# The Invasion of Ukraine: Short- and Long- Term Considerations for Internally Displaced People (IDP) and Refugee Well-being[1]

## Background

Ukraine is a country of 44.1 million people in eastern Europe that gained its independence from the Soviet Union in 1991. In 2014, the Maidan Revolution deposed the pro-Russia president of Ukraine. In the same year, Russia annexed the Crimean Peninsula and initiated an invasion of eastern Ukraine leading to the internal displacement of 1.5 million Ukrainians (UNHCR, n.d.). On February 24, 2022, Russia launched an invasion of Ukraine, and Russian forces began destroying Ukrainian cities. In the first three months of the crisis, over 10 million people have been displaced, and the international community has brought attention to the war crimes committed by Russian forces and to the resulting humanitarian crisis. Thousands of Ukrainians are fleeing their homes each day, becoming internally displaced or seeking refuge in other countries. They are facing extreme hardships. At the same time, Ukrainians are coming together like never before united in their identity as Ukrainians and committed to having their country persevere and survive.

## Problem Statement

The crisis in Ukraine has profound immediate and long-term impacts for refugees and internally displaced people (IDP). International organizations have documented crimes against humanity and genocide have occurred during the invasion of Ukraine, which includes the attempted stripping of economic, cultural, and social rights (United Nations, 2022). As in most conflict situations, the larger proportion of those fleeing to safety are IDPs (UNHCR, n.d). Many of those escaping to neighboring countries are being welcomed, but more refugees arrive each day straining the capacity of several European countries to provide them with temporary protection and resettlement opportunities. As most refugees are currently being accepted in Poland, the country is overburdened with housing and resource needs of refugees (UNHCR, 2022).

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[1] This statement was drafted based on the information available in April 2022. The Global Alliance has a long history of advocating for the needs and rights of migrants and displaced people. While the situation in Ukraine is not the only current and/or recent example of conflict and significant forced displacement around the world, the challenges faced by Ukrainians displaced by the invasion and their short- and long-term implications, bring attention to effects of forcible displacement on people everywhere. Unique to this situation, is the scale of displacement (not seen since World War II) and the ongoing nuclear threat. The Global Alliance's recommendations are therefore drafted in the context of the invasion of Ukraine, with recognition that similar considerations are applicable to people who have been forcibly displaced around the world. Further, it is understood that there are0 a plethora of needs both within Ukraine, neighboring countries and around the world resulting from the current crisis including but not limited to shortages of safe housing, resources and the necessities of life, as well as significantly impacting global peace, stability, food and economic security. However, based on the Global Alliance's concentration and the focus of the Migrants and Displaced Persons Task Force (advocating for the human rights and mental health of refugees and other people who are forcibly displaced), this statement is focused on the short-and long-term implications for well-being with a concentration on mental health related-needs.

Simultaneously, the needs of displaced Ukrainians are extensive. There is an ongoing short-term need for housing, food, and supplies, in addition to a focus on meeting the mental health crisis needs of families (International Centre for Migration Policy Development, 2022). While families are currently in survival mode, social and psychological support can lessen the mental health effects of trauma in relation to instability, family separation, and uncertain length of displacement. Further, inequities in humanitarian aid such as reported racism at the border warrant concern. Additional importance should be placed on the lack of safety, pervasive discrimination, and refusal by certain European countries to establish easy pathways for resettlement which are violations of human rights (Amnesty International, n.d.; Narea, 2022).

**Position Statement**

The Global Alliance for Social Justice and Behavioral Health stands in solidarity with all individuals and families suffering forced migration and displacement due to the humanitarian crisis. We support Ukrainian people whose country faces an existential threat and believe it is critical to address war crimes and humanitarian injustices happening within Ukraine. The Global Alliance also condemns the inequities in humanitarian aid for refugees and non-Ukrainians of color that have been highlighted at the borders and within neighboring countries. Immediate and long-term needs of refugees and internally displaced people in Ukraine must be addressed with a specific focus on supporting Ukrainians as they foster identity, community, and connection as forms of healing.

**Current responses and long-term mental health implications for refugees and displaced persons from Ukraine**

To meet the immediate needs of Ukrainian refugees, including food, housing and general support, logistical processes must be in place. Ukrainian refugees are vulnerable and in need of protection. Many have already been targets of sexual violence and trafficking (UNHCR, 2022). Therefore, the Global Alliance recommends strengthening current efforts by increasing coordination for accepting and supporting refugees. For internally displaced Ukrainian residents, these processes should involve the continued effort to bring supplies into affected regions and to be prepared to accept displaced persons if they choose to flee. Additionally, for Ukrainian residents who are returning to find their homes destroyed, it is vital to support ongoing efforts to rebuild security and health infrastructure as is already being done in many Ukrainian cities (Beaubien, 2022). There should be a global effort to coordinate secure housing for refugees across the European Union and to have systems in place to support the transition. Safeguards and protections need to be in place when private individuals transport and house refugees to assuage concerns of the potential increased vulnerabilities and risk factors to well-being, such as the threat of human trafficking. Creating immediate safety and stability for refugees is important in contributing to long-term positive outcomes and is a required doctrine of humanitarian crises (Marley & Mauki, 2019).

