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# "THEY ARE NOT REFUGEES; THEY ARE TRAVELLERS"

Situation of Roma Refugees from Ukraine in Podkarpackie Voivodenship.  
Monitoring report 2022-2023

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND DEFINITIONS

<b>antigypsyism</b>	prejudice, which manifests itself in individual statements and actions, as well as in institutional policies and practices of marginalization, exclusion, physical violence, depreciation of Roma cultures and lifestyles, as well as hate speech directed against Roma and other persons and groups perceived, stigmatized or persecuted - both in the Nazi era and to this day - as "Gypsies". This leads to Roma being treated as a supposedly alien group and associated with them a range of negative stereotypes and distorted images that constitute a form of racism (IHRA 2020)
<b>Gypsies/Roma</b>	Gypsies - a historically discriminatory term; the correct one is the Roma
<b>collective accommodation</b>	accommodation facilities for refugees, divided into those administered by the state (e.g. local self-governments) and by other actors (social or international organisations)
<b>hate speech</b>	statements that spread, promote and justify racial hatred, xenophobia, anti-Semitism and other forms of intolerance, undermining democratic security, cultural cohesion and pluralism (Council of Europe 1997)
<b>NGO, INGO</b>	non-governmental (civil society) organisation; international non-governmental organisation
<b>OPS, MOPS</b>	social assistance centre, municipal social assistance centre
<b>participation towards accommodation costs</b>	a change under the amendment of 25.01.2023 of the Assistance Law, obliging refugees to pay up to 75% of the total costs of collective accommodation
<b>reception and integration</b>	two stages of the response to the arrival of refugees; reception is receiving them and is mainly related to basic needs (shelter, material assistance); integration is the process of integrating refugees into the host society through systemic measures (education, social welfare)
<b>Romaphobia</b>	active resentment against the Roma manifested via discrimination; specific actions; may be systemic, often combined with a refusal to recognise the Roma as a discriminated or minority group
<b>Transcarpathia</b>	a region of western Ukraine, inhabited until the outbreak of full-scale war by the country's largest population of Roma (so-called Transcarpathians)



The center in Kidałowice run by the UNITATEM Foundation - May 2023, photo: Adam Durjasz

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND KEY RECOMMENDATIONS [ES]

Since the beginning of Russia's full-scale aggression against Ukraine, more than 7 million Ukrainian refugees have left for the neighbouring countries or farther on, to Western Europe<sup>1</sup>. According to the European Commission's findings of April 2023, the above number included some 100 000 Roma people<sup>2</sup>. On the very first day, thousands of refugees rushed towards the Polish border. At present, we estimate that there are up to tens of thousands of Roma refugees in Poland<sup>3</sup>, the vast majority without sufficient systemic support and, partly or completely, cut off from the support infrastructure.

Apart from unequal treatment, Roma face widespread antigypsyism and the challenges they encounter during their flight are particularly acute. Hence, from the onset of the war, this has taken on a new dimension: sub-standard support at reception points and places of collective accommodation. This report focuses on the border town of Przemyśl in the "transit" Podkarpackie Voivodeship, where this is evident. Other problems identified include: impeded access to accommodation and increased risk of homelessness, discrimination at border checkpoints and in accessing benefits or services (education, translation/interpretation or transport), and an increase in Romophobic rhetoric on the part of public authorities. For months, a so-called "Roma corridor" was in operation at the main railway station in Przemyśl, and mothers with children slept on the ground despite the presence of international organisations or crisis staff and despite the intervention of the Ombudsman's Office.

Przemyśl is just one example of Polish cities where unequal access to aid structures occurs, but it is there that the situation seems most difficult. Although in theory the cooperation between the local government and the voivodeship authorities should run smoothly, in practice this means difficulties in communication and in the division of humanitarian duties and responsibilities for the reception and integration of refugees, also in the provision of accommodation and the monitoring of its standard. A tendency to disregard the specific needs or voice of the Roma community prevails likewise in international organisations, despite attempts to include the Roma in staff or to consult the community. Thus, the responsibility for assisting groups that are particularly excluded and vulnerable to discrimination and attacks, to which the group of Roma refugees from Ukraine undoubtedly belongs, shifts to the already overburdened civil society organisations.

