

**POLAND |
SELECTED LOCATIONS OF
CENTRAL POLAND**

Protection Monitoring Analysis

December 2023



DRC Poland would like to thank all persons who dedicated their time to share information and discuss their perspectives and experiences during the protection monitoring.

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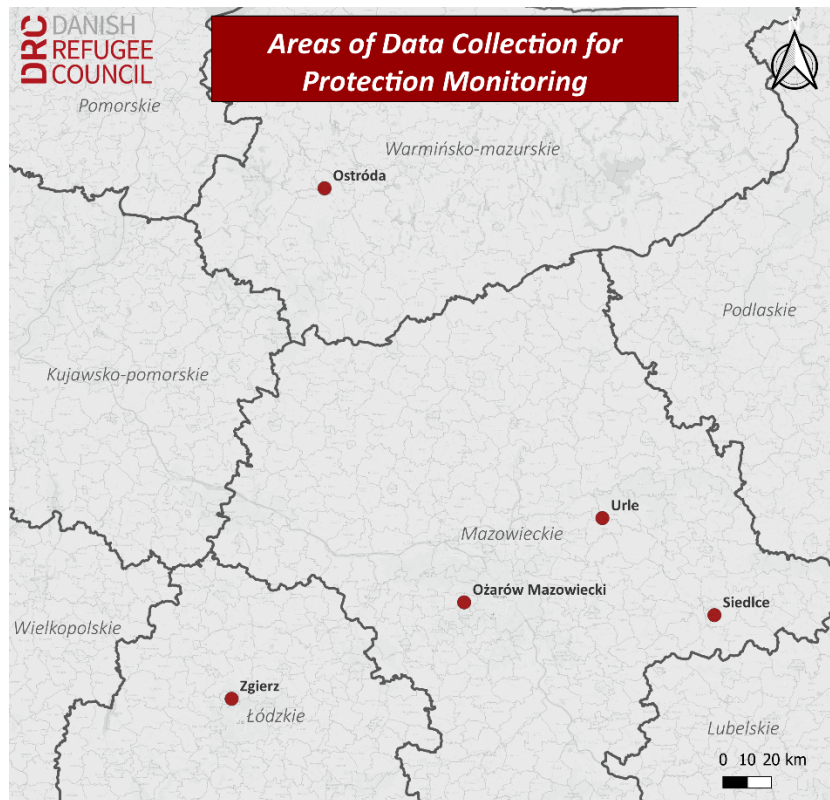
DRC Polska pragnie podziękować wszystkim osobom, które poświęciły swój czas na rozmowę i podzielenie się swoimi doświadczeniem i perspektywami w ramach prowadzonego monitoringu.

DRC Польша благодарит всех, кто посвятил свое время обмену информацией и обсуждению своих взглядов и опыта в процессе мониторинга по вопросам защиты.

INTRODUCTION

This brief provides an overview of the key challenges faced by the population displaced due to the ongoing armed conflict in Ukraine, now residing in smaller urban centres in central Poland. To complement existing research conducted by other humanitarian actors, this document focuses on topics related to access to adequate, safe accommodation, employment, documentation and administrative procedures, and social cohesion. Throughout the document, these topics will be referred to as ‘protection risks’, which include the risk of labour exploitation, lack of access to adequate housing and security of tenure, barriers in access to documentation and administrative procedures, as well as hate speech, harassment and intercommunal conflicts. These issues are essential in understanding the obstacles to self-reliance, meeting basic needs, and integration. They are equally important in shaping a humanitarian and durable solutions response that is adequate to the needs of the affected population and considerate of the existing services and support systems.

This report outlines insights gathered during the first round of data collection from the Danish Refugee Council protection monitoring, conducted in November and December 2023. The data collection involved collaboration with the population displaced due to the Russian-led armed conflict in Ukraine, and with service providers from the public and non-governmental sectors. Overall, 48 respondents from the affected population and 9 respondents from service providers were interviewed in five cities: Siedlce, Zgierz, Urle, Ożarów Mazowiecki, Ostróda in both collective accommodation sites and NGO-run community centres.



The main objective in carrying out protection monitoring is to examine the risks to accessing rights, safety and well-being that the displaced men, women, boys, and girls currently face. An evidence-based approach guides the development of targeted protection programmes to address the needs of displacement-affected communities.

