



Older Persons in Ukraine and EU Neighbouring Countries Must Not Be Forgotten

AGE Platform Europe Policy Brief

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Eight months after the beginning of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, AGE Platform Europe (AGE) is publishing a second policy brief on the impacts of the war hostilities on older persons. Our aim is to ensure that the European Union includes older people in its initiatives to support Ukraine. This briefing discusses the specific challenges faced by older people remaining in Ukraine or fleeing to EU neighbouring countries. It also includes recommendations to policy makers, private and civil society organisations, and the general public willing to support older people affected by the war.

The [Conclusions](#) of 20 and 21 October 2022 of the European Council state that “the European Union will stand with Ukraine for as long as it takes. It will continue to provide strong political, military and financial support to Ukraine, including for its liquidity needs, and step up its humanitarian response, in particular for winter preparedness”. Older persons must not be forgotten in the help that the European Union has started to provide since the beginning of the war.

On [19 October 2022](#), the European Union announced a new emergency shelter and winterised facilities programme for Ukraine as well as an additional €175 million in humanitarian assistance to support those most in need in Ukraine and Moldova.

In her [statement](#) at the joint press conference with Chancellor Scholz and Prime Minister Shmyhal of Ukraine on the occasion of the International Expert Conference on the Reconstruction of Ukraine, President von der Leyen stated that “Ukraine now needs regular, grass-roots financial support. That means, quite simply, salaries for teachers, doctors, but also soldiers and police officers, for example, as well as the pensions that have to be paid – in other words, the absolute minimum”. While this is of the utmost importance that older people get access to their pensions,



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we must ensure that their rights are respected and fulfilled, and that their needs are covered in all cross-cutting areas.

Older people must receive equal protection in armed conflicts

Ukraine is among the [fastest ageing countries](#) in the world with more than 7 million people aged 65+, representing 16.7% of the total population. In situations of risk and humanitarian emergencies, like the current war, older persons face specific challenges. Support for older persons in Ukraine is formally available. However, they are too often disregarded or forgotten in humanitarian aid and emergency response.

In March 2022, the Special Rapporteur on the rights of persons with disabilities, Gerard Quinn, and the Independent Expert on the enjoyment of all human rights by older persons, Claudia Mahler, recalled the [importance of protecting persons with disabilities and older persons](#). International law exists to [protect civilians](#) who are suffering from the war, including older persons and persons with disabilities. The Geneva Conventions of 1949 and their Additional Protocols of 1977 explicitly state that all civilians who are not taking part in conflicts must be protected, while also recognizing that special respect and protection is due to persons with disabilities and older persons during armed conflict. However, in situations of risk and humanitarian emergencies, the rights of older persons are only specifically covered in [Article 11](#) of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, limiting the availability of and access to aid and support older people can receive.

In addition, the lack of age-disaggregated data in situations of armed conflicts is far too common. Since our first briefing, data collection on refugees fleeing from Ukraine fail to capture the situation of older people. It reinforces their invisibility and impedes governments and civil society efforts to assess their needs and propose tailor-made support.

In the absence of comprehensive data about older people during the ongoing war, this briefing mainly relies on the inputs collected on the ground thanks to the support of AGE members and partners in Ukraine, Poland, and Romania. The independent initiatives of national and local organisations are indispensable for registering the experiences and specific needs of older people affected by the war and inform our emergency and long-term responses.

Situation of older people in Ukraine

The vast majority of older people remained in Ukraine after the beginning of the war. Some families have faced the unbearable choice of either leaving Ukraine with their children or remaining in the country to look after their parents/grandparents.

Older persons with disabilities face structural barriers and are among the most marginalised. Currently in Ukraine, the [National Assembly of People with Disabilities of Ukraine](#) (NADP), one the



European Disability Platform's members, is an association of public organisations of people with disabilities. Before the start of the war, it consisted of 126 organisations from various regions of Ukraine. Despite 40 percent of the organisations and their members (mostly from Eastern Ukraine) became internally displaced or evacuated to other countries after the beginning of the war, they offer humanitarian aid to people with disabilities, including older persons with disabilities. The aid they have offered includes "targeted monetary assistance, accommodation and nutrition, food packages, hygienic items, technical means of rehabilitation, medications, payment for medical services, transportation vehicles and others".

