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Report



# The Marginalization of Roma Refugees From Ukraine

*Experiences From Hungary and Poland*

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## Summary

The war in Ukraine has displaced millions, triggering an unprecedented humanitarian response across Europe. While the EU has been praised for its unprecedented solidarity and rapid support for Ukrainian refugees through its Temporary Protection Directive (TPD), over the last two years there has been growing evidence of patterns of exclusion for marginalized groups, like the Roma, among them. The experience of Roma refugees in Hungary and Poland shows the intersection of racialized exclusion, systemic neglect, and significant gaps in policy responses. The responses of both governments perpetuate cycles of exclusion, as neither has developed long-term strategies to address the systemic barriers faced by Roma refugees.

The arrival of Roma refugees in Hungary and Poland has been marked by racial profiling and immediate barriers to critical services, such as housing, employment, education, and welfare. Many have faced complications in accessing their temporary protection status, and many from Ukraine's Zakarpattia region also hold Hungarian citizenship, excluding them from temporary protection measures. In theory, dual citizens are taken care of by the Hungarian state, but they have often faced further complications in accessing benefits. Housing options for Roma are mainly limited to segregated shelters, often overcrowded and unsuitable for long-term living. Housing policies in Hungary and Poland are insufficient, and recent restrictions introduced primarily exclude Roma refugees. They rarely access private housing due to financial instability and pervasive discrimination. They are also forced to accept exploitative, informal work, which entrenches their economic precarity. These systemic failures extend to children, who face varying practices in both countries as well as often significant neglect in their special educational needs and experience with educational segregation. Welfare systems largely supposed to be universal fail to address the unique disadvantages of Roma refugees, leaving their basic needs unmet and their vulnerabilities amplified.

Civil society organizations and Roma activists have played a critical role in addressing the immediate needs of Roma refugees—providing legal aid, temporary housing, and support in everyday life. However, these efforts are constrained by limited funding, insufficient institutional backing, and the absence of systemic state-led initiatives. Support from international organizations such as the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees and UNICEF has provided relief, but meaningful, long-term strategies for Roma inclusion are still lacking.

The marginalization of Roma refugees from Ukraine reflects broader trends in racialized governance across Europe, where selective inclusion reinforces structural inequalities. Addressing these challenges requires comprehensive reforms to the TPD to include marginalized groups with complicated legal status, alongside equity-focused national and international policies that acknowledge and address the specific vulnerabilities of Roma refugees. Reforms should encompass culturally appropriate services, stronger anti-discrimination laws, and collaboration with Roma organizations to ensure sustainable solutions. Transitioning from short-term humanitarian aid to long-term integration and social inclusion strategies is essential for dismantling systemic barriers to the inclusion of Roma refugees.

The plight of Roma refugees from Ukraine exposes fundamental flaws in European refugee policy frameworks. To ensure dignity, equity, and protection for all displaced populations, policies must move beyond superficial solidarity and address the deep-rooted inequalities that leave marginalized groups behind.

## Introduction

The war in Ukraine has caused one of the largest exoduses within Europe, with the number of Ukrainians displaced far exceeding the number involved in the 2015 refugee crisis. Since February 2022, more than 7 million Ukrainians have sought protection in other countries in Europe.<sup>1</sup> International, EU, and national agencies have mobilized massive resources to provide support for the displaced.<sup>2</sup> In the first year following the invasion by Russia, the EU activated the Temporary Protection Directive (TPD) for them, as well as providing economic, humanitarian, and military support to Ukraine worth over €88 billion.<sup>3</sup> As part of the Regional Refugee Response plan, UN and state agencies as well as civil society organizations (CSOs) work together on coordinating and implementing international and national protection strategies, on aid services, and on monitoring refugees' wellbeing and risk factors in host countries.<sup>4</sup>

The experience since February 2022 indicates that historically marginalized social groups among displaced Ukrainians have not adequately benefited from the mobilized resources and exemplary solidarity. This is particularly evident in the situation of Roma refugees in EU countries. As is the case across Central and Eastern Europe, Roma communities in Ukraine are in a multiply marginalized and racialized social position, and they are historically deprived of adequate life opportunities across various social arenas. Consequently, they have arrived in EU countries in a position of heightened vulnerability that demands complex and systematic policy interventions. However, they are often excluded from meaningful assistance and are among the first to be left out as member states restrict access to their support measures.

This paper looks at the cases of Hungary and Poland to understand how policy responses and actions toward refugees from Ukraine reproduce the marginalization of Roma. The first section reviews EU protection frameworks and member-state responses to Roma and refugee populations, and it also outlines the social position of Roma refugees. This helps to understand that the latter's vulnerability is not incidental but rather a continuation of processes and dynamics of historical marginalization. The second section examines state and nonstate measures and social dynamics in Hungary and Poland that particularly affect the situation of Roma refugees. Drawing on the lessons learned since February 2022, the paper concludes with recommendations regarding policies and support mechanisms to address and dismantle processes of exclusion.

## Roma, Refugees, and Migrants in the EU

The government of Hungary and the one that was in office in Poland from 2015 to 2023 have been seen as key examples of rising populist rule in the EU, in which exclusionary politics against migrants, refugees, and Roma is a central element.<sup>5</sup> Both governments built regimes merging authoritarianism, racist and patriarchal nationalism, clientelism, and partial neoliberalization.<sup>6</sup> Since 2010, the Fidesz government in Hungary has taken significant steps to construct the boundaries of the political-economic community jointly in economic and symbolic terms. In Poland, the Law and Justice (PiS) government followed the Fidesz example.<sup>7</sup>

The marginalization of certain groups is central to this construction of political-economic communities, which opposes to “ideal citizens” those “troublesome groups” that have a “tangential relation to the economic and political norm” mostly along the lines of gender, race, class, and religion.<sup>8</sup> The sense of a unified community is upheld by hardening external borders and by reinforcing internal divisions—and, in line with that, the legal and political expansion of categories that define various forms and degrees of otherness and exclusion.

In the case of “external others”, starting during the refugee crisis in 2015, Hungary adopted punitive and security-oriented measures toward irregular migration, backed by racist and anti-migrant rhetoric. Restricting protection and in-country support to a minimum to keep “unwanted” migrants out of the country, the government aimed to preserve a “Christian European and Hungarian community”.<sup>9</sup> Hostility to migration remains at the heart of its political rhetoric. Although the 2015 crisis had only an indirect impact on Poland, the perceived “threat” of refugees’ arrival was a central issue in the 2015 elections. The subsequent PiS government relied on a security and anti-immigration rhetoric. From 2021, it responded to the humanitarian crisis at the Poland-Belarus border with the same anti-immigrant approach, pushing back individuals from the Middle East attempting to seek asylum in the EU through this route. In October 2021, Poland amended its Act on Foreigners, effectively providing legal justification for these pushbacks.<sup>10</sup>

A characteristic feature of the Hungarian and Polish situations is that government-induced hostility toward foreigners occurred simultaneously with efforts to attract non-EU immigrant workers in certain sectors of the economy. In the 2010s, Hungary’s government started attracting temporary workers—mainly from Serbia, Ukraine, and later from Asia—but without any intention or measures regarding their social integration.<sup>11</sup> In Poland, the 2007 labor-migration legislation laid the ground for the arrival of a significant number of foreigners, mainly from Ukraine. This has included an increase in the number of women migrating from Ukraine to Poland for work, particularly in the care sector.<sup>12</sup> However, the creation of a regime of coherent migration and integration policy has been neglected in Poland as in Hungary.