The monitoring was conducted at community-level, gathering data on community perspectives and understanding of protection risks while not documenting individual incidents. Although DRC triangulated the collected data, the objective of protection monitoring was not to verify the situations described during protection monitoring. Referrals to specialized services were provided by protection monitoring teams when needed.

It is crucial to acknowledge limitations in the data collection. The selection of interviewees, while indicative, may not definitively represent the diverse experiences of the affected population. Reliance on KIIs and FGDs at the community level introduces potential biases, and the temporal scope between November and December 2023 may not fully capture evolving protection challenges. The findings do not speak of the prevalence and magnitude of certain risks (i.e. the number or ratio of people affected) but aim to highlight the characteristics and dynamics of selected protection risks.

Despite these constraints, the collected data provides evidence for targeted interventions, underscoring the importance of regular monitoring of the evolution of protection risks and needs, and adaptability in the required approach to both individual and community-based support mechanisms.

The findings are not dismissing the substantial support provided by either the Polish government at country and local level and the civil society to Ukrainian refugees. It aims to highlight areas of evolving risks to the rights and well-being of refugees, which require urgent joint action.

PROTECTION RISKS

Risk: Labor exploitation and unfair treatment in the labor market

Labor exploitation denotes work situations that deviate significantly from standard working conditions as defined by legislation or other binding legal regulations, concerning in particular remuneration, working hours, leave entitlements, health and safety standards, and decent treatment.¹

Protection monitoring findings indicated that labor exploitation is a substantial risk faced by Ukrainian refugees regardless of age and gender and the location they currently reside in. The awareness of the risk is widespread – even respondents who had not experienced it directly themselves could recall multiple situations affecting their friends, family or neighbors.

¹ 1. rep., Severe Labour Exploitation: Workers Moving within or into the European Union (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2015), https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra-2015-severe-labour-exploitation_en.pdf.

According to key informants, the principal form in which labor exploitation takes is the extension of working hours substantially beyond those legally allowed and stipulated in the contract, if such was signed at all.

The biggest problem is working hours. Employers require Ukrainians to work even 12 hours a day, 6 days a week, even if the contract stipulates that they work 8 hours a day for 5 days. Otherwise, they don't hire.²

In smaller towns, especially if not satellites to large urban centers, employment options are limited available jobs are usually limited to physical work. Lack of advanced Polish language skills and non-recognition of some Ukrainian professional certifications is another factor limiting the choices of refugees and may exclude elderly persons or persons with disabilities from the local labor market. Those who do not have close family members in Poland are forced to rely on humanitarian assistance or social safety nets. Social security payments from Ukraine are very limited in value, those from Poland often difficult to obtain.

It is difficult for people with disabilities to find a job, and it is difficult for me, a mother with a child with a disability, because you need time for the child, go to rehabilitation, etc. It would be good if you could work in the morning, then take care of the child, and then work again in the evening. But they said that there were no such jobs.³

A last resort for many people who struggle to find work are commercial employment agencies. These have a reputation of applying untransparent practices, offering jobs with terms which are subsequently not met and are generally very poorly paid – this being in addition to the high commission deducted from the salary.

Many key informants described the work conditions as extremely strenuous, with extended working hours and instances when protective equipment was not provided. Oftentimes, workers do not receive the full agreed payment and are forced to work overtime for free or receive wages late. Some key respondents also described having experienced verbal humiliation and harassment in their work environment, including that of a sexual nature. Respondents also recalled cases where people lost their job due to the necessity to take time off in situations of family emergencies or illness. One key informant summarized the working conditions in Poland in the following way:

It seems like Poles believe that Ukrainians are immortal, that they will withstand everything.⁴

The exploitation in the labor market is driven by the widespread practice of either engaging workers without a formal contract or based on a civil contract (*umowa zlecenie*) which does not provide sick leave or, annual leave and can be terminated without any grounds or notice period. While according to key informants it is relatively easy to find a job, it is very challenging to find an employer who will offer a formal employment contract. Lack of formalized employment makes it extremely difficult to pursue legal recourse in case of non-payment, under-payment or other rights' violations. It also deprives people of access to social insurance in case of any work-related accidents. Respondents noted that even if they receive a contract, it will usually include loopholes or unfavorable provisions which create room for exploitative

² Key Informant Interview with a member of the affected population. 22.11.2023

³ Key Informant Interview with a member of the affected population. 12.12.2023

⁴ Key Informant Interview with a member of the affected population. 01.12.2023

practice. Limited understanding of the Polish legal frameworks and lack of advanced Polish language skills also increases the exposure to these risks as people are unable to verify if the provisions of the contract match legal requirements. Language skills were mentioned as the key protective factor to prevent or mitigate the risk of labour exploitation, yet many people find it impossible to take up language classes while working long hours in such challenging conditions.