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<sup>1</sup> IOM, Ukraine Internal Displacement Report (April 2022): [iom.int/news/71-million-people-displaced-war-ukraine-iom-survey](https://iom.int/news/71-million-people-displaced-war-ukraine-iom-survey) (16.06.2023). Polish Border Guard notified on 14 October 2022 that the Polish-Ukrainian border had since 24.02.2022 been crossed by 7 million people ([official website of the Border Guard](https://www.pogranicze.pl/en/aktualnosci/7-milion-osob-przekroczylo-graniczno-polsko-ukrainska), 14.06.2023).

<sup>2</sup> Position of the European Commission of 7 April 2022: [ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/statement\\_22\\_2326](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/statement_22_2326) (28.06.2023)

<sup>3</sup> There is no accurate data as information on ethnicity or minority status is not collected. Kołaczek, Mirga-Wójtowicz & Talewicz (2022), Human rights, needs and discrimination. The situation of Roma refugees from Ukraine in Poland. Report on research and intervention activities: [zentralrat.sintiundroma.de/en/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2022/10/2022-report-ukrainian-roma-refugees-in-poland-en-web-version.pdf](https://zentralrat.sintiundroma.de/en/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2022/10/2022-report-ukrainian-roma-refugees-in-poland-en-web-version.pdf)

According to data from the European Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA), Roma are the most persecuted minority in Europe<sup>4</sup>, and as early as March 2022 the international organisation known as the Minority Rights Group flagged documented cases of human right violations and more intense discriminatory tendencies after the invasion.

## **KEY RECOMMENDATIONS**

1. Central and local government authorities, in cooperation with expert civil society organisations, need to create a sustainable strategy of activities and local policies for working with the Roma community, with particular attention to refugees from Ukraine and their specific needs.
2. Regional (voivodeship) authorities must take responsibility for accommodation and adequate access to services for Roma refugees, whether by supporting and monitoring collective accommodation and creating cross-sectoral solutions in cooperation with the central government and social and international organisations (social tenancy agencies); or by coordinating a programme of support for private accommodation and employment activation for refugees from Ukraine. Legislative changes, such as the mandatory participation in the cost of accommodation or the relocation programme, must aim to systemically improve rather than aggravate the situation of Roma refugees; to this end, such legal amendments should be consulted with the Roma community and monitored.
3. All human rights violations and instances of incitement to hatred against persons of Roma origin, especially by state representatives, should be monitored, reported, and prosecuted under the Penal Code.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The evidence presented in this report was gathered by the W Stronę Dialogu/Towards Dialogue Foundation team during regular site visits in Podkarpackie Voivodeship, mainly in Przemyśl, between March 2022 and May 2023. The report is based on multi-site qualitative research, correspondence with representatives of the authorities and analysis of existing data in terms of possible human rights violations.

The team conducted a total of 43 interviews (some of them online or by phone) with people from the Roma community (Ukrainian and Polish), people working in local (NGOs) and international organisations (INGOs), volunteers, and representatives of local authorities. At the request of the individuals, their personal data was anonymised and the material collected was stored securely and screened for the safety and comfort of the individuals

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<sup>4</sup> EU Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA), Fundamental Rights Report 2022: [euromanet.eu/news/fra-fundamental-rights-report-2022-specifically-addresses-roma-equality-and-inclusion/](https://euromanet.eu/news/fra-fundamental-rights-report-2022-specifically-addresses-roma-equality-and-inclusion/) (14.06.2023)

themselves. Women are a significant majority among those surveyed with refugee experience.

The Foundation consulted the preliminary results of the report with the Przemyśl City Hall and the Ombudsman's Office, and presented the findings outlined in this report on several occasions in its contacts with the authorities. The Foundation's staff have repeatedly intervened in cases of violations of the rights of Roma people in Przemyśl, which is part of its mandate and complements the activities of the authorities in the region in terms of minority protection.

## **ABOUT THE FOUNDATION**

Since 2012, the Foundation Towards Dialogue has been active in anti-discrimination work, research and advocacy as an expert organisation created with and for the Roma community in Poland. The Foundation runs workshops for, among others, journalists, local government officials, representatives of cultural and educational institutions, teachers, and the Police. It carries out educational activities through e.g. lectures, publications, reports, or patronage.

Since 2022, the Foundation has been actively supporting the Roma fleeing Ukraine, among others in Warsaw, Przemyśl and Nadarzyn. In July 2022, faced with the need to provide special support to the Roma community fleeing war and experiencing discrimination regarding assistance provided to refugees, the Foundation opened a Roma Community Centre in Warsaw. The Foundation's team provides educational, legal, psychological, and empowerment support and intervenes on a case-by-case basis.

