



Activities of The United Methodist Church in the Central Conference of Central and Southern Europe with/for Refugees from Ukraine *Summary of March 23, 2022*



General Situation

The number of refugees from Ukraine is still increasing. The refugees are mostly women with children. Sometimes there are elderly people – and sometimes there are also big families. According to **Leading Superintendent Andrzej Malicki** from **Poland**, men can join their families and leave Ukraine if they have 3+ children.

People in general are still welcoming and open up their hearts, their hands, and their houses to help the refugees wherever they can. **Milán Mutschler**, coordinator of the work with/for refugees of the UMC in **Hungary**, writes: “The storages are full of donations at the border and the NGOs are very active. Lots of ordinary people open their homes, go to the railway stations, apply for volunteering, donate food or other materials, take up refugees by car.”

Sarah Putman, coordinator of the work with/for refugees of the UMC in **Romania**, adds: “There is some balancing pressure for those Romanians needing to find accommodations in hotels or universities who cannot now, but even there it doesn’t change the attitude of wanting to welcome refugees.”

But there are also other emotions. **Ivana Procházková**, District Superintendent of the UMC in **Czechia** writes in a short meditation: “We have encountered many fears in the last few days. Fear for the lives of those we love, fear for our own lives, fear for the lives of innocent and defenseless old people, children, fear for the lives of soldiers drawn into war, we have experienced fear of the Zaporozhye nuclear plant explosion, Chernobyl, fear of the spread of war from Ukraine further west. We feared for the future of Europe, of our civilization, we feared what price for peace the Ukrainians would pay, what price we ourselves would pay.”

State / Regional / Municipal Authorities – Ecumenical Cooperation – NGOs

The political authorities in the countries directly or indirectly bordering to Ukraine are very active, and where they already know from the past – or where they are observing now – that the UMC is a truly reliable partner being able to make a helpful contribution towards dealing with the current situation, there is a willingness for a cooperation. The UMC in **Czechia**, for instance, is currently negotiating with the Municipal District Office in Plzeň about a cooperation in regard to the creation of a children’s group for Ukrainian children, which would be under the auspices of the United Methodist center for children located in this town.

The Diakonia of the UMC in **Czechia** is currently arranging and organizing accommodation for refugees in three facilities – two belonging to the UMC (Veselka near Vimperk / Poušť near Bechyně), one borrowed. The final intended total capacity of all three buildings will be about 100 beds. All of these facilities require staffing and cooperation with the local government: a doctor, an interpreter, and crisis intervention need to be available all the time.

There is also a helpful cooperation with local institutions such as a Food Bank in České Budějovice or the Masaryk High School in Plzeň, the latter offering Czech language courses for both Ukrainian children and their parents who want to stay in Czechia and not move further to the West.

Timotej Tagaj, coordinator for the work with/for refugees in **Slovakia**, however states: “If the situation would be left only for the State to deal with, the situation would be much worse, but thanks to the Churches and many organizations, it’s fine to this day.”

The cooperation of different Churches – Evangelical, Reformed, Lutheran, Roman-Catholic, Orthodox – is helpful, particularly when it comes to find accommodations at very short notice.

Bence Vigh, pastor of the UMC in **Hungary**, writes: “Now we can boldly ask each other. And the doors open.” And **Rares Calugar**, District Superintendent of the UMC in **Romania**, mentions the example of an elderly couple that, with the help of the UMC, found a permanent housing at an Orthodox monastery until they can return to their home country.

According to **Sarah Putman**, the UMC in **Romania** cooperates with other NGOs, for instance in order to find safe places for Ukrainian families who want to stay longer term – but also for those who want to stay temporarily only. They also cooperate with local area restaurants in order to provide the refugees with meals.

Milán Mutschler writes about the cooperation with several Churches and NGOs in **Hungary**, and he particularly mentions the Ecumenical Aid Service, by the support of which relief aid is brought to United Methodist and other congregations in the most western part of Ukraine, just on the other side of the border. There are also emergency relief points on the Hungarian side of the border, which are run in ecumenical cooperation.