The Roma are Europe’s largest ethnic minority but they are unequally present in the two countries. In Hungary, the 2011 census showed there were 700,000 Roma in the country, making up 7.05% of the population; in Poland, the 2021 census listed around 13,300 Roma, or 0.035% of the population, but local Roma organizations have higher estimates of 35,000– 50,000.<sup>13</sup> As the “internal others”, the Roma are often viewed as vulnerable in nation-state structures but also as potentially threatening to countries’ stability and security. Two major types of policies maintain the marginality and “subordinate inclusion” of Roma in Central and Eastern Europe: one concerns the lag in social conditions or life chances, and the other concerns subjecting target groups to forms of governance and policing in order to reduce insecurities. Both, alongside related narratives, are conducive to framing the Roma as an essential problem for the envisaged normative order.<sup>14</sup>

The politics of exclusion do not necessarily involve completely shutting out Roma, refugees, or migrants from all areas of society. Instead, these groups are often included in the political system, but in a way that keeps them marginalized or differentiated from the mainstream. This means they are integrated, but only through forms of exclusion or selective inclusion that maintain their subordinate status within society.<sup>15</sup> This is especially important

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when looking at the exclusionary processes affecting Roma refugees in a policy climate toward Ukrainians fleeing to EU member states that is generally seen as unprecedentedly generous and inclusive.

The governments of Hungary and, until 2023, of Poland have been criticized for exclusionary policies that did not reflect “European values”.<sup>16</sup> However, this misses important points about the European community as a whole.<sup>17</sup> Permissive or restrictive dynamics at external borders, the reproduction of bordering strategies internally through the growth of immigration detention camps, securitization, and expulsion policies targeting migrants and Roma have been integral elements of European politics centered on the identification and exclusion of external and internal “others”. The rise of illiberal regimes is not exceptional in the history of the EU; it evokes core dynamics of the European project and its social space. It is important to bear in mind this historical legacy in EU thinking and policymaking.

## The Social Position of Ukrainian Roma Refugees

In the latest census of Ukraine, carried out in 2001, 0.1% of the population (47,587 people) were of Roma origin. However, it is likely that this figure, as well as being out of date, was inaccurate at the time due to the reluctance of Roma to declare their ethnic origin, their lack of official identity documents and registration, and incorrect recording by the authorities.<sup>18</sup> Based on estimates of local CSOs, in 2020, the Roma population ranged between 200,000 and 400,000.<sup>19</sup>

Roma live in all regions of Ukraine, in culturally diverse communities and speaking a range of dialects. In an estimate in 2014, the largest Roma communities were in the Zakarpattia (42,580) and Odesa (10,000) regions and in Russian-occupied Donetsk (20,000) Luhansk (11,630) regions.<sup>20</sup> There are also communities in the central parts of the country (Kyiv, Cherkassy, and Poltava regions), in the east (Kharkiv region), and in Russian-annexed Crimea.<sup>21</sup>

Similarly to Roma communities in other European countries, they face multiple forms of marginalization in all spheres of life—although one needs to bear in mind the heterogeneity of linguistically and culturally diverse micro-communities of Crimean, Hungarian, Kalderash, Lovari, Olah, Russian, and Serb Roma. The living conditions and social position of Roma communities are also heavily shaped by regional and local socioeconomic contexts and inter-ethnic relations. It is important to take this into account when considering what different Roma refugees have encountered in different host countries.<sup>22</sup>

Some Roma communities in central Ukraine have managed to achieve considerably decent living conditions alongside the non-Roma population. However, those in geographically and economically peripheral regions, or on the outskirts of urban or semi-urban areas, face poor living conditions and extreme segregation. They are heavily marginalized in the labor market, which is shaped by the transgenerational experience of segregated and inadequate education. They also face exclusion in social arenas and from bureaucratic services, as well as being exposed to hate speech and crime, police brutality, and marginalization in the local population.<sup>23</sup>

In Zakarpattia and Odesa regions, Roma communities live mainly in segregated settlements, known as “Roma camps”. The largest two, with 5,000 and 7,000 inhabitants, are in Zakarpattia. Roma camps are located far from the local institutional infrastructure. Many have no piped water, sewers, piped gas, waste disposal, or concrete roads. Most Roma in these settlements live in overcrowded houses and mud huts. People live there usually in informal housing, lacking title deeds to their homes and being unable to register their residence.<sup>24</sup>

Based on CSO estimates, before 2022 only 38% of Roma accessed the labor market.<sup>25</sup> Roma women are even less likely to find jobs. The lack of access to adequate, non-segregated education and the widespread anti-Roma sentiments leave Roma with huge barriers to decent and stable jobs. Besides, mainly residing in economically peripheral areas with high unemployment rates and labor shortages, Roma are first to be excluded from the scarce job opportunities available.

The main labor-market strategy for most Ukrainian Roma has been labor migration, for the last decade mostly to Czechia, Hungary, and Poland.<sup>26</sup> As noted above, this was facilitated by policies of EU states that encouraged the inflow of cheap labor. Before 2022, Ukrainian Roma men typically worked in low-paying, low-prestige jobs in the construction and steel industries of European countries.

In 2011, Hungary’s government enacted the Simplified Naturalization Procedure that allows ethnic Hungarians living abroad to obtain citizenship easily.<sup>27</sup> This was intended to garner the electoral support of ethnic Hungarians in neighboring countries for the governing Fidesz party and to increase the inflow of cheap labor. As a result, some Hungarian-speaking Roma in Ukraine hold dual citizenship.

### **Although Roma are often legally entitled to citizenship, they lack proper documentation to acquire it, leaving their status unresolved.**

According to the Hungarian authorities, as of 2015, 88,339 people in Ukraine held Hungarian citizenship.<sup>28</sup> It is reasonable to assume that most of these are Roma and non-Roma in Zakarpattia, where the 2001 census showed around 156,000 ethnic Hungarians residing.<sup>29</sup> However, estimating the number of Roma among these dual citizens is challenging due to the lack of precise data on their ethnicity. While the 2001 census counted 14,000 Roma in the region,<sup>30</sup> the abovementioned 2014 estimates showed 42,580 Roma and the CSO Chirikli put their number at up to 70,000 in 2022.<sup>31</sup> Reports from the ground suggest that a high share of Hungarian-speaking Roma refugees Hungary hold dual citizenship.