In September 2022, the Foundation collaborated on drafting a report on the research and intervention activities of the Central Council of German Sinti and Roma [“Human Rights, Needs, and Discrimination – The Situation of Roma Refugees from Ukraine in Poland”](#).

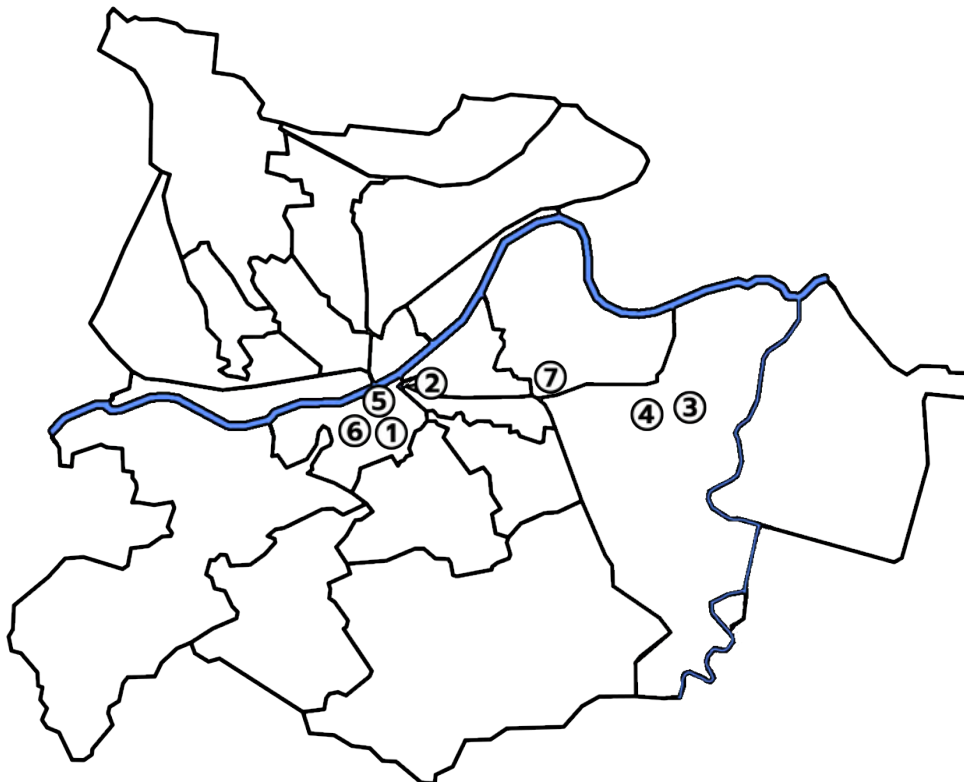
## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

The Foundation Towards Dialogue wishes to acknowledge all the individuals whose histories and support have made this report possible. Special thanks are due to the representatives of the Roma community who agreed to share their stories, despite the experience of difficult migration.

## Map of the actors covered by the study

### Przemyśl:

1. Przemyśl City Hall Central Railway Station - Reception Point, Mother and Child Room
2. Collective Accommodation Center "TESCO"
3. Hope Shelter
4. Ukrainian House
5. Caritas of the Archdiocese of Przemyśl
6. Collective accommodation center „Bilana"



### Outside Przemyśl

1. UNITATEM Foundation  
Kidałowice  
Radymno  
Jarosławiec

### Rzeszów:

1. OXFAM headquarters
2. UNHCR headquarters



## INTRODUCTION

I saw the first group of Roma, women with children, about 20 people. I chatted them up; they said they were from Transcarpathia and wanted to live here. We thought they would stay with us. I was happy, yet little did I know what was going to happen to them (volunteer)

### PRZEMYŚL – BEFORE AND AFTER THE INVASION

Prior to 24 February 2022, Przemyśl, a city in Podkarpackie Voivodeship with approximately 59,000 residents (data as of 2019), was one of the transit points for migration (mainly labour migration) of people from Ukraine due to its location 11 km from the state border. There were a number of social organisations in the city, yet few specialised in working with migrants - with the exception of the Ukrainian House Foundation in Przemyśl and the Union of Ukrainians collaborating with it. As noted by the Foundation, there were cases of Romaphobia in the city before the outbreak of the full-scale war<sup>5</sup>.