In the long-term the experience and response of IDPs and refugees will have significant impact on mental health. Mental health in situations of emergencies and displacement needs to be defined

broadly, to focus not only on addressing symptoms of distress but also providing social supports to improve well-being (Ellis et al., 2011). Psychological support can be most helpful when basic needs are addressed first. For this reason, comprehensive or multilevel mental health services that are based in the community are considered best practices in supporting refugees (Benson et al., 2018; Birman et al., 2008; Goodkind et al., 2014). Culturally informed mental health services for Ukrainian refugees must also address the impact of family separations on long-term mental health. Culturally informed services would address distress while also fostering resilience by helping Ukrainian refugees find ways to connect to their identity and community while settling (temporarily or permanently) in their new communities (Pieloch et al., 2016). Similar means of providing mental health services in communities within Ukraine for those still displaced should be established by harnessing Ukrainian-based mental health workers to provide support. Specific considerations for Ukrainians who chose not to leave or are internally displaced are necessary as their needs for mental health support may be escalated due to their continued exposure to the war up-close. Further, the global community should foster connection and communication among refugees and internally displaced persons to mobilize resources and create avenues for mutual support. Research has shown the positive effects social support from surrounding communities has on the mental health of those fleeing their country (Walker et al., 2015; UNHCR, n.d.).

**Providing short-term communication supports and long-term technological pathways for maintaining communication and connection**

The use of technology can have both positive and negative implications. One such negative implication has been the use of disinformation as a war tactic leading to inaccurate information about the invasion. Having accurate information about constantly changing dangers and resources in the midst of a crisis is crucial for families trying to stay safe, especially for those still residing in Ukraine. At the same time, the rampant spread of disinformation is impeding evacuation efforts, interfering with investigations of human rights violations, and compounding the trauma caused by the invasion. Another negative repercussion of technology is the ease of access to distressing images and videos of violence, which can retraumatize refugees and IDPs. Therefore, the global community should facilitate disseminating information and refuting disinformation about the invasion itself and effects of violence on individuals and communities. Doing so will bolster morale, increase settings for safety, and create a sense of global community for individuals in Ukraine and for those who have fled (Borkert et al., 2018).

Current technology provides unprecedented opportunities to support refugees and internally displaced people with online education and psychological services becoming more normative during the COVID-19 pandemic (Endale et al., 2021). Already, educators are holding classes and mental health professionals from around the world are providing supportive mental health services using online platforms to children and adults sheltering in Ukraine or finding refuge in other countries. Many schools in Ukraine have instituted online learning, bringing a sense of stability through continued education to people both inside and outside Ukraine (UNESCO, 2022). These efforts not only provide much needed supports but also affirm the message of solidarity with Ukraine from the global community. Education and mental health services that are provided in neighboring countries can be led with or by other refugees as a way of encouraging connection,

community, and resilience through Ukrainians using their skillsets with others. Therefore, coordinated efforts to bring mental health, social support, and educational services to refugees and internally displaced persons can contribute to well-being even once the crisis is over. Additionally, technology can be harnessed long-term to connect displaced Ukrainians with family members who may have fled to different locations within and outside the country. Enabling this social support by using technology, especially to connect separated families, is vital towards contributing to positive mental health effects for Ukrainian refugees after they resettle or return (Alam & Imran, 2015).

**Reflection on racism in the short-term and long-term actions for supporting Ukrainian and non-Ukrainian refugees of color**

Protecting human rights includes preserving social, economic, and cultural freedom regardless of the citizenship status of the refugee fleeing war. According to the 1951 Refugee Convention, these specific rights should be applied without discrimination as it relates to race, religion, and history of origin (UNCHR, 1951). As Ukrainian residents were fleeing the country, incidents of blocking non-citizens, students, and visitors of color from crossing the border were reported widely (Simon, 2022). These discriminatory experiences are a reflection of the broader inequitable treatment of refugees of color by European countries (Abbasi et al., 2015). This preferential treatment of White Ukrainians denies equal access to protection. The added layer of trauma at the border can have life or death consequences and be detrimental for mental health and can disrupt the establishment of community connections among refugees within countries of resettlement due to potential distrust.

Long-term efforts to create welcoming and equitable environments for all refugees are important for the mental health of these individuals (Hilario et al., 2017). There should also be equitable efforts to help all refugees establish themselves economically and socially. In the same vein, while Europe has welcomed Ukrainian refugees, concerns have been raised about Central Asian and Middle Eastern refugees from Afghanistan and Syria who experience a much less positive reception (Berry et al., 2015). The Global Alliance advocates learning from the ongoing Ukrainian crisis to assure equitable treatment for all refugees.

*Principally drafted by Sasha Zabelski with contributions by Gita Jaffe, Dina Birman, and the Migrants and Displaced Persons Task Force.*

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