.⁹

Another proxy for onward migration flows is the migration intentions that Ukrainians had during the past 10 years. Researchers from the Swedish Delmi thinktank used *Gallup World Poll* data about migration

Figure 1 Scenarios for end situation of the war with consequences for refugee flows and possibilities for return

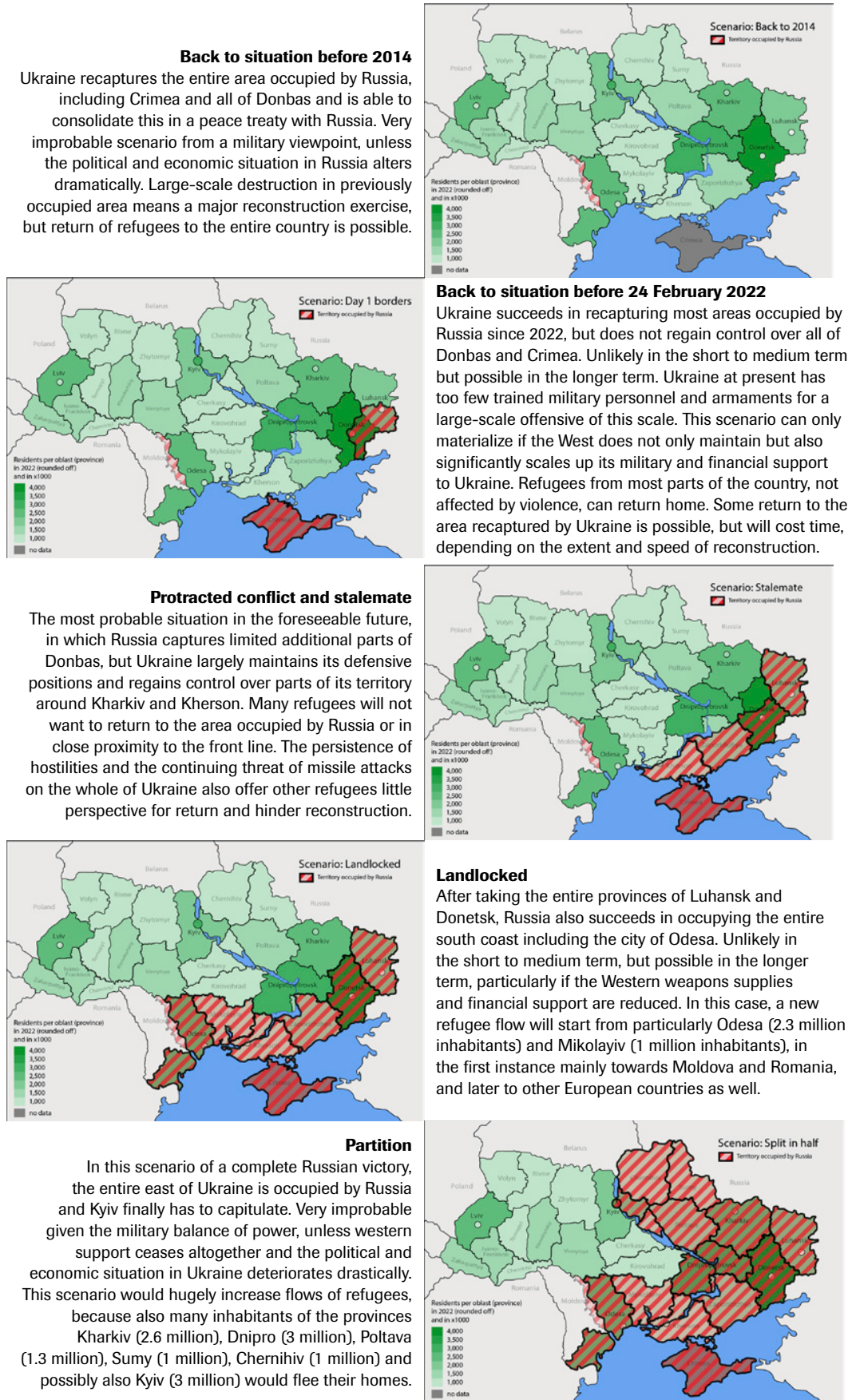
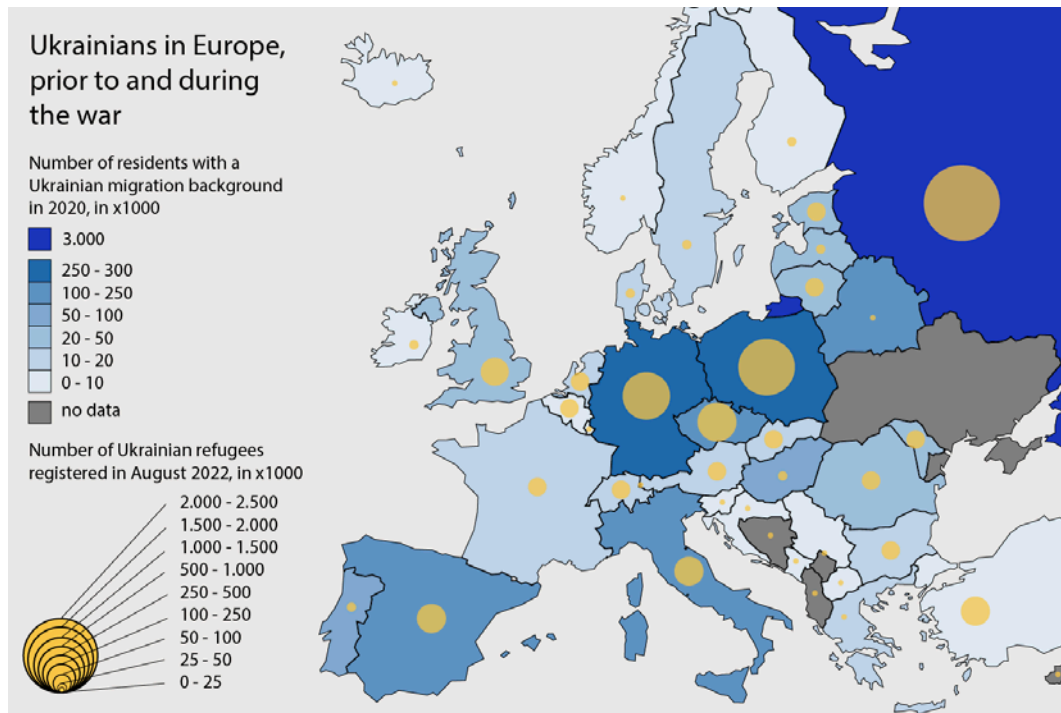