In the case of the Simplified Naturalization Procedure, Hungary’s government appears to have disregarded its perception of Roma as undeserving of the symbolic and economic benefits of its envisaged political-economic community. The legislation granted citizenship, and its associated rights, to ethnic Hungarian Roma too. This suggests that the government is willing to be inclusive toward Roma when it is politically or economically expedient.

Although Roma are often legally entitled to citizenship, they lack proper documentation to acquire it, leaving their status unresolved. In 2015, the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimated that the stateless population in Ukraine ranged between 35,000 and 46,000. The only available view on the potential scale



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of Roma statelessness comes from the country's Ombudsman and Roma rights CSOs, which estimate that 10–20% of Roma in Ukraine are undocumented, including those who are stateless or at risk of becoming stateless.<sup>32</sup>

## The Unmet Needs of Roma Refugees

It is difficult to determine the number of Roma refugees from Ukraine in various EU countries, as no official data has been collected on the ethnic origin of those arriving there. Based on estimates from international and local CSOs in Ukraine and in the host countries, around 100,000 Roma left Ukraine seeking protection in European countries.<sup>33</sup>

Roma refugees in Hungary primarily arrived from Zakarpattia region. Estimating their number is highly uncertain, primarily because dual citizens are not registered in the country's temporary protection system, which recorded 46,000 refugees from Ukraine at the time of writing. According to local stakeholders, there could be at least 3,000–4,000 Roma refugees in Hungary. In a UNHCR survey of 682 refugees, 36% of respondents came from Zakarpattia (including ethnic Hungarians, Hungarian Roma, dual citizens, and temporary protection beneficiaries) and 5% of identified as Roma. Regarding legal status, 61% of respondents with ethnic Hungarian backgrounds held dual citizenship compared to 28% of Roma respondents.

Polish CSOs estimate that there are approximately 50,000 Roma refugees in Poland (out of approximately 1 million refugees). They are predominantly from eastern Ukraine, including from Donetsk, Kharkiv, Odesa, and Zhytomyr regions. Many had worked in Poland or other European countries before the war.<sup>34</sup> Stakeholders' experiences suggest that Roma from these regions generally have a more stable socioeconomic background compared to those from Zakarpattia.<sup>35</sup> They typically hold identity documents and travel in smaller groups, often in their own vehicles. Nevertheless, they are vulnerable compared to other Ukrainian refugees, as they are mostly low-educated and low-skilled and they lack meaningful financial resources.<sup>36</sup>

There are also significant numbers of Roma refugees in Czechia, Moldova, Romania, and Slovakia. Available information suggests that they number several thousand in each country, but accurately assessing their situation is challenging.

The lack of precise data highlights a significant gap in refugee-protection systems, demonstrating that even within well-established frameworks, certain communities—such as the Roma—remain underrepresented, making it difficult to fully recognize the extent of their vulnerability.

The lack of knowledge about Roma refugees from Ukraine is just one aspect of the challenges that they experience. From the moment they have crossed a border, they have faced difficulties in all essential aspects of protection. The challenge from the fact that many Roma lack proper documentation or hold dual citizenship has led to exclusion and differential treatment already at borders. In all the countries mentioned above, there has been evidence of racial profiling, denial of support, and additional screening procedures for Roma refugees.<sup>37</sup>

There has been further marginalization in the housing of Roma refugees. Across Central and Eastern Europe, they have barely accessed private housing.<sup>38</sup> Due to widespread anti-Roma discrimination, they are fundamentally not welcome in the housing market and less likely to get reduced-priced or solidarity-based private housing. Besides, Roma of usually unstable financial situation cannot afford to rent, even with subsidies. They most often reside in collective shelters and large facilities that are most often not adequate for long-term housing. In the absence of proper housing solutions and meaningful pathways to private housing, Roma are left segregated in institutional housing, from which, in addition, they are increasingly squeezed out due to restrictions.

Furthermore, Roma refugees do not usually end up in formal jobs in host countries, including those who are eligible to work after their legal status is settled. They are more likely to only access informal and insecure positions where they are exposed to exploitative conditions. As growing evidence shows, Roma refugees are similarly exposed to denial of healthcare and education services.<sup>39</sup> Even where they gain access to these, they are vulnerable to further discrimination and racist attitudes. Whether they access adequate services varies even within the host country, and a lot depends on the support of local CSOs, social workers, and other stakeholders.

These cases of Roma's unmet needs are not extreme instances of vulnerability and antigypsyism, or exceptional ones due to the extraordinary nature of the current crisis. Rather, they express and reproduce deep-seated historical processes of the racial marginalization of Roma.

## The EU Response to Ukrainian Refugees

The EU's response to the flight of refugees from Ukraine showed unprecedented solidarity and openness on its part, especially with the member states deciding unanimously to activate the Temporary Protection Directive (TPD) in March 2022. This was the first time the TPD was activated since it was introduced in 2001. Thus, alongside the EU's asylum regime, a second reception regime with a specific framework and rules came into force.

Under the TPD, Ukrainian refugees have rights and entitlements that were restricted or denied to other groups of refugees during previous crises. In contrast to the EU's asylum regime, the TPD enables the unbureaucratic and rapid reception of those displaced from Ukraine, who are free to enter the EU country of their choice. It gives them access to the same rights across the EU: a resident permit in the chosen host country, language support, housing, education, healthcare, and employment. To date, more than 7 million people have fled from Ukraine to EU countries, and about 5 million have benefited from the TPD and similar national measures.<sup>40</sup>

The TPD acknowledges that people from Ukraine fully deserve access to secure and decent living conditions in the EU. However, there are differences in how it is implemented in the member states. National policies, available resources and infrastructure for the inclusion of displaced people, and the general state of social services determine the nature of support under the TPD. Each host country's political and social dynamics and discourses around refugees and displacement also play a key role.

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Apart from that, what raises crucial questions is that not all refugees from Ukraine fall equally under the scope of the TPD. It foresees group-based protection, meaning that its beneficiaries are primarily Ukrainian nationals as well as third-country nationals with international protection status and who had a residence permit in Ukraine and cannot return safely to their country of origin. The TPD assumes that people from Ukraine have documents to prove their status, which excludes undocumented and/or stateless people in Ukraine. It also does not apply to those holding dual citizenship. Many Roma refugees hold dual Ukrainian-Hungarian citizenship or lack proper documentation, as explained above, and this has particularly affected them when seeking protection in an EU country.

Despite the fundamentally welcoming framework in the EU, there is growing evidence of various degrees of exclusion across the EU, with Roma, third-country nationals, stateless people, and asylum seekers among the most vulnerable to risks to their protection. Marginalized groups face inconsistent practices, discriminatory treatment, and additional challenges when crossing borders and accessing protection. The treatment of Roma refugees thus reveals complex social relations behind EU and international border regimes, regional and national security arrangements and protection systems, and accessibility to security.<sup>41</sup>

## The Response to Roma Refugees in Hungary and Poland

The numerous cases of differential treatment and unmet needs of Roma refugees in EU states shows that solidarity, security, and inclusion have not been equally accessible for all. From the moment they have crossed borders to when they have attempted to access accommodation, employment, education, and medical services, they have faced particular challenges, rooted in deep-seated marginalization.