According to **Timotej Tagaj**, the UMC in Slovakia is rather partner than leader, which mainly has to do with the size of the Church in this country. But they are willing to do what they can.

Again, the overall attitude of people is still welcoming and open. There are, however, also signs of negative implications of a “positive discrimination” (i.e. of treating Ukrainian refugees differently in a positive way). The Czech government, for instance, provides refugees with small amounts of money to help with beginnings, or it simplifies the way to obtain visa and work permit. This, on the one hand, allows a number of refugees to become self-sufficient. On the other hand, it may also contribute to the reality that **Jana Křížova**, pastor and coordinator of the work with/for refugees of the UMC in **Czechia**, describes as follows: that there are also people who start to complain.

Every Day is Different

Many people coming to Poland, Czechia, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania, and Bulgaria still want to continue their journey towards more Western countries. But **Sarah Putman** in **Romania** says that “now, many are staying longer term”. In those situations where the refugees are staying for a very short time only – one night, two nights, three nights – a considerable flexibility of the helpers is required, and the volunteers are working hard as far as preparing meals, doing the laundry, etc. is concerned. **Timotej Tagaj** in **Slovakia** mentions the challenge that people sometimes announce their arrival but then do not come – which also requires a certain flexibility.

Sarah Putman points to another reality: “There is some overwhelmedness on the part of laborers as we adjust to the new normal hours/schedule/needs/priority of helping our new friends while still maintaining other ministry programming.”

A newsletter from **Czechia** also mentions the importance of volunteers: “This work is only possible through the dedicated work of local church members and professionals who are willing to give up their free time for this cause.”

Not only every day is different, the people coming are different, as well. Some of them are beautifully dressed, some of them wear very old clothes, some of them come from Donbas, others from north-eastern parts of the country, others from more western regions. Some of them speak foreign languages, some of them only speak Ukrainian (the latter emphasizing the need to cooperate with people who can understand/speak this language and to start as quickly as possible with offering language courses for those who would like to stay in the country). What all of these people have in common is the longing for a safe place, security, peace, a hopeful future – and in many cases the fear for family members still living in Ukraine.

Activities of The United Methodist Church

Accommodation

- The UMC in Cluj-Napoca (**Romania**) hosts 10 families (20-30 people) at a time and helps connect those looking to stay longer term to long term housing options. Over the past 3 weeks, about 70 people have been hosted in Cluj-Napoca.
- The UMC in Sibiu (**Romania**) is hosting 28 orphans and 2 caretakers at the Evangelical church premises for the use of these refugees.
- The Social Center and the Children's Center in Shumen (**Bulgaria**) have prepared 15 places to accommodate refugees from Ukraine. Probably a children's center for Ukrainian children will be organized there, as District Superintendent **Daniel Topalski** writes.
- Other local churches in **Bulgaria** are also accommodating Ukrainian refugees or are preparing for doing so.
- In addition to the above-mentioned centers coordinated by Diakonia of the UMC in **Czechia**, local churches in Jihlava, Mikulov, Prague, Protivín, Třeboň, Plzeň, Litoměřice and individuals also accommodate refugees or help finding accommodations through personal or ecumenical networks.
- Currently, the two local churches in the **Hungarian** capital Budapest, the Budakeszi Methodist college and – assisted by the Baptist Aid Service – the UMC in Debrecen accommodate refugees and help finding accommodations through their networks.
- According to **Szarlota Kaminska**, coordinator for the work with/for refugees from Ukraine in **Poland**, a number of local churches have received refugees from Ukraine – either for a few nights only or for longer term: Koszalin, Chodzież, Poznań, Warsaw, Katowice, Przemyśl, Bielsko-Biała/Wapiennica, Tarnów, Kielce, Stare Juchy, Ełk, and Puławy.
- In **Slovakia**, refugees were/are/will be accommodated in church buildings, in a private cottage for 15 people, and in private homes of church members in Bratislava, Michalovce, Sered', Partizanske, Trnava, and Pezinok.

