



OPINION

# Ukraine's Refugee Crisis Is Unprecedented. The Response Must Be, Too.

By Sara Chodosh, Zach Levitt and Gus Wezerek

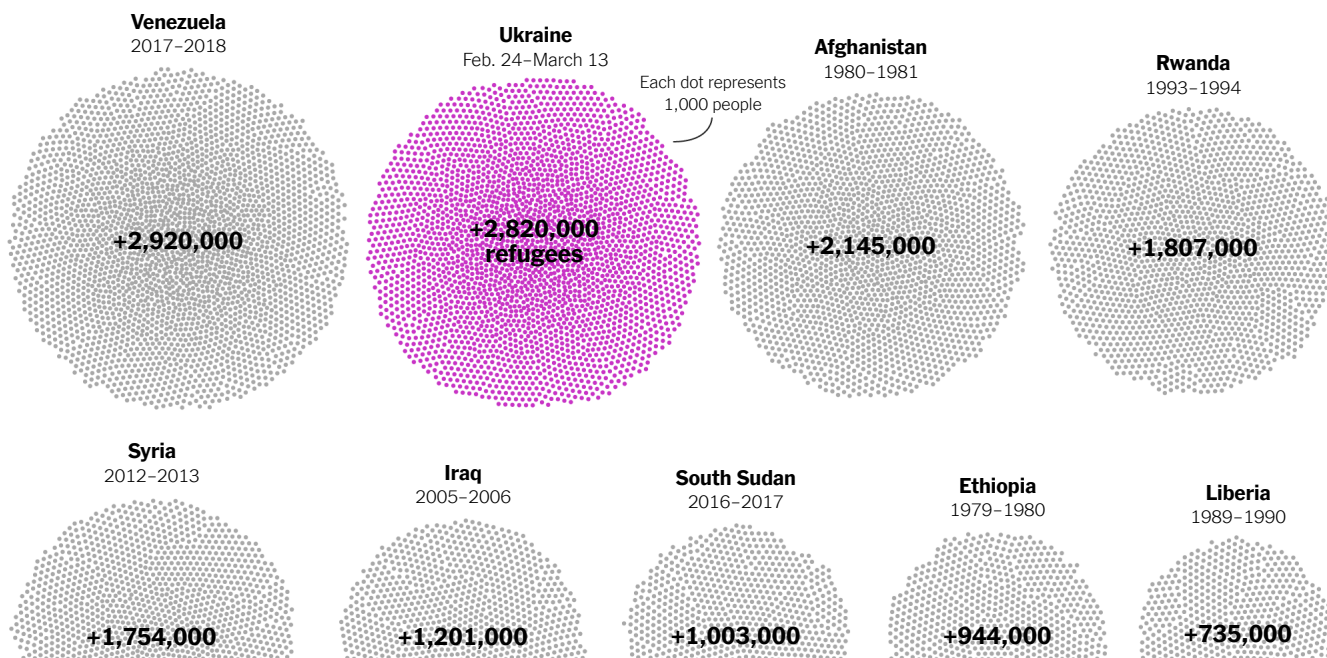
March 15, 2022

In the weeks since Russia invaded Ukraine, almost three million of the country's 44 million residents have left the country.

The rate of the Ukrainian exodus is unprecedented in recent history. Europe's response to the crisis has been similarly remarkable — both in its immediate generosity as well as in contrast to how poorly many European countries have treated refugees from Africa and the Middle East.

### The rate at which Ukrainians are fleeing is unprecedented

Comparing 18 days of refugees from Ukraine with countries' largest one-year increases in refugees.





Source: U.N.H.C.R. • Note: Totals include people seeking asylum and Venezuelans displaced abroad, since 1975. Refugee counts for the Russian invasion of Ukraine through March 13, 2022.

But the coming months are likely to be the real test of the West's commitment to Ukraine. As Russian attacks increase in western Ukraine, experts estimate that the number of refugees could double. Leaders in Europe and the United States will need to start thinking about long-term resettlement efforts for the war's victims.

Early refugees from Ukraine often had relatives outside the country and the means to reach them. That's less likely to be true for people who decide to leave in the coming weeks, said Steve Gordon, a security adviser for the aid group Mercy Corps. "The next wave of refugees will need much more assistance," he added.