The Ukrainian organisation "[Turbota pro Litnih v Ukraini](#)" (Age Concern Ukraine) – a Ukrainian organisation offering support to older people – warned about the consequences of possible gas and electricity shortage this winter. The organisation worries that in a country where temperatures regularly drop below zero during the coldest months of the year, a vast number of older people will suffer. In territories near the frontline, older persons also need food, medicine, blankets, specific material, and equipment for nursing homes such as special hospital beds. Because of widespread destruction, money will be needed to repair infrastructure.

Situation of older people in EU neighbouring countries

Since our first briefing, most of the people who sought refuge in Poland and Romania have found food and shelter to meet their primary needs. In Romania for instance, the government passed the "[50-20 program](#)" offering the possibility for private households to host refugees from Ukraine in exchange of 50 lei for accommodation, and 20 lei for food per day and per person they host. The vast majority of refugees prefer to stay in private households.

In EU countries bordering Ukraine, it is fairly common to see refugees going back to Ukraine. They might still seek employment for the duration of their stay in their host country, which sometimes leads to high staff turnover in organisations employing refugees from Ukraine.

One of our members, the [National Federation Omenia of Pensioners' Mutual Help House Associations](#), gathered the following testimonies from Ukrainian refugees in Romania:

"Luka's grandfather and grandmother stayed in Mykolaiv. They are retired. The pension of each of them is somewhere between 330-390 lei, and food prices now in Ukraine, and especially in war zones, are the same as in Romania (it used to be significantly lower). Since April, there is no drinking water supply in Mykolaiv, only what is brought. The city is bombarded by missiles every day, and now attacked by kamikaze drones. This is how our grandfather and grandmother live in Mykolaiv".

"Nikita's great-grandmother and great-grandfather remained in Odessa, their pensions around 350 lei (approximately 70 euros). Of course, they hardly have enough for utilities

and food, only for medicines that they cannot live without. But like everyone else, they are not used to complain... all medical examinations and tests are paid by themselves”.

Since our first briefing, a large number of refugees that had arrived in Romania and Poland have already returned to Ukraine or moved further to the West.

Refugees arrive in neighbouring countries confused and exhausted. The experience of war also causes, distress, depression, anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder, severely affecting the mental health of refugees, including older people. Accessing psychological support, however, remains difficult for many refugees.

“We have tried to engage parents coming to our day care center [in psychological support activities] but only a few of them access these services if they have post-traumatic stress disorders” said our Romanian member

In addition, older refugees may face administrative burdens and language barriers.

Refugees from Ukraine allegedly get their medical expenses covered. Corresponding mechanisms are incredibly important for older refugees that might arrive with chronic conditions. A [study](#) that considers data from the Polish Ministry of Digitalization and the Ukrainian Ministry of Health, was carried out in Poland between February and May 2022 and showed that older refugees have an average of 2,5 diseases each, the most frequent being cardiovascular diseases, gastrointestinal, respiratory, musculoskeletal, and genitourinary diseases.

However, the National Federation Omenia of Pensioners' Mutual Help House Associations reported that in Romania, general practitioners can be reluctant to treat refugees from Ukraine. Contacts with refugees are difficult because of language barriers: practitioners do not speak Ukrainian or Russian, and refugees hardly speak English. In addition, practitioners are private entities in contract with the Ministry of Health to receive reimbursements from refugees' visits. Hurdles in receiving these reimbursements de incentivised general practitioners to welcome refugees in their practice.

The situation is even more complicated for older persons facing multiple and intersectional discriminations such as older persons with disabilities. Many older people had to leave their towns and villages in a hurry, without taking with them any medical documentation, including certificates recognizing their disability. As a result, their disability is simply not acknowledged. Older persons with disabilities must therefore apply for certificates of disability, a lengthy and cumbersome procedure. Currently, in Poland, there is no reception system designed to support older refugees with disabilities. While certain physical disabilities are easier to identify, such as watching persons in wheelchairs, “invisible” disabilities like dementia or mental health issues, are not readily assessed.

Roma and other marginalised groups face unequal treatment in seeking refugee in neighbouring countries. This includes discrimination in accessing housing.