It all comes down to language. If you know the language, you know the law, and you are immediately treated better.⁵

On the other hand, many interviewees said that the level of awareness of what constitutes an exploitative practice or breach of the labor law is high among Ukrainians in Poland. Due to the necessity of generating income, particularly dire among single-headed households, in a reality with continuously increasing costs of living and diminishing humanitarian assistance people find themselves forced to accept such conditions.

We agree to everything: less pay and more hours.⁶

The economic hardship also contributes to youth occasionally engaging in income generating activities at the expense of school attendance. While many key informants mentioned that they are motivated by the need to have pocket-money for personal expenses several clearly stated that for some households it is a necessity to afford basic needs. The risk of extensive youth labour is substantial for households with only one source of income, which have to cover accommodation costs, food, medicine and clothing.

Single-parent families usually live here, where there is only a mother and no father. Therefore, when only one mother works and cannot fully provide the child with everything necessary, the child understands this and wants to work.⁷

Even young children are reportedly well-aware of financial struggles in the households and according to key informants it impacts on their sense of security and creates internal pressure on them to support their family. Legally in Poland, youth can work part time from the age of 16. The prevalence of informal labour increases the risk of younger teenagers being engaged in work.

Ensuring proper care for children is a frequent challenge for single headed households, especially when the parent – usually a woman – must work long shifts. While many respondents living in collective sites mentioned that there are community care arrangements in place with caregivers providing oversight on a rotating basis or elderly residents caring for children, this is not an option available to all. Also, at times it may lead to unintended consequences and further risks.

In the collective accommodation site, parents of younger children often pay other people's older children to look after them. And these children, instead of going to a school where they feel like strangers, prefer to stay and earn money. It happens that some of them fail a year because of this.⁸

⁵ Key Informant Interview with a member of the affected population. 01.12.2023

⁶ Key Informant Interview with a member of the affected population. 29.11.2023

⁷ Key Informant Interview with a member of the affected population. 29.11.2023

⁸ Key Informant Interview with a member of the affected population. 22.11.2023

For some single caregivers the inability to find adequate care giving options creates an insurmountable barrier to finding work while others may resort to hazardous strategies.

Sometimes children roam around on the streets. Or some are even sent to ride on a bus back and forth.⁹

According to key informants, adult men are exposed to exploitation through being forced to perform very strenuous physical work whereas, single women are often seen as susceptible to harassment, mistreatment, and are perceived as being less likely to challenge exploitative treatment such as poor compensation or even lack thereof.

While some key informants indicated that there is a frequent disparity in salaries between Polish and Ukrainian workers (to the disadvantage of the latter) and discriminatory treatment others mentioned that in factories Poles and Ukrainians are treated equally as bad and that exploitative conditions exists in both Polish and Ukrainian-managed businesses.

At one of the local factories, the manager is Ukrainian, and the working conditions there are undoubtedly the worst.¹⁰

Key informants were rather pessimistic about the capacities to address the risk of labor exploitation due to systemic drivers – it being a widespread phenomenon, the limited profile of jobs available (and limited alternatives), increasing economic needs and the complicity with or acceptance of many stakeholders of the situation – the private sector, public administration, employers and refugees themselves.

There should be a reaction, but I don't know that anyone has ever been helped. People went to different authorities when they were not paid, I don't know where, but no one helped them. They won't go next time. ¹¹

The support of public employment offices is rated extremely negatively with regard to supporting refugees finding jobs or addressing issues of labor exploitation.

I went to the Labor Office. And nothing. They tell me there that we Ukrainians are lazy, we don't learn the language. But they don't offer us a job and tell us to look for it ourselves.¹²

Recalled cases of self-advocacy efforts or attempts to challenge labor exploitations by employees themselves were unsuccessful and met with intimidation.