Meals / Food

- Where refugees are accommodated, they also receive meals from the local churches and/or from the church members.
- Near Budapest-Obuda UMC in **Hungary**, there is a school, which offers leftover food for refugees – so, a warm meal can be prepared at Budapest-Obuda UMC on every workday. These meals are offered to those refugees living in the guest-rooms of the church building but also to refugees that have been accommodated in private homes.
- In cooperation with a missionary serving in the east of the country, Debrecen UMC in **Hungary** can offer warm food for refugees.
- The Hungarian Methodists also bring food to emergency relief points at the border.

Clothes

- Since many refugees only come with little personal belongings, they are given clothes and shoes according to their needs. These clothes/shoes are either purchased on the spot or they are donated by local church members and their friends.
- So far, the local churches in Poland, Czechia, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania, and Bulgaria have been reluctant to receive trucks with second-hand clothes and shoes from Western Europe as long as everything can be bought in the respective countries or is donated by local people with loving hearts. (The situation in Ukraine, however, is different as there are lots of goods that are no longer easily available everywhere. Therefore, it really makes sense to bring relief goods into the country.)

Transports into Ukraine

- Members of Russian-speaking UMC in Prague (**Czechia**) have brought relief supplies (food, hygiene items, etc.) to Ukraine twice and are planning to continue doing so.
- There are longstanding relationships between Methodists in East **Poland**, East **Slovakia**, and East **Hungary** – these are now used to bring material support into Ukraine (or at least to the border, from where the relief supplies are taken over by Ukrainian helpers).
- The UMC in **Romania** sent two shipments of relief supplies (insulin, food, mattresses/blankets/pillows/sheets, baby supplies such as diapers, wipes, creams, etc.) to the UMC in Khust (Ukraine) and plans to continue doing so at least twice per month.
- Currently, they are also planning to send a delivery to a relief compound so that the goods can be distributed as needed (medications, surgical supplies, protective equipment).
- A local church in the eastern part of **Slovakia** provided food packages for Ukraine; they were taken to Ukraine by a brother as he was bringing medical stuff to the country.

Other Activities

- The UMC in **Romania** had a special event on the International Women's Day.
- There have been bi-lingual worship services in **Romania**.
- A Ukrainian UMC pastor and some members came as a group to Puławy (**Poland**) and stay with people of the local UMC. Another Ukrainian pastor is accommodated at the same place. This has to do with the fact that the Polish pastor of this local church speaks Ukrainian and already had contacts to Ukraine before.
- Members of Russian-speaking UMC in Prague (**Czechia**) help at the Prague Center for Refugees as interpreters. Refugees come to register, then they are entitled to obtain some financial help and are offered a shelter. They usually wait there for hours. Pastor Lev Shults from RUSUMC takes shifts serving as a chaplain there – it is an activity of the Ecumenical Council of Churches.
- Local churches have opened or are planning to open their church rooms to serve as places where mothers and children can stay during the day (e.g. Protivín/**Czechia**, Plzeň/**Czechia**, Shumen/**Bulgaria**, or Varna/**Bulgaria**).
- In Protivín (**Czechia**), a retired teacher has taken over the teaching of mothers and children.
- Local language courses will also be offered in **Bulgaria**.
- In Varna (**Bulgaria**), members of the church participate as volunteers in the Crisis Center in the city.
- The UMC in **Bulgaria** provides aid for medicine and other medical supplies for children with disabilities staying in Varna hotels.
- Pastor Nerses Ketikian has been very active in coordinating work with Armenian refugees from Ukraine, both in **Bulgaria** and in other Eastern European countries. As a result, the Armenian UMC in Varna has been filled with Armenian refugees from Ukraine.
- The UMC in **Slovakia** offers help to refugees who do not need an overnight accommodation but only want to travel across the country in order to reach Germany or Italy.
- In Bratislava (**Slovakia**), space is offered where an organization working with refugees can store durable food, clothes, hygienic articles, etc.

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based on reports from BG, CZ, HU, PL, RO, and SK