After 24 February 2022, as a border city, Przemyśl has become one of the cities the hardest hit by the migration of persons fleeing Ukraine to Poland, including Ukrainian Roma. In March and April 2022, the nearby border checkpoint was daily used by approx. 50,000 people<sup>6</sup>. Hence, the necessary aid infrastructure, information points, food and material aid warehouses as well as temporary accommodation facilities had to be set up in the city. One of these was the Humanitarian Aid Centre arranged in a former TESCO building (since July 2022 coordinated by the Podkarpackie Branch of the Polish Red Cross, previously by the City Hall in cooperation with the owner of the Kazar company), which by August 2022 assisted around 250,000 people. Initial sanitary conditions left much to be desired, the registration system for refugee women did not meet the requisite standards, and the volunteers were often unprepared for this type of work (Amnesty International 2022).

By order of Voivode of Podkarpackie, a reception point with a round-the-clock information desk was set up at Przemyśl Railway Station. Gradually, the issue of transferring people from Ukraine to other cities and countries was regulated, from the original full spontaneity (posing many potential risks for refugee women) to the current, much more regulated and institutionalised forms of registration and verification of those applying for assistance. Some of the needs reported by community organisations and male and female volunteers included the need to train aid workers to handle vulnerable groups (elderly and minors, the Roma), improving sanitation facilities (including free toilets and a facility for breastfeeding mothers) and opening a permanent medical aid station at the reception point. In the first months, one

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<sup>5</sup> On the basis of the monitoring by civil society organisations (including the Foundation).

<sup>6</sup> An interview in *Dziennik Gazeta Prawna* with Mayor of Przemyśl of 25 February 2023: [gazetaprawna.pl/wiadomosci/kraj/artykuly/8666994\\_uchodzcy-z-ukrainy-wojna-wojciech-bakun-prezydent-przemysla-kukiz15-wywiad.html](https://gazetaprawna.pl/wiadomosci/kraj/artykuly/8666994_uchodzcy-z-ukrainy-wojna-wojciech-bakun-prezydent-przemysla-kukiz15-wywiad.html) (18.06.2023)

of the biggest threats was e.g. that of human trafficking and violence against women and children.

The municipal and provincial authorities have repeatedly stressed the transit nature of the region, as evidenced for example by the unprecedented closure of most places of collective accommodation or short-term forms of support for visitors and relocation mechanisms. Currently, only two facilities support accommodation for refugees for more than two weeks. During a press conference on 13 March 2022,<sup>7</sup> Deputy Mayor Bogusław Świeży observed: Of course, we do not drive out anyone who wants to stay with us, but our city acts as a transit hub rather than a final destination. In turn, during a press conference held on 17 March 2022<sup>8</sup>, in reply to a question about the support offered to unattended refugees in Poland, Deputy Mayor said: According to the recommendations given to the city of Przemyśl, we are only a transit point, i.e. Przemyśl should host people who do not know where to go (...), are tired and unable to continue their journey. (...) There should be people waiting for someone who will pick them up. This is the role of Przemyśl.

A rapid influx of aid organisations and international support groups in the very first months (UNICEF, Mercy Corps, World Kitchen, etc.) dramatically transformed the city, as did their gradual retreat in 2023. As the work carried out by the Foundation proves, some decided not to support the Roma community. The evidence gathered helped to identify a high degree of "compassion fatigue".

At first everybody helped – said a volunteer. Now the river has turned into a rivulet (November 2022)

Furthermore, active in Przemyśl and in selected other locations on the border since the very first days was the Ukrainian House Foundation in Przemyśl in collaboration with the Union of Ukrainians. One staff member said:

We became a natural place for both refugees and some organisations; they would come to us. In the first weeks, we collected volunteers and dispatched them where they were needed. (...) Since August we have been running a "hostel" of 50 beds, plus a number of projects (...), legal aid, translations/interpretation, a culture centre, so that there is some normality in it too, not just humanitarian aid alone.

Around 1,000 people were accommodated at one point or another in the hostel, before it closed down. A number of places of collective accommodation were established within the city limits and in nearby Korczowa; they included e.g. a former TESCO mall in Lwowska Street

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<sup>7</sup> rp.pl, Przemyska wieża Babel. 25,000-35,000 refugees daily, 13.03.2023: [rp.pl/spoleczenstwo/art35854251-przemyska-wieza-babel-25-35-tysiecy-uchodzcow-dziennie?fbclid=IwAR0AfDVJ0l6Tk5rBqGM74ccTBbxyUB2uqi3-v4DV8Tc4shAOJ5\\_P1bslFw](https://rp.pl/spoleczenstwo/art35854251-przemyska-wieza-babel-25-35-tysiecy-uchodzcow-dziennie?fbclid=IwAR0AfDVJ0l6Tk5rBqGM74ccTBbxyUB2uqi3-v4DV8Tc4shAOJ5_P1bslFw) (14.06.2023); Przemyski Serwis Informacyjny (official site), [Konferencja z 13.03.2022](#), (access 27.06.2023).