The Fidesz government in Hungary has politicized the flight of people from Ukraine differently than it did the influx of refugees from other countries in 2015. Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has claimed the state's help to all Ukrainian refugees was driven by "elementary human, Christian instinct".<sup>42</sup> Under its current and previous governments, Poland has shown extraordinary generosity toward those fleeing the war, and it currently hosts nearly 1 million Ukrainians, amounting to two-thirds of those present in Central and Eastern Europe. Prime Minister Donald Tusk has proclaimed himself to be "the most pro-Ukrainian politician in Europe".<sup>43</sup> Whether substantive measures underpin this openness in two countries notorious for anti-immigrant attitudes is a fundamental question. The pushbacks and violence at Poland's border with Belarus and Hungary's government's refusal of "masses arriving from Muslim regions" suggests that their benevolence might be selective in the case of people fleeing from Ukraine too.<sup>44</sup>

The ratio of temporary protection beneficiaries from Ukraine to the population of EU countries is among the highest in Poland and among the lowest in Hungary.<sup>45</sup> The high ratio in Poland can partly be explained by labor-migration trends before the war. The relatively low ratio in Hungary could be the result of many refugees there not seeking protection in a country known for its anti-immigrant policies and a dismantled asylum system, and thus choosing instead to transit it to other countries. The ratio is also low due to the high number of refugees holding dual Hungarian-Ukrainian citizenship, who do not appear in the official numbers.

Assessing the proportion of Roma granted temporary protection or encountering difficulties in obtaining it is challenging. The data on refugees often lacks precision. Various organizations have collected data on Roma refugees in Hungary and Poland, relying on estimates and the experiences of actors on the ground.

## Responsibilities and Actors

In Poland, a Government Plenipotentiary for War Refugees from Ukraine was tasked with implementing and coordinating actions. Responsibilities concerning the social integration of the refugees were assigned to the minister-member of the Council of Ministers.<sup>46</sup> In Hungary, the National Directorate-General for Aliens Policing, under the Ministry of Interior, is responsible for the legal status of the refugees. Formally, the reception of and provision of assistance for the refugees is the responsibility of the National Directorate General for Disaster Management, under which County Defense Committees are in charge of coordination.<sup>47</sup> The realization of the tasks related to this assistance and reception at the state level has been outsourced to the Charity Board, which brings together the country's six biggest faith-based organizations.

Interviews with Roma activists and social workers in Poland reveal that, while government entities have been willing to participate in the interagency response, state interventions have been insufficient and universal in nature. In Hungary, higher government entities have been less engaged in the interagency response and, apart from the Charity Board, the government does not provide a platform for local and national CSOs to engage with policy processes. International bodies such as UNICEF, the UNHCR, and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) have played significant roles in coordinating service provision and providing funds for local governments and CSOs in Hungary and Poland. CSOs specializing in refugee and migrant services and humanitarian aid have been at the forefront of delivering essential services in both countries.

In the absence of comprehensive state-led initiatives and separate programs by international organizations aimed at supporting Roma, Roma activists and CSOs have shouldered the responsibility. In Poland, key contributors include the Central Council for Roma, the Foundation Toward Dialogue, and Roma community-level activists working with agencies like Salam Lab, the IOM, Oxfam International, and UNHCR. In Hungary, the Romaversitas Foundation and various Roma community organizations have addressed challenges and fostered collaborations with service providers, Roma and refugee CSOs, and international and state agencies.

In Hungary and Poland, key Roma stakeholders have sought to respond to the diverse situations arising from the intersection of the specific vulnerabilities of Roma refugees, the shortcomings of the protection schemes, and related discriminatory attitudes. Roma organizations and activists have been present at the borders and in accommodation facilities in both countries, assisting Roma in navigating everyday life and public institutions, assessing their needs and conditions, providing information, securing accommodation, and raising awareness about instances of discrimination. These actors typically have received funding from international donors and CSOs, and they lack meaningful state support. Despite their invaluable contributions, the required upscaling and sustainability of their efforts exceed their capacities, and the funding for their activities is gradually shrinking.

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## Reception and Documentation Policies

In Poland, the TPD was implemented through the Law on Assistance to Ukrainian Citizens of March 2022 (also known as the Special Law). This established rules for the legal stay of Ukrainian citizens, directed county and local governments to assist them, and created an aid fund for their needs. Ukrainian citizens and their spouses (of any nationality) can obtain temporary protection (known as UKR status) by first registering in the national identification system PESEL. After registering, individuals are eventually issued a PESEL number, which is essential for accessing various services, including healthcare, education, and social benefits. All Ukrainian refugees residing in Poland need to apply for a temporary residence permit by the end of September 2025.<sup>48</sup>

Following the declaration of a new “state of danger due to the war”, Hungary’s government has introduced several legislative measures.<sup>49</sup> These include decrees on the protection of and measures available to those fleeing Ukraine<sup>50</sup> as well as amendments to legislation on asylum procedures, migration, and state security to accommodate the TPD and manage the legal status of refugees.<sup>51</sup> Under the revised framework, temporary protection is extended to Ukrainian nationals, beneficiaries of international protection, stateless individuals recognized in Ukraine, and their family members. Applications for temporary protection must be submitted to the National Directorate-General for Aliens Policing, which will make a determination within 55 days.<sup>52</sup>

### **There is growing evidence that adequate protection has not been equally accessible in Hungary and Poland for all those fleeing from Ukraine.**

There is growing evidence that adequate protection has not been equally accessible in Hungary and Poland for all those fleeing from Ukraine. One issue stems directly from the fact that in both countries the TPD has been implemented in such a way that certain groups do not come under its scope. In Poland, third-country nationals and stateless persons are excluded from the rights provided by the Special Law and are recognized by the general rules under the July 2003 Act on the Protection of Foreigners in Poland.<sup>53</sup> Although Hungary’s government initially granted temporary protection to all refugees from Ukraine, regardless of their nationality, it then issued a decree in December 2022 that excluded third-country nationals and stateless people formerly not recognized in Ukraine. These must instead access protection “in accordance with the general rules”.<sup>54</sup>

In Hungary and Poland, general rules offer no adequate protection compared to the TPD, as well as involving lengthy administrative processes and scrutiny. Moreover, the exclusion of third-country nationals and stateless persons created a breeding ground discrimination and differential profiling by the authorities. Some non-Ukrainian nationals were not allowed to enter Poland and some were subjected to stricter identity control.<sup>55</sup> In Hungary, non-white third-country nationals among refugees were subject to more lengthy procedures and received little help. Based on the experience of CSOs and Roma activists, not enough attention is given to the problem of lack of proper documentation and statelessness that affects Ukrainian Roma who have fled to both countries. For various reasons, those without proper documentation or undocumented mostly fled to Moldova in the early phases of the war.<sup>56</sup>

A status-related issue has affected primarily Zakarpattia Roma holding dual Ukrainian-Hungarian citizenship, who therefore do not fall under Hungary's Asylum Act of 2007 or the TPD and have been denied provision of assistance in other EU countries than Hungary, such as Czechia, Poland and Slovakia. At the same time, most of them have not enjoyed all the rights of Hungary's citizens since most of these are tied to having social security status and a registered address in the country.

