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Benefits for Ukrainian refugees cut, as social crisis in Ukraine deepens

Poland will cut Ukrainian refugees off an essential welfare benefit on July 1, the government announced on Wednesday. As of the start of next month, those fleeing the war will no longer receive 40 zloty a day, about \$9.40 at current exchange rates, toward the cost of food and housing. Exceptions are being made only for families with many children, pregnant women and invalids. Major cities, such as Warsaw and Cracow, just recently ended free municipal transport and train fares for Ukraine's displaced, of which there are millions in the country.

A representative from Poland's right-wing, nationalist Law and Justice party (PiS), which holds the presidency and has a majority in the parliament, told the press that the goal "is to stimulate Ukrainians to work." In other words, they can either stay and serve as a cheap labor force or leave the country, having lost access to money they need to survive.

Beyond even the fact that many do not have permanent housing, Ukrainian refugees face language, age and family-status barriers in finding work. The majority of them are women, children and the elderly. Most of those in the latter two categories cannot take on jobs, either because of their youth—48 percent are under 18—or the physical limitations of age.

Predominantly female-headed households with young kids face an impossible situation, as schooling is not available for children under three, many Ukrainian students are taking classes online through their home institutions, and summer vacation is about to begin. Support services—temporary shelter, translation services, food banks, childcare, logistical

help—overwhelmingly staffed by volunteers are also drying up, as ordinary Polish people do not have the personal resources to sustain the volume of giving needed.

Poland has yet to receive a promised \$154.5 million aid package from the EU to support refugees, despite various Polish provinces having already shelled out tens of millions of dollars to make the 40 zloty daily payments. Just recently and only after significant pressure, the country was granted the right to tap unused funds in Europe’s multi-billion-euro COVID-19 relief program.

The Czech Republic, to which 348,000 Ukrainians have fled, is contemplating making a move similar to that of Poland. It may cut off Ukrainian refugees who do not find a job after 180 days from social benefits, including medical care.

In Bulgaria, thousands of displaced people are now being ejected from hotels along the country’s Black Sea coast in time for the tourist season. Refugees report a chaotic process of removal and say they have been given basically no information as to what awaits them at “buffer centers” set up near the Burgas airport, to which they are being offered transfer.

One nurse who fled eastern Ukraine with her 13-year-old daughter told RFE/RL, “We have no official information. Absolutely none.” A volunteer group issued a statement on Facebook explaining, for instance, that instructions for refugees as to what to do when their hotel stays ended were published in Bulgarian, which they cannot read. They volunteers described the Bulgarian government’s actions as a “complete lack of communication with refugees from the moment they cross the border [and a] complete lack of understanding of needs.”

Bulgaria’s Deputy Prime Minister Kalina Konstantinova, however, complaining about the fact that buses sent to seaside hotels to transport refugees to “buffer centers” were not full, told the press, “Protection is a right, not an obligation. Therefore, I will not allow any more empty buses or empty cars to leave. The development of the situation from that moment on is in the hands of the Ukrainian community in Bulgaria.’ However, Bulgarian officials have acknowledged that the state only has space for about 33,000 people at its various facilities, although there are 63,000 Ukrainian refugees in the country.

Media coverage of the crisis has largely portrayed the problem as one of ungrateful visitors not wishing to have to leave their luxury vacation spots.

Spanish officials are receiving large numbers of complaints from Ukrainians of ridicule and poor treatment. Just 6.5 percent of the 47,000 refugees in Spain have found work, primarily seasonal agricultural jobs tied to the orange harvest. In addition to the fact that the country has a 13.5 percent unemployment rate, making jobs scarce, the newly-arrived Ukrainians face a language barrier. According to news reports, through social media, Russian speakers living in Spain are helping Ukrainians—many of whom are of Russian or mixed Russian-Ukrainian ancestry or simply dual-language speakers—navigate everyday life and find work.

Switzerland is preparing to cancel the special refugee status of Ukrainians who return home for more than 15 days over the course of three months or were in another country for more than two. If, for instance, a mother needs to go to Ukraine or elsewhere to reunite with children or family but cannot stay because it is dangerous, there is no work, or she has no home, she risks losing her right to return to Switzerland for safe harbor. As there are more than 3.6 million Ukrainian refugees spread out across Europe and elsewhere, all of them caught in a chaotic world of scrambling for housing, jobs, schools and visas, the ability to travel for periods of time without penalty is essential for families.

In Britain, thousands of Ukrainians with a temporary status are stuck in an endlessly long visa process and many who have been granted visas are unable to get to the UK. Currently, about 500 Ukrainian children who have host families waiting for them in Britain cannot go there because they cannot get through the paperwork. The charity Safe Passage says the kids are now “alone in Ukraine and neighbouring countries.”

The problems are mounting even among those who make it to the UK, with many ending up homeless, reports the BBC. The governments “Homes for Ukraine” program continues to have problems. According to another news outlet, residents of East Yorkshire who opened up their homes to refugees and were supposed to receive a £350 stipend “haven’t seen a penny.” “As much as £400,000 from the money promised for host families and people escaping the war still hasn't materialized.”

Inside Ukraine, where 7.8 million people are internally displaced, social catastrophe is in the making. The country's GDP is projected to fall by 45 percent this year, according to the ministry of finance. Already 5 million jobs, about one third of the nation's total, have been wiped out.

But as the US and NATO allies pour ever-more lethal weapons into the country, the International Labor Organization is warning, "Should the military escalation continue, over 43 percent of jobs—about seven million—could be lost." If the conflict goes on for just another six months, the United Nations Development Report says that 90 percent of the Ukrainian population could fall into poverty or be surviving just on the edge of it.

The International Organization for Migration just released a report showing massive numbers of Ukrainians are in dire straits. According to the agency, among internally displaced people, 77 percent need direct financial assistance, 27 percent need clothes and shoes, 27 percent need health care and medicine, 25 percent need food (a rising number), 22 percent need hygiene items, and 28 percent need transportation.

Even among those who have not fled somewhere inside the country's borders, the level of need is high. Fifty-seven percent of Ukrainians still living in their homes are short of money, 24 percent cannot get the health care and medicines they require, and 14 percent do not have enough food. Among both groups, 30 percent of families with children under 5 years of age report they are having problems feeding their kids due to a lack of formula and baby food. That number increased by three percentage points from a month ago. Nearly 20 percent of the Ukrainian population reports being in want of psychological and mental health support.

At the end of April, Disability Rights International issued a report showing that the situation facing institutionalized disabled children in Ukraine is disastrous. According to Euractiv, "They found children living in overcrowded, closely packed rooms filled with strong smells of urine and faeces and encountered children with untreated severe medical conditions like Hydrocephalus, which leads to fatalities in 80% of cases. They also met children that were physically underdeveloped due to enforced inactivity, and showing signs of emotional abuse and neglect."

On June 1, the head of the Chernivtsi regional military administration in Ukraine was found guilty of “manipulation with humanitarian aid.” He was using ambulances donated from Italy for “commercial purposes.”

This is just the tip of the iceberg. The social consequences of the NATO/Ukraine-Russia war are intensifying and will continue to do so, as Washington and the EU keep escalating the conflict, creating the conditions for the transformation of the regional proxy war into a full-blown world conflict. Tens of billions of military aid and ever-more lethal weaponry is being sent to Ukraine, laying the groundwork for strikes on Russian territory. Moscow’s criminal, reckless, blind-alley invasion has given the US and NATO what they wanted. The working class is paying the price.

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