<sup>8</sup> Przemyski Serwis Informacyjny (official site), [Konferencja z dnia 17.03.2023](#) (access 27.06.2023).

(Humanitarian Centre), co-run before its closure by the City Hall and the Kazar company until July 2023, when the coordination was taken over by the Podkarpackie Branch of the Polish Red Cross. The monitoring visits by the Foundation, the Ombudsman's Office and Amnesty International in 2022 and 2023, identified the poor standard of accommodation (including lack of privacy) and the residents' limited access to services.

The situation of Roma refugees from Ukraine was additionally exacerbated by the fact that they repeatedly faced social ostracism and aid exclusion over the months, not infrequently from the volunteers themselves. The self-organisation of the local Roma community and the interventions of the civil society had a major impact, but after Podkarpackie Voivodeship was declared a transit one, further challenges arose.

## **THE ROMA COMMUNITY IN UKRAINE**

There is no reliable and comprehensive data on the exact number of Roma in Ukraine, their needs and living conditions. An estimated 200,000 up to 400,000 Roma lived in Ukraine before the war, dispersed throughout the country, embracing a range of dialects and cultural identities. However, regardless of this diversity, the Roma as a whole were considered the country's most vulnerable minority group, at risk of social exclusion and racism. The largest Roma communities have been located in the regions of Transcarpathia, Odessa, Donetsk, and Kharkiv<sup>9</sup>.

Antigypsyism, racism, and discrimination against Roma are widespread in Ukraine, as indicated by the limited representation of Roma in public life and the growing intensity of hate speech and violence directed against Roma by far-right groups. A series of attacks on Roma settlements in 2018 is but one example of the increasingly visible presence of right-wing extremist groups in the country<sup>10</sup>. The attacks were condemned by a number of international human rights organisations, including Amnesty International; one year after the attacks, the president of AI's Ukrainian Branch, Oksana Pokalchuk, said: For the past 12 months, the Ukrainian authorities have failed to conduct what can be called an adequate investigation and have done little to support the victims of this blatant hate crime.

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<sup>9</sup> Kołaczek, Mirga-Wójtowicz & Talewicz (2022), Human rights, needs and discrimination. The situation of Roma refugees from Ukraine in Poland. Report on research and intervention activities: [zentralrat.sintiundroma.de/en/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2022/10/2022-report-ukrainian-roma-refugees-in-poland-en-web-version.pdf](https://zentralrat.sintiundroma.de/en/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2022/10/2022-report-ukrainian-roma-refugees-in-poland-en-web-version.pdf); Bocheva (2019), Roma in Ukraine: A Time for Action: Priorities and Pathways for an Effective Integration Policy, Minority Rights Group: [minorityrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/MRG\\_Rep\\_Ukraine\\_EN\\_Apr19.pdf](https://minorityrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/MRG_Rep_Ukraine_EN_Apr19.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> Fiałkowska, Mirga-Wójtowicz (2022), "Be Careful Out There, in the Gypsy District" – antigypsyism in a war situation: [pl.boell.org/pl/2022/05/16/uwazajcie-tam-w-tej-cyganskiej-dzielnicy-antycyganizm-w-warunkach-wojny](https://pl.boell.org/pl/2022/05/16/uwazajcie-tam-w-tej-cyganskiej-dzielnicy-antycyganizm-w-warunkach-wojny) (21.06.2023)





The center in Kidałowice run by the UNITATEM Foundation - May 2023, photo: Adam Durjasz

After the Russian invasion in February 2022, refugee flows of Roma people to Poland intensified significantly. The main border crossings through which Roma refugees enter Poland are those of Korczów and Medyka; other checkpoints are used to a lesser extent. The research team working on the Heinrich-Boll Stiftung project encountered Roma fleeing from eastern Ukraine who crossed the Ukrainian-Russian border and then entered Poland via Estonia. Typically, if less frequently than for other groups of refugees from Ukraine, these people have the passports required in Poland to prove Ukrainian citizenship, which would make them eligible for support<sup>16</sup>.