[...] the strike was suppressed, and the unofficial workers' union was dissolved. All participants were threatened with dismissal for demanding better working conditions.¹³

In smaller towns where employment options are very limited people fear reporting issues of exploitation or raising complaints to employers. They explain:

⁹ Key Informant Interview with a service provider. 01.12.2023

¹⁰ Key Informant Interview with a member of the affected population. 01.12.2023

¹¹ Key Informant Interview with a member of the affected population. 12.12.2023

¹² Key Informant Interview with a member of the affected population. 01.12.2023

¹³ Key Informant Interview with a member of the affected population. 01.12.2023

In a small town, people are afraid of word of mouth and a 'shadow ban' from other jobs if they fight for their rights.¹⁴

The most frequently used coping strategy is thus to look for another job, although even in such cases unscrupulous employers may intimidate people.

People who want to quit their jobs are forced to bring "dismissal fees" or threatened with deportation. Those who do not know their rights are afraid and stay.¹⁵

Risk: Lack of Tenure Security and Access to Adequate Housing

Security of tenure is understood as a set of relationships with respect to housing and land, established through statutory or customary law or informal or hybrid arrangements, which enables one to live in one's home in security, peace and dignity. It is an integral part of the right to adequate housing and a necessary ingredient for the enjoyment of many other civil, cultural, economic, political and social rights.¹⁶

In the locations covered by this protection monitoring, as in other locations in Poland, Ukrainian refugees can seek accommodation in the commercial rental market, in collective accommodation sites and can be hosted through the government program known as "40+"¹⁷.

Opinions about the severity of the risk of loss of access to housing overall depending on the type of accommodation varied. While several key informants residing in collective sites have had experienced site relocations or had to change their accommodation, most did not report any concerns related to the process. Some of them discussed the sense of uncertainty shared by residents in light of diminishing assistance and limited information about the future of the temporary protection in Poland and the substantial negative impact it has on people's emotional well-being. Such concerns were particularly expressed by those whose houses were destroyed or who lived in the occupied territories. It is also indicative that returning to Ukraine is often considered a main coping strategy towards the risk of eviction, which was also confirmed by key informants.

They go back. They have no choice.¹⁸

¹⁴ Key Informant Interview with a member of the affected population. 01.12.2023

¹⁵ Key Informant Interview with a member of the affected population. 22.11.2023

¹⁶ *Guiding principles on security of tenure for the urban poor* issued by the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Right to Adequate Housing available at <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Issues/Housing/Guide-SecurityTenureGuidelinesEN.pdf>

¹⁷ For more details see: <https://ukraina.interwencjaprawna.pl/how-to-receive-the-pln-40-benefit-for-refugee-accommodation/>

¹⁸ Key Informant Interview with a member of the affected population. 29.11.2023

The majority of key informants felt that the risk of losing accommodation was higher in the commercial market than in collective accommodation sites. Some, however, voiced a sense of dependency on site managers and related power imbalance.

A key barrier to accessing housing through the commercial rental market are the very high prices. A single source of income is insufficient to cover both rent and the costs of basic needs. Some people have the ability to pool resources with friends and rent an apartment for multiple families, others live with extended family members. This leaves single elderly people who cannot rely on their adult children, as particularly vulnerable.

We will be evicted if we have nothing to pay with and no way to earn money. My pension is enough for 1/4 of the rent. I don't know what would have happened to me if I hadn't come here with my whole family.¹⁹

According to some key informants, a written contract offers little protection from unfair actions of a landlord such as increasing the rent or terminating the contract without proper notice. Inability to cover rent usually results in a risk of being evicted which creates high pressure to work even if conditions are exploitative.

I have a small pension, I live at the expense of my children, so I could not live on my own. Now no one is helping me, Poland doesn't pay me anything. So, we are dependent on the price of the rent and can lose our accommodation if we don't have enough money.²⁰

A recurring theme throughout the majority of interviews was the concern over the refugees' proper behavior, playing the role of a polite, unobtrusive, and most importantly grateful guest and condemnation for those who do not adhere to housekeeping rules. This applies also to situations which are very complex. Key informants recalled situations of eviction of residents who struggled with substance abuse and emotional self-regulation but also those who failed to provide care for their children due to the necessity to work. While such evictions were considered as acceptable measures it was unclear what support was provided to those persons to prevent homelessness and its associated risks or to support them with mental health and psychosocial support interventions. Some of the key informants however expressed the exhaustion with the necessity to be constantly mindful about one's behavior:

It is terrible to be a "poor relative". I don't sleep on my bed, I eat from a plate that is not mine. We had a normal life and now I can't even buy my own underwear.²¹

The above quote illustrates the emotional toll the adoption of such a protective strategy has on refugees. Similar levels of self-awareness and necessity to control one's behavior were not exhibited at such scale in other locations covered by the protection monitoring – in Dolnośląskie and Pomorskie voivodships.