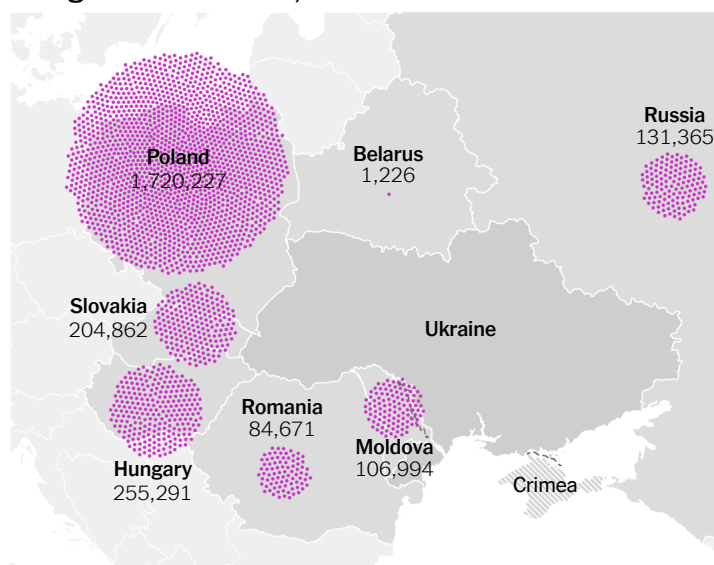
The sudden arrival of millions of people who need housing, education and health care will challenge public services in European countries. So far, that challenge has fallen largely upon Ukraine's neighbors to the west — Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania and Moldova — which are some of the poorest countries in Europe.

Moldova, for example, has one of Europe's lowest gross domestic products per capita and a population of just over three million. The influx of tens of thousands of Ukrainians has put the country in "a very, very tight spot," according to the country's foreign minister.

**Refugees from all countries, 2021**



**Refugees from Ukraine, since Feb. 24**



Source: U.N.H.C.R. • Notes: Totals include people seeking asylum. Refugee counts for 2021 as of June of that year. Refugee counts for the Russian invasion of Ukraine through March 13, 2022, except for Romania, which is through March 8. Not shown are Ukrainian refugees who have fled to other European countries.

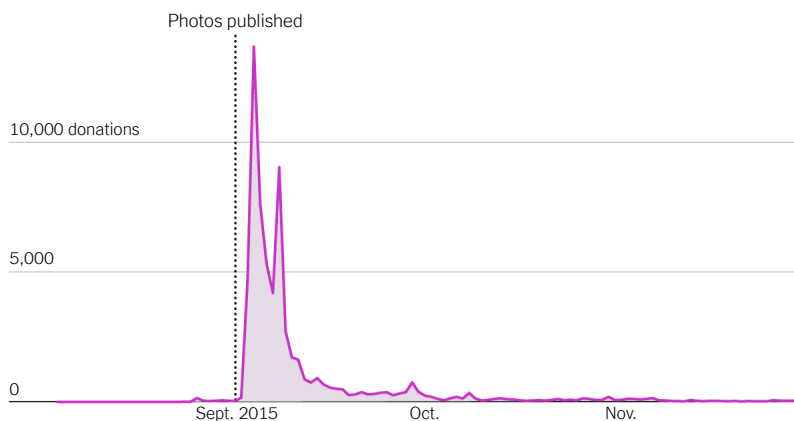
If countries struggle to integrate Ukrainian refugees, goodwill could turn into apathy or even hostility. “We know that hospitality can wear out,” said Kathryn Mahoney, a spokesperson for the United Nations refugee agency.

The Syrian refugee crisis shows how quickly public sympathy can wane. In 2015, newspapers published a photo of Alan Kurdi, a 2-year-old Syrian boy who drowned while his family was trying to cross the Mediterranean Sea to escape the country's civil war. Widespread outrage led to a hundredfold increase the following week in the number of donations to a Red Cross fund for Syria.

Within two months, however, donations had dropped back down to a trickle. Even when people are confronted with powerful, graphic images, their attention dissipates after a few weeks, said Paul Slovic, a psychology professor at the University of Oregon who has studied the “psychic numbing” that can occur after tragedies.

### Sympathy for refugees can be fleeting

Donations to a Swedish Red Cross fund for Syrian refugees, before and after newspapers published photos of Alan Kurdi.



Source: “Iconic photographs and the ebb and flow of empathic responses to humanitarian disasters,” by Paul Slovic, Daniel Vastfjall, Arvid Erlandsson and Robin Gregory.

As sympathy for refugees fades, spite can fill the void.