In the early weeks outbreak of the war, dual citizenship apparently was the ground for discrimination and racial profiling toward Roma refugees. There have also been multiple reports of Roma, regardless of their status, being stuck in limbo in segregated facilities as they wait for the authorities to decide whether they qualify as Ukrainian refugees.<sup>57</sup>

Specific provisions regarding refugees who are dual citizens in Hungary were formalized in a December 2022 decree, which stated that they are entitled to all the provisions for those holding temporary protection status unless they receive more favorable benefits based on their Hungarian citizenship.<sup>58</sup> In practice, however, many dual-citizen Roma refugees did not receive any allowances for long periods following their arrival in Hungary, primarily due to lack of information regarding the necessary administrative procedures. It is also common for dual citizens' address cards to contain only a Ukrainian address, leading to them being categorized in the register of persons and addresses as "Hungarian citizens living abroad". This often results in incorrectly treating them as nonresidents, complicating their access to rights and services. A representative from a local CSO reports that a school denied free meals to refugee children due to their lack of a registered address in Hungary. The Ministry of Human Capacities has acknowledged this issue and advised dual citizens to apply at the local government office for a residence card that indicates their place of residence in Hungary.<sup>59</sup>

**While in theory Roma dual citizens are legally recognized as refugees in Hungary, in practice they encounter persistent barriers to accessing protection and social assistance.**

While in theory Roma dual citizens are legally recognized as refugees in Hungary, in practice they encounter persistent barriers to accessing protection and social assistance. Whether on the basis of their status as refugees or as Hungarian citizens, claiming their entitlements in many cases means significant administrative and bureaucratic hurdles. Furthermore, with the introduction of increasing restrictions, these Roma refugees were among the first to be excluded from the services offered by the protection system. Another concerning issue is that since they are not officially registered as temporary protection beneficiaries in the system, they simply do not appear in any data on refugees.

Those Roma that fled to Poland generally had the necessary documentation for entry, and issues related to dual citizenship were not that common. However, those with refugee status have faced challenges in accessing protection and entitlements in both countries. For instance, some Roma refugees in Poland report not receiving entry stamps in their passports, which was then improperly used as a reason to deny them accommodation in refugee reception centers. Similarly, in Hungary, numerous reports indicate that even Roma refugees with "clean"

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Ukrainian status have often been treated like those with dual citizenship and not properly registered or denied of provision of assistance upon arrival.

Roma organizations have initiated interventions by the Office of the Ombudsman in both countries in several cases. The arrival of Roma refugees is significantly influenced by overt and covert mechanisms of ethnic discrimination, and temporary protection fails to address the unique vulnerabilities of specific groups such as this one, creating barriers to accessing entitlements.

## Housing Measures

Housing plays a crucial role in the integration process for refugees. Establishing a sustainable housing system that includes short-term accommodation, transition mechanisms, adequate support, and affordable options in the private sector is essential. While the TPD mandates that EU member states must ensure equal access to adequate housing for all beneficiaries, the implementation of this varies. Hungary and Poland are far from realizing any complex measures, and instead have been introducing restrictions. This problem is compounded by the housing crises in many EU capitals. In this situation, it is precisely the most vulnerable groups that are furthest away from secure housing opportunities.

In Hungary, there was no housing strategy for asylum seekers before the war in Ukraine. The care and protection system had been demolished since 2015 and, with no meaningful infrastructure, everything had to be set up from scratch. The lack of adequate preparation and complex centralized measures created varying housing conditions for Ukrainian refugees across the country. The Disaster Management Service is in charge of distributing refugees through the government-organized temporary shelter system, but many have accessed accommodation through CSOs, church organizations, or municipalities. Such shelters have been created out of homeless shelters, temporary shelters for families, summer-camp houses, and workers' dormitories, which in most cases are not adequate for long-term housing.

The housing situation has been similar in Poland. Large temporary accommodation facilities were rapidly established. The largest were provided by the provincial governments with central-government funding and operated by volunteers, social organizations, local businesses, or universities; others were set up by local authorities and CSOs. A special fund was established to provide accommodation and the government introduced support for private citizens, institutions, and organizations hosting refugees, which received PLN 40 (about €9) per day per refugee.<sup>60</sup>

In Hungary or Poland, the state has not initiated medium- and long-term programs supporting independent housing. The scarce options available have been set up and operated by humanitarian actors and CSOs offering temporary shelters, rental subsidies, or assistance in finding accommodation. However, many of these initiatives have faced funding cuts and logistical challenges over time. With most humanitarian actors now scaling back or ceasing operations due to reduced financial resources, the housing situation for Ukrainian refugees has become increasingly unstable.

This problem is particularly acute for marginalized groups such as Roma refugees, who often face additional significant discrimination and barriers in accessing suitable long-term independent housing in both countries. Private housing options have scarcely been available to them. The widespread discrimination in the housing market and the generally high rental cost left Roma with no options but to remain in collective accommodation for the long term. However, most shelters were only set up to provide temporary accommodation and the collective housing conditions for Roma have varied. The lack of an intimate sphere is a source of strong mental and psychological exposure for Roma, not least for families with children. CSOs with limited capacity are often only able to provide the most basic social work addressing this situation.

### **The widespread discrimination in the housing market and the generally high rental cost left Roma with no options but to remain in collective accommodation for the long term.**

The current policy environment does not allow for meaningful pathways out of collective housing for Roma refugees. In recent months, there have been various restrictions and cuts regarding the existing measures and support available for refugees in housing in Central and Eastern Europe. Poland's government has instituted stricter requirements and reduced support for temporary housing for Ukrainian refugees. It has terminated the program that allocated PLN 40 per day for hosting refugees. All collective accommodations are now required to be registered with the provincial authorities, which will determine whether they may continue operating.<sup>61</sup> Accommodation in the remaining centers is provided free of charge for the initial 120 days. After this, vulnerable groups are still provided accommodation at no cost while others have to pay up to PLN 60 per (about €14) day.<sup>62</sup>

The majority of those still in shelters are Roma, making them disproportionately affected by these restrictions. As large reception centers closed, many Roma have been relocated to remaining facilities that are typically on the outskirts of urban centers or in more remote areas. This has been particularly challenging for Roma, given that often they face restricted access to the labor market and educational institutions that is compounded by the prevalence of racist attitudes in these smaller, more insular communities.