Non-governmental organisations for older people have specific expertise and they can be reliable partners to support older refugees after meeting their primary needs such as food, hygiene, and shelter. However, the lack of fundings limits the support that can be provided to older refugees. This is the case for [Alzheimer Polska](#) who might provide strong expertise on (older) persons with dementia to other humanitarian organisations who do not have the knowledge. However, strong coordination and responsible sharing of information is needed, which is currently not the case in Poland, something both our members Bonum Vitae Foundation for seniors and Alzheimer Polska reported on.

BONUM VITAE Foundation for seniors also reported that the lack of knowledge on how to provide assistance to older persons in international humanitarian crisis is problematic. Better coordination and knowledge sharing between humanitarian, and non-humanitarian NGOs, and governments would benefit refugees and improve the aid that is offered to them. In addition, smaller organisations' actions are limited because of the lack of resources and fundings.

Key recommendations to fulfil the needs of older persons affected by the war

Recommendations for fulfilling older persons' immediate needs in Ukraine

- Provide adequate and specific supplies to older persons in Ukraine such as food, blankets, and medicine.
- Provide adequate access to safe drinkable water.
- Due to growing shortages of gas and electricity, help protect older people in Ukraine from winter-related adversities such as cold.
- Support residential care facilities with adequate material and equipment, including special hospital beds.
- Provide adapted accomodation to older persons who were evacuated from the Eastern and Southern parts of Ukraine. Support older persons living in occupied territories of Ukraine to evacuate to safer places, notably to the Western part of the country. That includes providing accessible transports, including access to humanitarian corridors.
- Provide accessible information for people of all ages in Ukraine and neighbouring countries.
- Support older persons who are in the most vulnerable situations, including in areas that are directly affected by fighting.

Recommendations for addressing the needs of older refugees in EU neighbouring countries

- Support older people from Ukraine that have fled to neighbouring countries to find adequate accommodation.
- Support older people of working age to find and access adequate trainings and jobs, notably under the Temporary Protection Directive.

Long-term Recommendations

- Collect systematic and accurate age and sex-disaggregated data to get a clear understanding of the situation of older persons remaining in Ukraine, crossing the borders, and relocating to EU countries. This data should be disaggregated by different age sub-groups to reflect the diversity of older persons.
- Develop a gender-sensitive response to the Ukrainian conflict to assess how the war impacts in different ways older women and men and take into consideration the different risks they face.
- Address the multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination older persons face in the Ukrainian conflict, notably in terms of sexism, ableism, racism, discriminations towards sexual orientations and gender identities.
- Address any forms of discrimination, including ageism and age discrimination regarding humanitarian aid, healthcare, employment, adequate housing, and asylum applications.
- Develop training for professionals and volunteers on the ground, including humanitarian staff and other relevant stakeholders, on the special needs of older people, including long-term care needs.
- Develop a long-term perspective on how to shape the lives of older people in post-war Ukraine. Engage older Ukrainians to discuss perspectives and approaches for improving the environment in which older people live and for providing better quality care through technological improvements.
- Support non-governmental organisations, including small organisations which have limited human and financial resources, in their efforts to assist older persons in and outside Ukraine.
- Improve the coordination between all actors and at all governance levels, including at local level. This must include better collaboration between governments, the European institutions, notably the European Commission, and the United Nations bodies. Non-

governmental organisations, including representative organisations of and for older persons, should be consulted.

- Implement a human rights-based approach when addressing the needs of older persons in Ukraine and Ukrainian refugees, such as the right to adequate housing.
- Include older persons as much as possible in the design and implementation of strategies and policies at EU and national levels that aim at responding to humanitarian crises such as the war in Ukraine to ensure that the foreseen emergency response mechanisms are inclusive of all age groups, including older people and people with care needs.
- Provide adequate funds and human resources to non-profit organisations on the ground to build capacity and defend the human rights of people of all ages, especially the most marginalised.

Read more on:

- [AGE general webpage on the war in Ukraine](#)
- [We express our solidarity with the Ukrainian people](#), 25 February 2022
- [Ukraine: the 'oldest' humanitarian crisis in the world](#), 15 March 2022
- [War in Ukraine: AGE members offer support](#), 15 March 2022
- [Situation of Older Persons in Ukraine and in the EU](#), 04 May 2022
- [The impact of ageism in migratory contexts](#), #AgeingEqual campaign, 2018
- [The impact of the war on older people](#), HelpAge International, 13 April 2022

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