Many respondents mentioned that those who struggle to find and maintain accommodation in the commercial market decide to return to Ukraine. For others this is the most feared last resort option. The uncertainty generates a lot of emotional distress. The fear of negative consequences in case of complaints

¹⁹ Key Informant Interview with a member of the affected population. 29.11.2023

²⁰ Key Informant Interview with a member of the affected population. 29.11.2023

²¹ Key Informant Interview with a member of the affected population. 01.12.2023

also hinders some people from seeking justice or standing up against unfair practice. One of the key informants described the impact of the risk of eviction in the following way:

These are physical consequences. A person cannot be homeless here. Therefore, a person must return to where he came from. We try to keep quiet in general so that we are not evicted.²²

Key informants mentioned cases of fraud related to the 40+ hosting arrangements, where landlords received the allowance yet still charge refugees for staying in their homes. Some cases of forced labor on behalf of the landlord were mentioned. Most often when the limit of the duration of the support is reached landlords ask people to leave, yet there is very limited support to help people find alternative housing. Thus, some move to collective accommodation sites. On the other hand, key informants also shared many positive stories of support provided by the hosts.

The people we lived with helped us a lot. They accepted us, we are friends with them now, although we no longer live with them. They helped us find a place to live. That way, if we had other problems, we could always ask them to help us.²³

In comparison to other locations covered by protection monitoring the risks to adequate housing seemed less acute and prevalent. Still, like in Dolnośląskie and Pomorskie there is a strong sense of uncertainty about future conditions of refugees' stay in Poland. Compounded with the pressure to have any source of income, it has a substantial impact on the psychological well-being of refugees.

Today we have a place to live, but what will happen tomorrow? Anxiety reigns. People focus on work and hobbies, so they don't have to think about it.²⁴

Risk: Barriers in Access to Documentation and Administrative Procedures

Key informants described the barriers related to accessing documents and administrative procedures in regard to documents issued both by Polish and Ukrainian authorities. While receiving PESEL-UKR was considered to be very simple, substantial challenges were faced by those whose PESEL (ergo temporary protection) was suspended. In some cases, it was the result of a clerical error. The procedure of PESEL reactivation is complex and lengthy. In the perception of some, the public administration staff compounded bureaucratic impediments throughout this process. This has very serious consequences for the daily life of people – resulting in an inability to access health services, loss of childcare allowances or other social benefits.

There are also increasing challenges for people who wish to obtain a residency permit in Poland. Such a permit provides them with more predictability than the temporary protection. The last-minute decisions on the legal framework regulating the temporary protection in Poland and poor communication on any

²² Key Informant Interview with a member of the affected population. 29.11.2023

²³ Key Informant Interview with a member of the affected population. 29.11.2023

²⁴ Key Informant Interview with a member of the affected population. 29.11.2023

planned changes, creates a lot of distress for Ukrainian refugees. People therefore look for alternative pathways to legalizing their stay which would give them more certainty in the mid-term perspective. The process of receiving a decision on the residency request is considered very long and complex. Reportedly, some young Ukrainian women resort to seeking romantic relations with Polish men with the intent that marriage would guarantee them access to a residency permit. This opens substantial space for exploitation and gender-based violence.

Among the most challenging documents to obtain is the Polish disability certificate. The Ukrainian equivalent is not recognized in Poland thus a Polish certificate is necessary to gain access to specialized support and relevant social safety nets for persons with disability. The process however is very time and resource consuming as it requires certified translation of medical records, which many people struggle to afford.

The main barriers in terms of accessing administrative procedures are limited language skills and the lack of availability of intercultural facilitators at public offices. From the perspective of some key informants the attitude of public servants towards assisting refugees has also been changing, with instances of denial of service due to alleged language barriers. An increase in barriers to accessing health services, especially specialized doctors, even with an official referral, was noticed. Oftentimes, the excuse of not understanding the person when they attempt to speak Polish was provided. Others stressed that the staff of the Social Insurance Office or social welfare department were extremely helpful. This variance in response was strongly influenced by the specific location of residence.

