



Activities of The United Methodist Church in the Central Conference of Central and Southern Europe with/for Refugees from Ukraine *Summary of April 21, 2022*



Developments of the past days

Society

Jessica Morris-Ivanova, Methodist pastor in Shumen, **Bulgaria**, had mentioned racism issues last week already. **László Khaled**, superintendent of the UMC in **Hungary**, and **Jana Křížova**, pastor and coordinator of the work with refugees in **Czechia**, are also aware of racism, envy, and hatred. Some politicians try to take advantage of these feelings. However, these negative expressions are considered a minority position, and the majority of the population is still open, welcoming and willing to help. This is, for instance, also true for **Poland**, according to **Szarlota Kaminska**, coordinator of the work with refugees.

Local churches

Jana Křížova from **Czechia** compared the current situation to people who fall in love. "After a time of first enthusiasm, a steadier relationship needs to be developed, with a more long-term perspective." According to her, this is somehow true for the attitude towards refugees from Ukraine, as well.

László Khaled from **Hungary** shared his observation of a certain tiredness in churches that have been very active in the first weeks and that have accommodated dozens of people week by week.

Refugees returning to Ukraine

The coordinators of the work with and for refugees from Ukraine are aware that there is a considerable number of people rather returning to their home country than trying to find a safe haven somewhere further in the west. There are, however, areas in Ukraine, particularly in the eastern and south-eastern parts of the country, where a return is beyond imagination. One specific reason for returning now might be the reality that, according to the Orthodox calendar, the current week is the Holy Week and that some people want to celebrate Eastern on April 24 at home. This is also a reason why the coordinators do not consider it a matter beyond imagination that some of these people will leave Ukraine again in the upcoming time.

"Regular" church work and ministries with/for Ukrainian refugees

Answering the question regarding the connection between "regular" church work and ministries with/for Ukrainian refugees, **Jana Křížova** from **Czechia** said: "When people are accommodated in church facilities, the message is clear: 'We are church.' But the additional statement is equally clear: 'We welcome you whether you are Christian or not.'" **László Khaled** from **Hungary** echoed: "From the very beginning, the aim was to help everybody in need – regardless of the religious background." None of those coordinators recently attending a ZOOM meeting consider the refugees as "mission targets". **Jana Křížova** is rather strongly convinced that the difficult and painful situation the refugees are in, must not be misused. "It is very easy to manipulate people in distress; therefore, refugees must not be pushed to any decision regarding their faith", she said.

This does, however, not mean that refugees would not join activities of local churches of the UMC. To the contrary. **László Khaled** from **Hungary** told the story of one Ukrainian family that had just arrived for worship. "The people of the congregation asked them what they could provide their guests with – food, clothes, shoes, and so on. But the response of these Ukrainian people was: 'We don't need anything. We just need a worship service.'"

According to **Jana Křížova** in **Czechia**, refugees in Prague who want to participate in a worship service are usually pointed to the Russian-speaking UMC in Prague (where about 80% of the congregants have Ukrainian roots). According to a newsletter of the UMC in **Czechia**, Ukrainian refugees in other parts of the country also participated in worship services, and the children visited the Royal Rangers and youth club meetings.

In the various countries directly or indirectly neighboring to Ukraine, there are increasingly bi-lingual activities: worship services (where some hymns and prayers, for instance, are in Ukrainian language), Bible studies and other church activities, as it is the case in Puławy, Kielce, Chodzież and other places in **Poland**, as **Szarlota Kaminska** shared.

Sarah Putman, coordinator of the ministries with Ukrainian refugees in **Romania**, wrote that there are five families with children – a total of 16 to 20 people – who are regularly attending the Sunday morning services in Cluj-Napoca. She said: "They have started to read Scripture passages in Ukrainian so that those in attendance can hear the Word in their heart language."

László Khaled from **Hungary** reported about his experiences: "Some of the refugees participate in church activities, others do not." As far as languages are concerned, there is a specific situation in **Hungary**, he said: "Hungarian-speaking people who fled from Transcarpathia (*located in the very west of Ukraine*) to Hungary mostly stay in our country and do not move on. There are three local churches of the UMC in which some of these Hungarian-speaking refugees attend the worship services."

Szarlota Kaminska from **Poland** shared the experience of a very special cooperation between Ukrainian refugees and the work of the respective local church: "Ukrainian refugees have in the past weeks also helped to prepare transports of humanitarian aid to Ukraine, and they could thus contribute to the relief activities of their host churches themselves."

In some places, activities specifically for Ukrainian people are developed and implemented: language courses, for instance, in **Czechia**, **Bulgaria**, and **Poland**. Or a meeting place for Ukrainian children and their mothers in Protivín (**Czechia**). Or neurographic art therapy in a school in Dobrich (**Bulgaria**). Or a social center for refugees with a daily attendance of 20+ people in Shumen (**Bulgaria**). However, in **Romania**, for instance, the predominant approach is to not primarily build up separate Ukrainian communities but to invite the new Ukrainian «friends» to become part of a sustainable, diverse community. Superintendent **Rares Calugar** said that they would not aim to establish support groups for Ukrainians only – rather then, all activities for children, youth, women, etc. are open to all, regardless of their nationality. **Sarah Putman** from **Romania** even pointed to a very specific experience in this regard: They welcomed a woman from Ukraine who is battling cancer to stay at the community center in Cluj-Napoca longer term and connected her with a church member and the work her non-profit organization does to help provide for Romanians going through cancer treatment. The Ukrainian woman will thus not only receive the help she needs but will also be part of a sustaining fellowship.

Challenges, joys and an overall aim

Karel Nyerges, director of Diakonia UMC in **Czechia**, wrote in a newsletter that currently, 51 people are accommodated in the three United Methodist refugee facilities that were made available for this purpose. He described one of his learning experiences: "If our aid is to be truly effective, just having a roof over their heads is not enough. There needs to be a manager or team

of people who take care of the important administrative and social issues and also serve as a fixed point of connection between the residents and our society." He is grateful that some of the children already attend school and some of the parents even have jobs. However, "getting work for the people housed in a low employment area is a real challenge, and so, finding work is now the current issue that we are most concerned about." According to him, the aim of all their work is to find jobs and housing for people from Ukraine and to provide them with the opportunity to communicate with a psychologist or other trauma specialist so that they can then live their lives without support of Diakonia UMC.

An encouraging story

Julia, one of the first women to be admitted to the Methodist facility in Horní Počernice in Prague (**Czechia**), fled from the wider Kyiv area. A month ago, the young woman had arrived with her one-year-old daughter and eight-year-old son, accompanied by some other family members. Her husband had stayed in Ukraine to defend the country's capital. Julia, who had run a hairdressing salon at home and also offered hand and foot care, cannot be idle. And so, it was no surprise that after only a few days she began to cut the hair of relatives and friends of her hosts. And a few days ago, she asked for a piece of land to plant vegetables and herbs together with other women of the group.

May not only the seeds of this bed grow and flourish, but also the seeds of comfort, encouragement, hope and life that Methodists are sowing in the hearts of people from Ukraine in these difficult days.

April 21, 2022 / Urs Schweizer
based on reports from BG, CZ, HU, PL, and RO