

Introduction

This book is one of the results of the Visegrad + project *Ukrainian refugees in Central Europe and the Balkans – lessons learned and policy recommendations* coordinated by the University of Opole, Poland. Its writing was possible thanks to the cooperation of a team of 14 academics led by the authors of the book, who altogether had been integrated within the Border and Regional Studies Network established within the Central European Exchange Programme for University Studies (CEEPUS). The point of departure for working on the book was the assumption that the massive influx of Ukrainian refugees should be analysed not only by focusing on the individual country's specific process, but it is also important to take a more holistic and comparative approach to the situation of Ukrainian refugees in Central Europe and the Balkans. We believed that as academics who are based in these countries, we should use our networks to study the situation of Ukrainian refugees in our countries and present a more synthetic, comparative picture.

Therefore, the book is a comparative analysis of 7 countries that experienced, in different forms and to different degrees, an influx of Ukrainian refugees after the full-scale Russian aggression on February 24, 2022. These are the four Visegrad countries, plus Romania, Montenegro and North Macedonia. The study covers the relevant developments till the end of 2023, so in round numbers – the first two years after the invasion. According to the UNHCR data, approximately two years after the aggression, there were the following numbers of refugees from Ukraine in these countries: the Czech Republic (381 400 as of 31.01.2024); Hungary (66 135 as of the 17.03.2024); Poland (956 635 as of 15.12.2023); Slovakia (117 265 as of 24.03.2024); Romania (77 250 as of 01.04.2024); Montenegro (65 105 as of 29.01.2024); North Macedonia (18 915 as of 22.02.2024). One clarification must be made at the very beginning, though, concerning the definition of a Ukrainian refugee. As we are using the data provided by the UNHCR, we follow the agency's definition of Ukrainian refugees. These are those who have fled Ukraine after February 24, 2022 and 'were granted refugee status, temporary asylum status, temporary protection, or statuses through similar national protection schemes, as well as those recorded in the country under other forms of stay (from 24 February

2022)' (UNHCR, 2023 June 14). So, the concept of Ukrainian refugees refers to those escaping the full scale invasion of Russia and covered by different forms of legal protection offered by receiving countries. For the sake of precision, it is worth adding that a gross majority of those who escaped to the EU territory were covered by the temporary protection – the legal instrument which was activated by the EU for the first time since its adoption in 2001.

The writing of the book was preceded by several steps which should be briefly described here as they compose an overall picture of the activities of the research team. In June and September 2023, there were two online sessions during which the authors presented and discussed theoretical and methodological foundations of the comparative analysis with the contributing researchers. Those sessions resulted in building a standardised analytical framework (see Annex) which was used later by each country team (two persons per country) to examine the situation in their own country separately. Next, between 18 and 20 October 2023, there was an international conference in Skopje, North Macedonia. During the conference, 7 preliminary country studies were presented by the country teams, which allowed us to draw a comparative picture of the refugee situation and ensured feedback from representatives of the non-academic sector. Finally, in the first half of 2024, the comparative analysis was prepared by the authors with the aim to describe similarities and differences in the studied cluster on the basis of individual country studies provided by the contributing researchers. Therefore, the findings and recommendations presented by the authors are products of a multi-step process that included an international team of researchers.

The main structure of the book is as follows. Chapter 1 presents briefly the theoretical and methodological foundations of the comparative analysis. Comparing 7 countries located in different settings with different experiences of the Ukrainian refugee situation posed a challenge from the very beginning. Thus, some framework for comparison was needed to standardise our work, and we wanted to embed it in the existing theories. Our goal was to demonstrate the complexity and interconnectedness of different dimensions of the refugee situation, but at the same time, it simplified its picture for the sake of comparison by reducing it to a few crucial dimensions to be compared. As for the next chapters, they are a reflection of the theory-based analytical framework guiding our comparison across several interconnected dimensions determining the Ukrainian refugees situation in the host countries: general characteristics of the immigration policy, the Ukrainian diaspora before and after 2022, political institutions' reaction and the host societies' reaction. The authors' intention was to grasp the main patterns of similarities between the countries included, balanced by articulating differences between each case or group of cases. Thus, when comparing, we constructed a more general picture which always brings a risk of losing details and peculiarity

for each country, but, whenever possible, we tried to provide a more country-focused description. As a result, sometimes we describe the selected phenomena only in one country, instead of the whole cluster, assuming that they should get a special country-specific attention. The task of comparing 7 countries with different geographic locations, demographics, histories, institutions and policies is always challenging and never perfectly workable. However, we believe that it was worth making this effort to give a more general context for understanding each country. We were motivated here by a simple but notable point made by Seymour Martin Lipset, who said that 'a person who knows only one country knows no countries' ('Seymour Martin Lipset...', 2006).