Around 2015, Denmark took in more than 30,000 refugees from Syria. Recently, however, Danish authorities have revoked some of those people's residency permits, despite reports that refugees who return to Syria have faced torture and sexual violence. Stripped of their right to live in Denmark, some of the country's Syrian refugees have been detained for months in deportation centers, with no indication of when they will be permitted to leave.

Before psychic numbing sets in and the days of Russia's invasion begin to blur together, world leaders must put comprehensive, durable protections in place for Ukrainian refugees.

The European Union is off to a good start. In a unanimous vote, the E.U. agreed to let most Ukrainians live, work and study across the bloc for up to three years.

Work should now begin on a plan to equitably resettle refugees across E.U. member states. Poland has already absorbed an incredible number of people; countries like Germany, France and Spain should be prepared to help millions more find homes, schools and health care. Every country must open its arms to Ukrainians and non-Ukrainians who were living in the country — some of whom have faced discrimination at the border.

“Hosting refugees is a global public good,” said David Miliband, the head of the International Rescue Committee. “We need to share the responsibility.”

In the United States, President Biden has already granted Ukrainians the ability to remain and work in the country for 18 months. Those protections, however, apply only to Ukrainians who were already in the United States.

If the Biden administration is willing to arm Ukrainian fighters — whose victories benefit the United States by diminishing Russia's real and perceived power — then it must also share responsibility for the Ukrainians whose homes are being shelled.

That will be difficult, but not impossible. Year after year, the Trump administration slashed the number of refugees that were allowed into the United States, forcing resettlement agencies to lay off employees and close offices.

To restaff those programs, Congress should pass the GRACE Act, which sets a minimum for the number of refugees that the United States takes in each year. That would help reassure potential hires that their jobs won't disappear after the next presidential election.

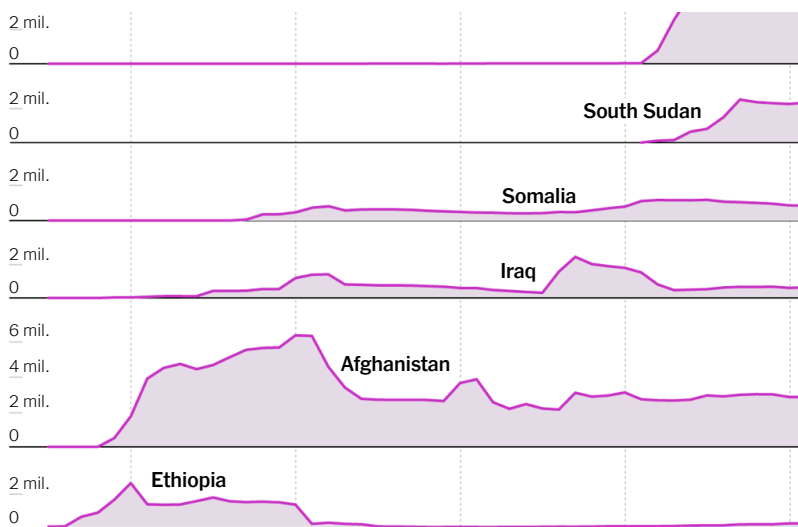
In addition to bolstering the country's refugee programs, President Biden should allow people fleeing Ukraine to live in the United States without a visa. So should Britain, which has issued a paltry 4,000 visas to Ukrainians as of Monday.

Ukrainians will likely need assistance for many years to come. History has shown that refugee situations almost inevitably last longer than they're expected to.

### Many refugees remain displaced for years

Countries with more than a million refugees for at least five years since 1975.





Source: U.N.H.C.R. • Note: As of June 2021. Totals include people seeking asylum. Estimates for Palestinian refugees are tracked across various U.N. agencies using different methodologies, which makes them difficult to compare with the numbers shown here.

If Russia's war turns into a yearslong occupation, millions of Ukrainians could end up like Syria's refugees, stranded in a legal, economic and emotional limbo. People who have already lost their homes and livelihoods will be robbed of their futures as well.

It doesn't have to be that way. Almost every country has expressed solidarity with Ukraine. The outpouring of compassion is an opportunity to reset the way that refugees are treated, in Ukraine and around the world.

Methodology: The United Nations refugee agency continuously updates its estimates for the number of people displaced by the war in Ukraine. Those updates sometimes include changes to previous days' totals. The data used in this essay was up-to-date as of March 14, 2022.

Sara Chodosh, Zach Levitt and Gus Wezerek are graphics editors for Opinion.