Figure 2 Ukrainians in Europe, prior to and during the war



intentions and the preferred destination to assess how Ukrainian refugees will finally be distributed among the European countries.¹⁰ It emerges from this that Germany was the favourite country for more than one out of three Ukrainians. Based on this proxy, Germany could finally count on over 356,000 arrivals per million Ukrainian refugees. With the counter standing at more than four million refugees to European countries (not counting Russia and Belarus), Germany ought to prepare itself for around 1.5 million arrivals.¹¹

Indeed, Germany has already recorded almost 900,000 Ukrainian refugees for temporary protection.

We also see these migration intentions becoming reality in the onward migration patterns from for example Romania, which was the preferred country of destination for only 0.4% of the Ukrainians in the Gallup data. In Romania's case, a great discrepancy exists between the number of people who originally crossed the Ukrainian-Romanian border, and the number of people who decided to register for temporary protection

in Romania. Several other countries of first arrival, such as Slovakia and Hungary, also score low on the list of preferred destination countries. This means that significant onward migration may also be expected from these countries. A survey of 2369 arriving migrants from Ukraine, conducted since April by the EU Asylum Agency (EUAA) in cooperation with the OECD, found that 84% indicated they had reached their preferred final destination. Only 66% of the respondents indicated that they had registered for temporary protection in their preferred country. Significant onward migration is therefore still possible. In this poll, the UK, the Czech Republic and Germany are the top three destination countries.¹²

Finally, it is possible that when the number of refugees in first countries of arrival, like Poland, exceeds the absorption capacity of their institutions and societies, onward migration will take place to other countries in the top of preferred destinations. Experiences of diaspora and experiences with accommodation, employment and school and study opportunities of previous Ukrainian refugees probably also play a role in this.