No matter where I go, whether it's to [the social welfare department] or to the commune office, or just asking someone on the street, there is always understanding and help from the Poles. I communicate with them even without knowledge of the Polish language.²⁵

Most key informants, however, agreed that there are frequent challenges with understanding procedures among the public administration and that available information is contradictive and information about available services is outdated.

There is terrible information chaos. If we find out about some programs and services, it turns out that they ended a long time ago.²⁶

Access to Ukrainian documents heavily depends on the area of origin of the refugee. According to key informants many people from Western Ukraine travel back to Ukraine to obtain necessary documents or arrange their shipment, while this is not an available option for those from the Eastern part of the country.

You can easily send anything from the west of Ukraine. From the East - practically nothing.²⁷

For people living far away from Warsaw or Gdańsk the access to the Ukrainian consulate is curtailed by the distance and travel costs. People with low digital literacy who do not have support networks struggle with processing requests through digital channels. The support of NGO staff was highly appreciated.

²⁵ Key Informant Interview with a member of the affected population. 29.11.2023

²⁶ Key Informant Interview with a member of the affected population. 29.11.2023

²⁷ Key Informant Interview with a member of the affected population. 29.11.2023

Risk: Hate Speech, Harassment and Risk of Intercommunal Conflicts

Hate speech is defined as speech which incites national, ethnic, racial, religious and/or sexual orientation and gender identity, health-based discrimination, hostility or violence. Harassment refers to words or behavior that threatens, intimidates, or demeans a person. Harassment is unwanted, uninvited, and unwelcome and causes nuisance, alarm, or substantial emotional distress without any legitimate purpose.

In the monitored locations, it was challenging to discuss the experience of inter and intra community tensions with key informants. In comparison to the findings from Pomorskie and Dolnośląskie voivodships the intracommunity conflicts among Ukrainians and related instances of hate speech, harassment and discrimination – including in access to humanitarian assistance came out more prominently.

There are differences between Ukrainians from Western and Eastern Ukraine. There is enmity.²⁸

We communicate better with the Poles here than with the Ukrainians.²⁹

The main conflict lines among refugees from Ukraine are related to the area of origin and also at times manifest themselves in disputes over the use of the Russian language. Some key informants questioned openly the community induced pressure to stop speaking Russian – a language they used throughout their whole lives.

People from Eastern Ukraine shared resentments on the severity of the risks and humanitarian needs in Western Ukraine and questioned the push and pull factors for seeking international protection by different groups of Ukrainians. This sentiment is particularly strong among people who experienced occupation and who lost their houses and belongings as a result of the Russia-led invasion. Witnessing discussions about plans to travel to Ukraine, visiting friends and family may trigger strong emotional reactions.

For example, when someone asks me if I'm going home for Christmas. Dude, I don't even know if my house is still standing.³⁰

The different experiences related to the armed conflict in Ukraine and their impact on mental health can result in grief, guilt, frustration, and/or envy which can in turn fuel community conflicts. It highlights the high needs for continued mental health and psychosocial support to help people process their traumatic experiences. Some key informants also indicated that Ukrainians from the East are perceived by some Ukrainians from the West as those bearing partial responsibility for the Russian invasion. They recalled cases when such attitude resulted in denial of assistance to people from the East.

²⁸ Key Informant Interview with a member of the affected population. 01.12.2023

²⁹ Key Informant Interview with a member of the affected population. 24.11.2023

³⁰ Key informant interview with a member of the affected population. 29.11.2023

*I watched when Ukrainians injured and insulted people from Eastern Ukraine. [...] I was shocked. [...] This is how women from Western Ukraine insulted women from Donbas. It's scary, such direct hatred.*³¹

The intracommunity conflicts are fueled also by a subjective sense of unfairness related to accessing assistance, especially financial support and accusations about the misuse or diversion of assistance by those whose situation is perceived to be less severe.

*People from Western Ukraine come to Poland, pick up humanitarian aid here, rent out their apartments in Lviv, and live here for free.*³²

Another issue which triggers open conflicts and hostilities among Ukrainian refugees is the presence of conscription-age Ukrainian men in Poland. Key informants remembered seeing or personally experiencing hostility aimed at adult men because of resentment that they hadn't stayed in Ukraine to join the military efforts. These attitudes tend to change once personal circumstances are explained. Yet, the very necessity for a man of conscription age to justify his stay in Poland with a serious family situation raises questions about the gender dimension of military service regulations and social expectations of different genders in a situation of armed conflict.