Additional hardship arises from the requirement to begin paying for collective accommodation after 120 days, a significant burden given the instability of Roma refugees' situation. While Roma organizations have engaged in advocacy efforts and held meetings with provincial governments to address the housing crisis, leading to a temporary suspension of accommodation fees for some Roma, their capacity to sustain such efforts is limited. As a result of these challenges, some Roma have chosen to relocate to Germany or to return to Ukraine.

Hungary recently introduced the most restrictive measure among EU states. Since August 2024, refugees from Ukraine are only entitled to subsidized accommodation if they have come from a government list of "war-affected areas" of the country.<sup>63</sup> Refugees could request continued support from the County Defense Committee under special individual circumstances, though they were given only 12 days to do so and exemptions appear to have been limited to the elderly and disabled.<sup>64</sup> The government has not established a monitoring mechanism to assess the impact of these restrictions on shelters, but humanitarian actors estimates that 75–80% of those living in



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them are now at risk of homelessness. According to the government, the decree targets around 4,000 people who “were living in Hungary on state money without wanting to work”.<sup>65</sup>

These refugees “living on state money” are primarily Zakarpattia Roma as they are predominantly the ones who have lived in shelters over the last two years. In practice, this new restriction also means that dual-citizen refugees from now on lose all access to any protection. Due to their dual citizenship including that of a member state, they are unable to seek protection in other EU countries under the TPD. They can legally stay in Hungary but they cannot expect any support for social inclusion. This government decision can thus be viewed as a cost-saving measure with dual-citizen Roma as the primary victims.<sup>66</sup>

This has led to reports of the mass appearance of refugees on the streets in several places. Some women have decided to return to Ukraine with their children while men have remained to avoid military conscription. Those who remain try to secure accommodation through employment, mostly in workers’ dormitories. Some operators of facilities are trying to find other resources to make up for the withdrawal of state funding, including in the case of facilities by the municipality of Budapest, where refugees have been given a reprieve until December 2024 and are being helped to find affordable accommodation.

## Welfare Measures

The proper long-term integration of refugees and asylum seekers requires that access to essential social arenas and welfare is facilitated by adequate institutionalized measures. In line with the TPD, the protection of Ukrainian refugees means providing not only adequate assistance in relation to immediate reception and needs, but also access to welfare measures and essential social institutions. Hungary and Poland provide financial assistance as well as access to education, the labor market, healthcare, and other social arenas. Still, in neither is there a framework place allowing all groups of refugees access these arenas.

There are differences between the two countries in how the TPD has been implemented for welfare assistance and in the extent to which regular welfare programs have been made available to refugees. In Poland, those recognized under the TPD are entitled to a one-time allowance of PLN 300 (about €60) from the central government and can apply for a monthly benefit of PLN 710 (about €150). Besides, they have access to mainstream family and childcare benefits worth PLN 500 (about €110) per child per month and other allowances under the Family 800+ and Good Start programs worth PLN 500 (about €115).<sup>67</sup> Refugees have also been given free public transport to places of accommodation.<sup>68</sup>

In Hungary, the legislation on childcare and family welfare does not apply to temporary protection beneficiaries. Care for them is entirely through the asylum administration system, under which only a maternity allowance is available. The targeted financial support Ukrainian refugees can apply for is a regular subsistence allowance of HUF 22,800 (about €60) per adult per month and HUF 13,700 (about €35) for minors. This allowance ends in case of employment or of receipt of a pension, and those with temporary protection are required to accept any job offered within 45 days if they are fit to work.<sup>69</sup> Refugees were also entitled to travel allowances until September

2023. In theory, all these benefits can be accessed by dual-citizen refugees, who are also eligible for mainstream family allowances through their Hungarian citizenship.

In addition to welfare benefits, temporary protection applicants and beneficiaries in both countries have access to the general healthcare system. In Hungary, dual-citizen refugees automatically have access to healthcare, even without a Social Insurance Number. A government decree outlines specific regulations for healthcare providers on how to register temporary protection applicants and beneficiaries as well as dual-citizen refugees. In Poland, in theory being in possession of a PESEL number is not mandatory for accessing healthcare, but temporary protection beneficiaries who not yet received one have encountered difficulties in doing so. For this reason, applying for a PESEL number shortly after arrival has been emphasized by Polish authorities, as it helps streamline the process of receiving protection and accessing services. Additionally, temporary protection beneficiaries may receive free psychological assistance.

When it comes to Roma refugees, interviewees in Hungary and Poland report crucial challenges regarding the different allowances. Many issues they face in claiming allowances are linked to inadequate access and information, complex and lengthy administrative procedures, and discriminatory attitudes of authorities. For these reasons, combined with a history of marginalization, Roma refugees often distrust social institutions. For instance, a pregnant woman who stayed in a mass shelter in the Budapest area for a couple of weeks decided to return to Zakarpattia for antenatal care, driven by a lack of sufficient assistance and information that left her doubtful about her ability to access free healthcare in Hungary.

In Poland, the language barrier is an additional challenge as many Roma refugees have limited proficiency in Polish, which limits their ability to navigate the welfare and healthcare systems. In response, Roma activists and volunteers have played a critical role in facilitating access to allowances and other forms of support. They often have acted as intermediaries, helping refugees navigate complicated bureaucratic processes, translating documents, and advocating on their behalf with authorities.

**Many issues they face in claiming allowances are linked to inadequate access and information, complex and lengthy administrative procedures, and discriminatory attitudes of authorities.**

In Hungary, Roma refugees with dual citizenship have often faced additional disadvantages due to this status when claiming welfare benefits or healthcare services. There are multiple reports of such refugees being turned away from healthcare institutions as staff assumed they need a Social Insurance Number to access services. It has also been common that dual-citizen refugees do not receive a subsistence or family allowance. They have often not had information of the relevant administrative procedures while the authorities have been reluctant to inform them about the benefits they are entitled to as refugees or as Hungarian citizens.

Another crucial concern about the financial allowances is that they have been implemented on the basis of equality rather than equity, or are exclusively connected to family or employment status.<sup>70</sup> This means that in

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neither Hungary nor Poland are there meaningful state measures recognizing marginalization and vulnerabilities in seeking an equal outcome for all. This one-size-fits-all approach fails to consider the specific obstacles Roma encounter that exacerbate their exclusion from social services and welfare. Without targeted, equity-based measures that address these structural disadvantages, Roma are less able than other groups to benefit from allowances for refugees.