Table 1 Expectations concerning distribution of Ukrainian refugees among EU Member States (Source: Elinder, Erixson and Hammer, 2022)

	EU country	% of Ukrainians who want to live in each country	Number per 1 million refugees based on migration intentions	Number per 1 million refugees based on proportional distribution
1	Germany	35.6%	356,100	185,900
2	Poland	15.4%	154,400	84,700
3	Italy	10.9%	109,400	133,000
4	France	7.3%	72,600	150,500
5	Czech Republic	7.0%	70,000	23,900
6	Spain	5.3%	53,100	105,700
7	The Netherlands	2.9%	29,100	38,900
8	Austria	2.9%	28,800	19,900
9	Sweden	2.5%	25,000	23,100
10	Denmark	1.6%	16,500	13,000

Factor 3: Return intentions

Return intentions form a third important factor affecting the number of refugees who have to be protected in EU Member States and the duration of this protection. When the Russian advance stagnated at the start of April and the attacks on the major cities of Kyiv and Kharkiv were suspended, many Ukrainians could return. As of 23 June, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) estimates that around 5.5 million displaced Ukrainians had returned to their home region. Of the Ukrainians who had fled abroad, only 10% returned.

It is of course extremely difficult for people who have only just fled to estimate whether and when they will be able to return. They are confronted with trauma, have had to leave family members, relatives and possessions behind, their homes have possibly been destroyed, and they are usually torn between, on the one hand, the need for safety,

particularly for their children, and on the other, feelings of solidarity and patriotism.

At the same time, the Gallup polls mentioned above reveal that, even prior to the 24th of February, one in four Ukrainians would like to migrate if the opportunity arose. This is not surprising, with the continuing violence in the east of the country since 2014, significantly lower living standards than in the European Union, severe inequality and persistent corruption, and at the same time the entrepreneurial spirit to work abroad as many before them were already doing. This means that now people from Ukraine have fled, this original wish of one in four to migrate will play a role in the decision on whether or not to return if the opportunity to do so arises. Impressions based on individual discussions that ‘all Ukrainian refugees want to return’ are in any event not supported by this study of migration intentions. A recent poll in Poland confirms these findings: of the roughly 3.2 million Ukrainians in Poland, 58% indicated that they would remain as long as the conflict continues, while 27% said they did not want to return to Ukraine at all.¹³

The great majority of Ukrainian refugees, both in the country and abroad, has no intention of returning home in the short term,¹⁴ which given the destruction and the continuing uncertainty about the course of the war is unsurprising. In addition to this, mainly women and children have fled until now, and

“ Ukrainian refugees therefore do not automatically register for temporary protection in the first country of arrival. Migration intentions and preferred destination countries play a major role and may result in significant onward migration, particularly to Germany.



Source: ZDF, 11 July 2022.

only very few men between 18 and 60 have been able to leave the country, due to the declared state of emergency. A significant number has already found employment; for example, in the Netherlands, approximately 40% of all Ukrainian refugees were working for Dutch employers in August.¹⁵ It emerges from previous research into re-migration patterns that it is in fact women and children who have a relatively low probability of returning, especially the longer the war lasts and children put down roots at school.¹⁶ As, moreover, a quarter of Ukrainians were already considering migration before the war, it may be assumed that when the restriction on the departure of men is removed, part of the family reunion will take place towards Western Europe rather than in the other direction.

Conclusion

EU countries are still deeply enmeshed in the crisis mode, providing essential temporary protection to Ukrainian refugees. Yet at the same time, a number of factors are

“ Besides the possibility to be able to return, migration intentions and integration realities will be a factor in the decisions of Ukrainian refugees to return. It emerges from research that one in four Ukrainians already wanted to emigrate prior to the war, and that women and children are relatively less inclined to return particularly when the duration of their stay increases. In the case of this particular group, with many Ukrainian women who are separated from their husbands, possibilities for family reunion will play a major role in these decisions.

forcing the realisation that the protection for a significant proportion of this group will not be so temporary, and that the number of refugees will probably increase. The following three factors are involved here:

Factor 1: Course of the war. Given the expectations about the duration of the war and the most probable final situation, account must be taken of the **limited possibilities for return and of possible new refugee flows from Ukraine.**

Factor 2: Onward migration. Ukrainian refugees do not automatically apply for temporary protection in the first country of arrival. Migration intentions and preferred destination countries play a major role and may result in significant onward migration, particularly to Germany.

Factor 3: Return intentions. Besides the actual possibility to be able to return, and the economic situation in Ukraine itself, migration intentions and integration realities will be a factor in the return decisions of Ukrainian

refugees. It emerges from research that **one in four Ukrainians already wanted to migrate prior to the war**, and that women and children are relatively less inclined to return particularly when the duration of their stay increases. In the case of this specific group, with many Ukrainian women who are separated from their husbands, options for family reunion will play a major role in these decisions.