Most collective<sup>17</sup> transborder movement takes place on means of public transportation, by rail or bus, although there are instances of whole families crossing the border on foot. They usually stay for a couple of days in the reception facilities and then move further into Poland or farther on, to Western Europe. According to the findings of Amnesty International and the Minority Rights Group, a lack of documents or funds was a regular impediment to Roma leaving Ukraine<sup>18</sup>. A substantial role in offering help to the Roma in Ukraine, especially in terms of humanitarian aid and funds for an escape from Ukraine is played by Roma civil society organisations (Voice of Romani; Blago Support Fund; ARCA; Roma Women Fund), and religious groups<sup>19</sup>.

## THE ROMA COMMUNITY IN POLAND

According to the 2011 National Population and Household Census, approx. 17,000 people chose Romani nationality<sup>20</sup>. The main groups of Roma living in Poland are the Polish Roma, Bergitka Roma, Kalderash, and Lovari; however, this may have changed due to the arrival of large refugee groups from Ukraine. Roma in Poland and the region suffered regular and systemic persecution, particularly during the Second World War, when they were repressed and mass exterminated by the Nazi regime<sup>21</sup>. The genocide of Roma (Samuradipen) is

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<sup>16</sup> Fiałkowska, Mirga-Wójtowicz (2022), "Be Careful Out There, in the Gypsy District" – antigypsyism in a war situation: [pl.boell.org/pl/2022/05/16/uwazajcie-tam-w-tej-cyganskiej-dzielnicy-antycyganizm-w-warunkach-wojny](https://pl.boell.org/pl/2022/05/16/uwazajcie-tam-w-tej-cyganskiej-dzielnicy-antycyganizm-w-warunkach-wojny) (21.06.2023); Minority Rights Group (2022) pointed out the lack of documents of Transcarpathian Roma, indicating their administrative exclusion and lack of trust in representatives of Ukrainian public authorities on the part of the Roma and the profile of escapes of the Roma in the 1990s (e.g. from Hungary). According to the findings of the Minority Rights Group (2022), the number of undocumented Roma in Ukraine in 2022 was up to 30,000; ERRC data indicated up to 20% of undocumented Roma refugees from Ukraine ([ERRC 2023](#)).

<sup>17</sup> More at: Fiałkowska, Garapich, Mirga-Wójtowicz (2018), *Between Chance and Tradition – migration paths of Polish Roma*.

<sup>18</sup> Amnesty International (2023), Summary of a one-year study project Refugees from Ukraine in Poland: [amnesty.org/pl/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Podsumowanie-rocznego-projektu-badawczego-Uchodzcy-z-Ukrainy-w-Polsce\\_EN.pdf](https://www.amnesty.org/pl/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Podsumowanie-rocznego-projektu-badawczego-Uchodzcy-z-Ukrainy-w-Polsce_EN.pdf)

<sup>19</sup> Minority Rights Group (2022), For displaced Roma conflict has exacerbated the existing patterns of discrimination: [minorityrights.org/programmes/library/trends/trends2022/ukraine/](https://minorityrights.org/programmes/library/trends/trends2022/ukraine/) (21.06.2023)

<sup>20</sup> Population. National Population and Household Census (2011).

<sup>21</sup> Żołądek (2014), Roma in Poland, Office of Sejm Analyses: [orka.sejm.gov.pl/WydBAS.nsf/0/DCAA0E8765B4B8D6C1257D0100488367/\\$file/Infos\\_172.pdf](https://orka.sejm.gov.pl/WydBAS.nsf/0/DCAA0E8765B4B8D6C1257D0100488367/$file/Infos_172.pdf)

estimated to have claimed between 200,000 and 1.5 million lives<sup>22</sup>. In the post-war period, the policy of forced assimilation in the Eastern Bloc countries led to the gradual degradation of Roma culture and forced settlement, usually in the suburbia. This significantly aggravated the economic status of Roma groups and led to their ghettoization<sup>23</sup>.