*[There is a] bad attitude towards Ukrainian men. Everyone says they should go back and fight.*³³

Conflict, hate speech and physical violence were also recalled when discussing relations between ethnic Ukrainian and Roma refugees, particularly those in large collective accommodation sites. Underlying prejudice, discrimination, and social tensions from Ukraine were frequently carried over into Poland, but site managers and service providers had little capacity to handle these dynamics, and there were few intercultural facilitators to assist. These circumstances, further compounded by challenging living conditions and emotional distress of forced displacement, led to instances of verbal aggression and physical violence on both sides.

Yet, instances of verbal and at times physical aggression between the host and refugee communities were also recalled, especially in the context of peer conflicts in schools. As in other locations, there is a sense that the situation has been deteriorating in the past months.

*Now it has intensified, I have the impression the longer this war lasts.*³⁴

Key informants recalled instances of verbal aggression, ethnicity-based hate speech in the public sphere coming from strangers – fellow passengers on the bus or passersby in a park. Language was mentioned repeatedly as a key factor – increasing the risk if it's Ukrainian or Russian or protective if it is Polish. To mitigate exposure to such situations people avoid speaking Ukrainian or Russian in public:

*In public transport, just in case, it is better not to speak Ukrainian. When someone calls, you reject the call and only call back when you're alone.*³⁵

³¹ Key informant interview with a member of the affected population. 01.12.2023

³² Key Informant Interview with a member of the affected population. 01.12.2023

³³ Key Informant Interview with a member of the affected population. 29.11.2023

³⁴ Key Informant Interview with a member of the service provider. 22.11.2023

³⁵ Key Informant Interview with a member of the affected population. 29.11.2023

Not speaking Polish increases the risk of facing discrimination when also approaching public services – primarily public administration and health services. According to key informants, in some cases it is used as an excuse to not serve Ukrainian refugees. Also, they are not limited to the denial of services but at times also take the form of substantial verbal abuse.

*The Poles put pressure on us if we don't speak Polish. They laugh at us if we don't know their language. In the authorities, in the administrations, we are also not accepted, if we do not communicate in Polish, they can even shout at us.*³⁶

*Even though I speak Polish at the ZUS they pretend not to understand what I'm saying.*³⁷

Also, discrimination in the labor and rental market was a widely recalled phenomenon. Intercommunal tensions are not limited to verbal abuse but at times also take the form of physical violence, destruction of property and abuse.

*If someone has a car with Ukrainian registration, it is better to keep it in a garage. Vandals often destroy them.*³⁸

*On one occasion, a bus driver dropped off a group of passengers at 8 p.m. in the cold for speaking Ukrainian. They were returning from a Polish language lesson.*³⁹

Some key informants drew attention to the specific gender dimension of intercommunal conflicts related to a stereotype of a Ukrainian woman and expectations of their behavior. This also exposes them to harassment including sexual harassment in interactions with some members of the host community. It can also contribute to the risk of entering into hazardous transactional relations described above.

*There is still a stereotype of a Ukrainian woman - beautiful, conservative, hardworking and always up for sexual relations.*⁴⁰

Some key informants pointed out that tensions among communities are driven by the perception of fairness related to access to services and assistance among refugees and host community and ways in which aid dependency exhibits itself when approaching service providers or charities. By some it is interpreted as entitlement.

*[...] the fault is a bit on the side of the Poles and on the side of the Ukrainians, because the Ukrainians got a little used to the help received from everywhere.*⁴¹

Physical violence was a frequent part of peer-conflicts among youth which often start at schools and later spill over outside of the school environment creating challenges for NGOs who try to work in support of social

³⁶ Key Informant Interview with a member of the affected population. 29.11.2023

³⁷ Key Informant Interview with a member of the affected population. 01.12.2023

³⁸ Key Informant Interview with a member of the affected population. 29.11.2023

³⁹ Key Informant Interview with a member of the affected population. 29.11.2023

⁴⁰ Key Informant Interview with a member of the affected population. 29.11.2023

⁴¹ Key Informant Interview with a service provider. 22.11.2023

cohesion, as reluctance to build relations increases on both sides. Key informants recalled some cases of serious physical harm experienced by Ukrainian teenagers, particularly boys perpetrated by Polish youth.