In both countries, humanitarian organizations, including international and local CSOs, have stepped in to address the gaps in government assistance. The UNHCR, the IOM, and UNICEF have provided financial support to those fleeing Ukraine, typically through short-term or one-off cash payments.<sup>71</sup> In Poland, prominent church organizations and the CSO Polish Humanitarian Action have also offered financial aid for basic needs. However, these humanitarian benefits have often been means-tested with rigorous eligibility verification. The threshold for accessing these benefits risks excluding vulnerable groups from essential social protection.<sup>72</sup>

## Access to Employment

In Hungary, temporary protection applicants and beneficiaries as well as dual-citizen refugees are eligible to work without an employment permit. In Poland, entry into labor market is possible after registering in the PESEL system. Both governments have issued decrees to facilitate access to the labor market for temporary protection applicants and beneficiaries. In Hungary, employers can request support for covering the costs of such employees.<sup>73</sup> In Poland, governmental and local online platforms connect Ukrainian refugees with a PESEL number with employers. Specific facilitating measures have been implemented for professionals in the healthcare, education, public service, care, and mining sectors.<sup>74</sup>

A crucial concern around employment is that, due to limited information about local conditions, language barriers, and their uncertain financial situation, marginalized refugees are at extreme risk of exploitative and illegal employment. In both countries, humanitarian actors have run programs regarding labor-market integration and safe employment. In Poland, employers are obliged to inform labor offices when hiring Ukrainian nationals. Yet the record shows that in both countries those at risk of labor exploitation have usually not been touched by these measures. Neither government has established special rules to ensure equal treatment for vulnerable groups in the labor market with regard to accessibility and working conditions.

Roma refugees are severely affected by this. Due to their low education levels and the widespread racism in the labor market, as well as to the need for cheap labor, they access only the lower sectors of the labor market. As was the case before the war, it is relatively easy for Ukrainian Roma men to access Hungary's iron, construction, and steel sectors that require low-skilled labor. In Poland, Roma men have predominantly accessed jobs in the iron and steel industries, in gardening, or as taxi drivers.

These jobs provide Roma refugees with a source of income but leaves them in a generally unstable economic position. These low-skilled and low-prestige jobs rarely contribute to them gaining local knowledge or accessing networks, which would be essential for their social inclusion. Additionally, in Hungary and Poland, Roma men are often employed illegally, meaning that they face high levels of uncertainty and exploitation and do not access

benefits tied to formal employment. There are numerous reports of Roma workers not being paid, working without contracts, receiving reduced wages, or being laid off without notice. Men in particular are often overworked in physically demanding roles and in informal work settings, raising serious concerns for their health and well-being.

Roma refugee women typically find it challenging to get jobs that they can perform alongside their care responsibilities. Those who have tend to be in domestic positions or to work in seasonal sectors. For instance, Roma women in a shelter around Lake Balaton in Hungary are only able to work during the summer season, when there is a great demand for their labor in catering and cleaning positions from local restaurants. Labor-market discrimination and the lack of access to jobs for Roma women that they could reconcile with their caring duties are issues also left without systemic interventions.

It appears that, while the Hungarian state is now reluctant to support housing and protection for refugees from areas of Ukraine it does not consider war zones, it continues to rely on their labor as a cheap resource. Yet they often remain portrayed as economic migrants or as people who want to live on support and do not want to work. This reflects a historically entrenched pattern of differential inclusion, where certain groups receive little or no support for their social protection, making them vulnerable enough to remain in unstable and exploitative employment. They are not entirely excluded from the labor market but are included alongside their exclusion from other social spheres and from access to meaningful employment. The implementation of the TPD and of national frameworks in Hungary and Poland is inadequate in freeing these individuals from such vulnerabilities.

## Education

Hungary and Poland have taken distinct approaches to access to education for Ukrainian refugees under the TPD. In Hungary, it is a right and obligation for refugees of school age to attend school within the national education system until the compulsory school age of 16. In contrast, Poland set up a dual-pathway approach in which refugee children can either attend public schools or can continue online studies in the Ukrainian school system, or they combine the two. Both countries have offered language and special integration or preparatory classes, and Poland has also relied on the involvement of cross-cultural and Roma assistants. In practice, the approaches of both countries have shortcomings.

In Hungary, there are no comprehensive measures ensuring equal access to education for refugee children. There are fundamental differences between the country's school system and Ukraine's in terms of grading, levels of education and curricula. Besides, it is not very common for Roma children to attend kindergarten in Ukraine. The lack of central coordination and institutional cooperation at the local and national levels, and scarce harmonization between the education and asylum legislation can lead to refugee children being neglected and their needs unaddressed in schools. Moreover, the data and information available regarding the situation of refugee children are imprecise and opaque, complicating efforts to advocate necessary initiatives.

Roma refugee children have entered an overburdened and underfunded public school and care system in Hungary, which lacks systemic identification and support mechanisms to address their past traumas and their educational, emotional, and social needs. For them, this situation has resulted in a variety of strategies and significant

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differences in educational settings. In some cases, there is a separate educational institution associated with the shelter where these children live, and in others they study with local students in an integrated setting.

In the absence of minimum standards and central regulations, it is difficult to map and assess good practices and effective initiatives or inadequate educational settings in Hungary. But there is no doubt that Roma refugee children's struggles and needs in school are less likely to be addressed in locations where civil workers and professional stakeholders lack the capacity to pay close attention to children's wellbeing. Although most of these children of school age had been enrolled in schools by September 2023, many of them have not attended regularly or have faced serious educational difficulties and have been demoted to a lower grade. An additional problem is that it is basically impossible to keep Roma refugee youth in school beyond the compulsory age of 16, when it makes more economic sense for them to seek work.

However, there have been notable examples of cooperation among various stakeholders in Hungary, including CSOs and humanitarian responders, leading to a greater focus on the schooling of Roma refugee children. Successful experiences of schooling have often occurred in areas where refugees have access to safe housing, employment opportunities, and support from social workers, Roma experts, and psychological professionals. For instance, at a shelter where multiple Roma and non-Roma civil actors, led by the CSO NestingPlay, have been present, enrolment was preceded by group and individual educational activities. This helped to thoroughly assess refugee children's educational abilities and gaps, and to prepare them to join formal education in integrated classes. With the involvement of teachers and social workers, these children's preexisting disadvantages were detected early, before they joined local schools with non-Roma children. To encourage Roma refugees to pay attention to their children's education, daily school attendance has been a condition of stay at the shelter. Through open and harmonious cooperation and continuous feedback from local schools and kindergartens, these children have received the complex attention they need to succeed at school and to stay motivated. However, this shelter eventually closed due to a lack of resources and capacity, like many others.