Due to, inter alia, the employment of Roma in large industrial plants in the People's Republic of Poland, the largest Roma presence is to be found in Małopolskie, Dolnośląskie, Śląskie, and Podkarpackie voivodeships (NSL 2011). Article 35 of the Polish Constitution guarantees them a chance to preserve their culture and language, and the Act on National and Ethnic Minorities of 6 January 2005 (Journal of Laws No. 17, item 141, as amended) recognises them as one of the four ethnic minorities. The first targeted assistance programmes for the Roma minority were conducted by the Government of the Republic of Poland in 2001-2003; subsequent programmes were launched, inter alia, with the support of Roma organisations and in accordance with EU guidelines<sup>24</sup>. An expert evaluation of these programmes indicates, inter alia, the professionalisation of Roma organisations in Poland after accession to the European Union and changes in these organisations' use of available funds and programmes<sup>25</sup>; also points out, inter alia, the role of EU subsidies in combating unemployment among the Roma community in Poland and the need for action to educate people about its culture and history<sup>26</sup>.

As for human rights protection, the Roma in Poland remain a group especially at risk of discrimination and persecution (ENAR 2010; Minority Rights Group 2013; Amnesty International 2013); as well as housing segregation with documented attempts at the ghettoization of Roma encampments<sup>27</sup>. Despite a relative improvement after 2000 concerning the prevention of violence against the community or grants to support Roma organisations and initiatives, documented exclusion in terms of access to housing or discrimination in the labour market and education remains a problem. Furthermore, there is no effective and systemic prevention of prejudice at school level ([Minority Rights 2018](#)).

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Szymańczak, The social and living situation of the Roma in Poland, Opinion BAS-WASGiPU-1033/14, 15 May 2014.

<sup>24</sup> Specific guidelines and evaluation of programmes in Poland and the European Union available at: Talewicz-Kwiatkowska (2013), The impact of EU financial activity on the social situation of the Roma in Poland: [ruj.uj.edu.pl/xmlui/bitstream/handle/item/23890/talewicz-kwiatkowska\\_wplyw\\_aktynosci\\_finansowej\\_2013.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y](http://ruj.uj.edu.pl/xmlui/bitstream/handle/item/23890/talewicz-kwiatkowska_wplyw_aktynosci_finansowej_2013.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y)

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 219.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 224.

<sup>27</sup> Czarnota, Nowicka et al. (2016), Roma behind the walls. Self-colonisation, *Czas Kultury* no. 4/2016: [czaskultury.pl/sklep/nr-4-2016-191romowie-za-muramisamokolonizacja/](http://czaskultury.pl/sklep/nr-4-2016-191romowie-za-muramisamokolonizacja/)

## ANALYSIS OF THE SITUATION OF THE ROMA COMMUNITY IN PRZEMYŚL

### On the basis of monitoring and interventions 2022-2023

As part of the monitoring and intervention work, based on the support of expert organisations and official correspondence with authorities at local and voivodeship level, three key areas of issues related to the situation of Roma refugees from Ukraine were identified. **First, the area of reception and emergency humanitarian assistance**, also in terms of equal access to the humanitarian offer; it is crucial due to the border character of Podkarpackie Voivodeship. **Second, the area of integration and equal access** to accommodation and other services at the central and local level as well as long-term local policies and strategies of work with the community on the part of the INGOs. **Third, the area of anti-discrimination** and monitoring incidents of inciting to hatred towards Roma refugees; this area repeatedly overlapped with all the above segments as it has a documented impact on a lower standard of the services and support offered to Roma refugees and employees, or even leads to decisions on a return to Ukraine.

### RECEPTION. Incidents of racism in border areas and selective solidarity

Refugees are ours and not ours (...) We are happy to help if someone needs this help. Yet if they travel back and forth, they are not refugees; they are travellers (interview with City Hall employee, November 2022).

In the first months of the Russian invasion, refugee groups fleeing Ukraine were met with an unprecedented wave of social mobilisation and hospitality in Poland, including from the Ukrainian diaspora and migrant communities. However, as documented via border monitoring activities by international human rights organisations such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, both border control on both sides and support for refugees upon arrival featured signs of preferential treatment, as experienced by third-country nationals fleeing Ukraine, as well as the Roma community, including the Magyar Roma.

An investigation led by OKO.press in March 2022 showed an upsurge of misinformation and racist content on social media as early as February 26. The following is one example of such content: I have contact with an acquaintance from Lviv who wrote that Poles should not be fooled because blacks from the Belarusian border (Iran, Iraq, Egypt, Turkey) are following the throngs of Ukrainian refugees. I contacted acquaintances from customs who were ordered by the government to let them through without verification (...) they trample women and children; reportedly, one kid did not survive<sup>28</sup>. Dozens of similar posts appeared on various accounts each day in late February and early March. The message was perpetrated by

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<sup>28</sup> Archival records in the Foundation's possession.



government representatives: during the commemoration of the National Day of Remembrance of Outlawed Soldiers on 1 March 2022, some politicians of the extreme right directly called for "filtering" and "selection" of refugees from Ukraine during a conference in the Sejm and linked the issues of "non-white" refugees to issues of state security and border tightness.