The recommendation is to monitor these critical factors for the number of refugees and the expected duration of their stay, and to take account in policy and in strategic communication of the scenario that a significant proportion of the refugees will stay for a longer period of time. This means that a transition is needed from crisis management and a short-term orientation to more long-term policy and planning for structural capacity and support, both at a European level and in the EU Member States.

Notes

- 1 As of 23 August 2022, over 2.3 million Ukrainians have been recorded in the Russian Federation, more than 11.000 into Belarus, and over 90.000 into Moldova [UNHCR Operational Data Portal on Ukraine Refugee Situation](#), latest update 23 August 2022.
- 2 Dara Massicot, "[Russia's Repeat Failures](#)", *Foreign Affairs*, 15 August 2022; Karolina Hird, Kateryna Stepanenko, George Barros, and Frederick W. Kagan, "[Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, August 24](#)", *Institute for the Study of War*, 24 augustus 2022; Sergei Shoigu, [speech tijdens een bijeenkomst van de ministers van defensie van de lidstaten van de Shanghai samenwerkingsorganisatie \(SCO\)](#), Telegramkanaal van het Russische Ministerie van Defensie, 24 augustus 2022.
- 3 Mick Ryan, "[Ukraine can win this war - on these five conditions](#)", *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 19 August 2022.
- 4 State Statistical Committee of Ukraine, "[Population by region \(by estimate\) as of February 1, 2022. Average annual populations in January 2022](#)", last amended on 13 May 2022. Areas occupied by Russia since 2014, including Crimea, are not counted here.
- 5 IOM UN Migration, "[Ukraine Internal Displacement Report: General Population Survey](#)", Round 8, 17 - 23 August 2022; UNHCR Data Portal, "[Ukraine Refugee Situation](#)", last updated on 23 August 2022.
- 6 The five scenarios have been elaborated in the context of ongoing research work on possible 'End States' by the Clingendael Institute and the Hague Centre for Strategic Studies for the 'Pol/Mil Thinktank' of the Netherlands Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Defence. The scenarios have been further developed here, with an eye to the consequences for additional refugee flows and the possibilities for return.
- 7 French Presidency of the Council of the European Union, "[Justice and Home Affairs Council, 28 March 2022](#)", published on 25 March 2022.
- 8 The diaspora figures are based on data from UNDESA in the *Volkskrant*: Semina Ajrovic, "[Oekraïense diaspora verspreid over heel Europa, kleine groep in Nederland](#)" (Ukrainian diaspora distributed throughout Europe, small group in the Netherlands), *de Volkskrant*, 14 March 2022. The number of Ukrainian refugees registered in August 2022 comes from the UNHCR Data Portal: "[Ukraine Refugee Situation](#)", UNHCR, last updated on 23 August 2022.
- 9 See Olena Fedyuk and Marta Kindler, *Ukrainian Migration to the European Union*. Springer International Publishing AG, Cham, 2016.
- 10 See Mikael Elinder, Oscar Erixson and Olle Hammer, "[How large will the Ukrainian refugee flow be, and which EU countries will they seek refuge in?](#)", *Delmi Policy Brief*, 2022: 3.
- 11 Of the 6.9 million refugees from Ukraine, 2.3 million went to Russia and over 11.000 to Belarus. See: "[Ukraine Refugee Situation](#)", UNHCR, last updated on 23 August 2022.
- 12 EUAA and OECD, "[Surveys of Arriving Migrants from Ukraine \(SAM - UKR\)](#)", Factsheet 14 2022.
- 13 Poll conducted by independent Polish polling bureau ARC Rynek i Opinia, cited in: Zosia Wanat, "[Polish cities feel the strain of helping Ukrainian refugees](#)", *Politico EU*, 2 June 2022.
- 14 IOM, "[Ukraine Internal Displacement Report](#)".
- 15 Bart van Rijswijk, "[Ruim 40 procent Oekraïense vluchtelingen heeft werk gevonden](#)", *BNR*, 22 August 2022.
- 16 See A. Leerkes, Hoon, M. De and Damen, R., *Blijven vergunninghouders in Nederland? Patronen en determinanten van vervolgmigratie en remigratie onder asielmigranten, cohort 1995-1999 (Do permit holders remain in the Netherlands? Patterns and determinants of onward migration and re-migration among asylum migrants, 1995-1999 cohort)*, WODC, 2019.

About the Clingendael Institute

Clingendael – the Netherlands Institute of International Relations – is a leading think tank and academy on international affairs. Through our analyses, training and public debate we aim to inspire and equip governments, businesses and civil society in order to contribute to a secure, sustainable and just world.

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