### **According to interviewees in Poland, Roma refugee children face significant barriers to school enrollment and access to quality education, particularly in large cities.**

In Poland, where the number of refugees from Ukraine is much higher than in Hungary, remote learning in the Ukrainian education system and preparatory classes have been introduced to prevent school overcrowding and to address cultural and language barriers. This has offered short-term relief but does not foster social development or long-term educational success. Consequently, more than half of the Ukrainian refugee children are still not enrolled in Poland's public school system.<sup>75</sup> What is more, some who were supposed to be attending Ukrainian schools online were not doing so. In response to this situation, in July 2024, the government decided to allocate PLN 500 million (about €115.2 million) for the educational integration of Ukrainian children. Further changes to the Special Law state that allowances under the Family 800+ and Good Start programs will be provided to refugee families only if their children attend a Polish school.<sup>76</sup>

According to interviewees in Poland, Roma refugee children face significant barriers to school enrollment and access to quality education, particularly in large cities. In urban areas like Kraków and particularly in the Małopolska province, many of these children have not been included in the school system for over a year. Overcrowded schools and limited resources in these areas further restrict opportunities for Roma children, leading to a substantial gap in their education. While some of those not enrolled may have accessed remote learning, many Roma families lack the technology, such as computers or stable internet access, to participate in online classes. This digital divide has exacerbated the educational inequalities faced by Roma communities. In contrast, authorities in smaller towns have managed to address these issues more swiftly, allowing Roma children to enroll in schools much earlier.

The disparity between rural and urban areas in Poland underscores the need for targeted interventions to address the specific challenges Roma refugee children face in cities. The lack of incentives for families to enroll their children in school, along with systemic discrimination and social exclusion, complicates efforts to ensure their consistent education. Without support such as educational incentives, access to technology, and culturally sensitive educational programs, Roma children experience prolonged educational neglect, perpetuating cycles of marginalization and social exclusion.

Employing Roma educational assistants has proven to be a vital practice in addressing the educational needs of Roma refugee children in Poland, helping them overcome the language barrier and specific learning difficulties. However, they are heavily overburdened due to their small number and to underfunding. While their employment is backed by an educational subsidy from the state, local governments often misuse these funds and do not hire enough Roma assistants where it would be essential.<sup>77</sup> Roma CSOs, with the support of humanitarian groups, are working to improve the refugee assistance system by establishing, training, and reinforcing networks of Roma and social assistants to support Ukrainian Roma refugees.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

Roma refugees from Ukraine face distinct and severe challenges that are historically rooted. The responses by the governments in Hungary and Poland, while reflecting a broader EU framework of temporary protection, are insufficient in addressing the unique vulnerabilities of Roma communities. The differential treatment of these refugees reflects long-standing patterns of exclusion that continue to marginalize Roma in Ukraine and in host countries.

More inclusive and targeted policies to support Roma refugees are needed. While the solidarity toward Ukrainian refugees has been commendable, it has not been extended to the same extent to all displaced populations, particularly the Roma. Their exclusion from meaningful assistance not only reflects the persistence of racialized and exclusionary practices but also highlights the inadequacies in current policies. The following recommendations for targeted policy change seek to address this.

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## ***Widening the scope of EU asylum and protection policy frameworks***

The EU should revise the Temporary Protection Directive to ensure that it comprehensively covers all categories of refugees from Ukraine, including undocumented and stateless persons and dual citizens, who are disproportionately represented among Roma. This requires a more flexible interpretation of documentation requirements and the inclusion of those without formal identification. Rather than leaving it to the discretion of member states, the TPD should provide clearer guidance to ensure the inclusion of groups with a complicated status.

## ***Enhanced and targeted support at the national level***

Most temporary protection mechanisms are based on the principle of equality rather than equity or are linked to certain social statuses (family, employment). Thus, they are not equally available to all and fail to meet real needs. Hungary and Poland need to develop targeted integration programs that address the specific needs of Roma refugees. This should include providing culturally sensitive services as well as holistic support systems that consider the historical and socioeconomic contexts of Roma communities and the entire spectrum of Roma refugees' needs. The establishment of dedicated government positions or agencies focusing on the integration of Roma refugees can help coordinate efforts across different levels of government and civil society.

## ***Engagement of Roma CSOs and communities***

Roma refugees have more meaningful life chances and positive experiences where Roma experts are involved in helping them. Yet local Roma organizations are often sidelined in interagency processes despite their being the most sensitive to the needs of Roma refugees. Governments should involve such organizations and community leaders comprehensively in the policymaking process to ensure that Roma voices are heard and that their specific needs are met. This could involve creating platforms for dialogue and consultation between the state and Roma CSOs. Providing funding and support to Roma CSOs that are already working on the ground can enhance their capacity to deliver essential services and advocate for Roma refugees effectively.

## ***Monitoring and accountability***

The experiences of Roma refugees are included in the debate on refugees only in an ad hoc and contingent way, and there is a lack of relevant information about their demographic specificity and how their lives are evolving. Independent monitoring mechanisms and research initiatives to assess the treatment and inclusion of Roma refugees in host countries is crucial. These should ensure that any discriminatory practices are identified and addressed promptly. The EU, in collaboration with international organizations, should establish benchmarks and indicators for monitoring the effectiveness of member-state policies in addressing the needs of Roma refugees.

## ***Long-term solutions***

Restrictions in member states, the narrowing of the scope of temporary protection, and the withdrawal of humanitarian actors and donors suggests that meaningful assistance is slowly being diverted from the situation

of Ukrainian refugees. The crisis responses in place since 2022 should be replaced by a long-term strategy for the social and economic integration of Roma refugees in host countries. This would involve reframing humanitarian aid as a bridge to long-term solutions rather than just a temporary relief measure. This means integrating emergency aid with transition and exit mechanisms and sustainable development strategies that address the root causes of Roma marginalization, such as lack of access to education, healthcare, and employment.

***Advocating anti-discrimination laws***

There is evidence of discriminatory treatment of Roma refugees in all areas of life in host countries. There is a need for extensive advocacy at the EU and member-state levels for the strengthening and enforcement of anti-discrimination laws to protect Roma refugees from bias and exclusion in housing, employment, and public services. The EU should establish clear guidelines and minimum standards that member states must meet or exceed in their national legislation. This would offer Roma refugees and other vulnerable groups stronger legal protection against discriminatory practices.

***Rethinking the humanitarian aid approach***

Top-down approaches are very much woven into how aid is conceived. Because they are not deeply rooted in local contexts, established protection and care mechanisms often fail to align with the reality on the ground or to sustain their impact once external funding or attention diminishes. Rather than viewing Roma refugees as passive recipients of aid, policies should be designed to actively involve them in decision-making processes, ensuring that their voices and needs shape the help they receive. Implementing participatory budgeting processes, investing in capacity-building and parental involvement, and working closely with Roma leaders, CSOs, and community members would help to move away from unsustainable and short-term charity-based assistance toward meaningful empowerment strategies.

\* \* \* \* \*

EU and national policies formulated with these considerations in mind could enhance the dignity, agency, and meaningful life opportunities for Roma refugees. What is considered a generous protection system in the current crisis is, at the local level, deeply intertwined with entrenched dynamics and structures of exclusion and marginalization, which hinder the emergence of more meaningful and progressive forms of cooperation and assistance. However, crises can serve as catalysts for change, offering opportunities to reimagine and reconstruct existing structures. In this context, the EU and its member states have the potential to move toward a more equitable and inclusive framework for helping all Ukrainian refugees that ensures no group is left behind.



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# The Marginalization of Roma Refugees From Ukraine

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## About the Author(s)

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