*Polish teenagers find fault with those who speak Ukrainian. There are assaults and beatings occurring. Because of this, Ukrainian teenagers are afraid to go everywhere alone, and always walk in groups.*⁴²

Although group formation serves as a protective measure, unresolved conflicts can quickly intensify and solidify the creation of ethnic-based groups, leading them to resort to violence to address rivalries.

Oftentimes, the forms of bullying are directly linked to the ongoing conflict in Ukraine, with manifestations of support to Russian or scaring children with sudden sounds resembling these of explosions.

*When children began to go to school, it was difficult for them because of the bad attitude towards them. Many of them are in Ukrainian schools online now, many returned to Ukraine because it was very difficult for children at school.*⁴³

Unfortunately, despite their role being crucial, oftentimes teachers do not know how to address such situations. On occasions, they contribute to the sense of oppression, for example by forbidding children to speak their mother tongue during school breaks. On the other hands some service providers mentioned challenges in engaging Ukrainian parents when schools raise educational problems of children. The language barrier, work exhaustion, emotional distress or cultural differences may be contributing to this.

Key informants recalled also a number of instances where the experience of bullying has led to school dropouts and growing concerns among Ukrainian parents to enroll their children into Polish schools. Bias-motivated violence at school contributes to children dropping out of the Polish education system, which has far-reaching consequences for the development and psychological well-being of children and youth.

Although it's the teenagers who are more exposed to peer-conflicts and bullying also young children are affected by the increase of intercommunal tensions, which has an adverse impact on their mental health:

*Young children suffer because they don't understand anything. They only see someone yelling at their mom, but they don't know what's going on, they don't know why.*⁴⁴

Limited knowledge of the rights and lack of Polish language skills becomes a barrier to reporting incidents of hate crimes. But during the protection monitoring it was noticed that some key informants were particularly reluctant to discuss the refugee-host community relations due to the internalized belief that they should not appear ungrateful for the assistance received – a similar attitude already noticed when discussing the issue of tenure insecurity. Key informants among service providers confirmed that there is strong pressure from the host community for Ukrainian refugees to adapt to the Polish culture and customs and perception that integration is a one – way effort.

⁴² Key Informant Interview with a member of the affected population. 01.12.2023

⁴³ Key Informant Interview with a member of the affected population. 01.12.2023

⁴⁴ Key Informant Interview with a member of the affected population. 01.12.2023

CONCLUSIONS

The prevalence of labor exploitation cases recalled underscores the importance of access to free legal aid which in smaller urban centres is very limited and often solely relies on non-governmental organizations. The experience of labour exploitation a sense of powerlessness to address it affects people's sense of dignity and trust in ability to access to justice in Poland. Combined with economic hardship it has a strong adverse impact on the mental wellbeing of the whole families including children. The identified characteristics of the risk of labour exploitation are consistent with those monitored by DRC in other voivodships which highlights the necessity for systemic solutions to mitigate the risks and address specific cases through confidential and safe reporting channels.

Monitoring and reporting mechanisms should also be established for people hosted with support of the government 40+ programme to mitigate risks of abuse and exploitation.

Uncertainty related to the legal status in Poland and scope of temporary protection in the future severely affects refugees psychological and emotional wellbeing and compounds barriers to establishing a life in Poland. Many people see the return to Ukraine as an ultimate coping strategy. Those whose lives and homes have been destroyed by the war return is not an option. With the increasing sense that the future in Poland is directly dependent on self-provided economic means, people are inclined to resort to hazardous options – acceptance of exploitative working conditions or abusive relations. With many collective sites across Poland closing, getting consolidated and/or relocated to other areas supporting self-reliance of those who face most barriers – persons with disabilities and single elderly persons - is crucial. What is however most important is to provide a predictable legal environment to refugees, create opportunities to include their perspectives on the necessary legal amendments and inform timely and transparently about upcoming changes.

The findings related to intercommunity tensions highlight the necessity to provide MHPSS services, develop strategies to deal with intercommunal conflicts especially in schools but also raise awareness about refugees' rights in Poland among both the refugee and host communities and create spaces for dialogue on the fears, challenges and opportunities related to the permanent transformation local communities have undergone since February 2022.

In relation to all protection risks the ability to speak Polish was mentioned as a crucial protective factor – whether to understand the content of contracts, navigate administrative procedures, stand up for one's rights or respond to an abusive situation and seek justice.



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