According to the Ukrainian Ministry of Education and Science, at the time of the Russian invasion, there were 77,000 foreigners, mainly men from India, African countries, and Central Asia, studying in Ukraine due to the premium quality education offered and paying tuition<sup>29</sup>. Many of them lived in Kharkiv or Kyiv, the cities that Russia attacked first. Like Ukrainian citizens and nationals, and they too were forced to flee. However, their situation and reception in Poland proved to be more challenging in many respects. This was because they were not able to stay legally in Poland (or in other EU countries) for a longer period of time and because they lacked any support from central and local authorities. There have also been documented cases of racist attacks and insults from Polish society, unequal or difficult access to services.

These people do not receive the same support. (...) Some of them have returned [to their countries of origin], with a sense of mistakes and embarrassment that they did not complete their education and had to change all their plans. And they did not receive support (intercultural assistant).

By April 2022, there were approximately 40,000 foreigners of non-Ukrainian origin fleeing Ukraine (primarily, but not exclusively, international students). Because Ukrainian men were subject to mandatory conscription and were not allowed to leave the country, it was usually non-white international students who made up the vast majority of men crossing the Polish-Ukrainian border in the first, highly feminised group. During their journey, they faced discrimination, verbal abuse, and even physical violence on both sides of the border (Migration Consortium 2023; Amnesty International 2022). Prolonged entry procedures on the Ukrainian side and instances of discriminatory treatment were observed: separate queues and segregated railway carriages for international students (RPO 2022). In response to these reports, the Ministry of Internal Affairs sent a diplomatic note to the Ukrainian side in mid-March 2022. The situation was further exacerbated by long-standing anti-refugee rhetoric, particularly intensified in the context of pushbacks and human rights violations on the Polish-Belarusian border from 2021 (Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights 2022).

Following a sudden spate of racist comments on some online forums, on 1 March 2022, incoming nationalist rioters appeared in Medyka and threatened with a knife and physically attacked citizens of India. On websites and groups (including Podkarpaccy kibice), there were fake accounts of foreigners "strangling young women", thefts or invasions (of schools

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<sup>29</sup> Official communique of Ukraine's Ministry of Education and Science, 28.05.2021: [studyinukraine.gov.ua/en/the-ukrainian-state-center-for-international-education-presents-areas-of-work-on-the-education-of-foreigners-at-session-of-board-of-the-ministry-of-education-and-science/](https://studyinukraine.gov.ua/en/the-ukrainian-state-center-for-international-education-presents-areas-of-work-on-the-education-of-foreigners-at-session-of-board-of-the-ministry-of-education-and-science/) (18.06.2023)

and kindergartens); some residents exchanged information about where to meet people with a darker skin colour. An Amnesty International delegation also learned of a group of non-white refugees being transported from Przemyśl to a town near the German border in the first week of March 2022<sup>30</sup>.

Along with the gradual return of third-country nationals with the support of embassies, the practice of so-called border racism or preferential treatment at border checkpoints affected other groups, most notably the Roma minority, both refugees and the existing local community. Roma people reported difficulties and discriminatory treatment at border crossings on the Ukrainian side, but as we found out, on the Polish side the Border Guard sometimes assisted them in completing missing documentation. Roma did not collect stamps in their passports after crossing the border, which in turn was often used as a pretext for refusing to return them, even though this practice is illegal. On more than one occasion, the Office of the Ombudsman intervened in such situations following the interventions of Roma activists<sup>31</sup>.

In addition, the experience of local organisations indicated that even representatives of e.g. consulates and embassies undermine the Ukrainian citizenship of the Roma, which may lead to a double standard also in terms of the tasks and services they are eligible to and those offered to non-Roma citizens: I will never forget calling the Ukrainian embassy and being asked why we don't call the Roma embassy, explains a coordinator of work with the Roma community (June 2023). This not only contributes to the rise of anti-Roma rhetoric and the loss of trust of community organisations, but also demonstrates the bad practices (or ignorance) of embassies in the selective and discriminatory treatment of their own citizens.

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<sup>30</sup> Records in the Foundation's possession, in collaboration with Amnesty International.

<sup>31</sup> Kołaczek, Mirga-Wójtowicz & Talewicz (2022). Human rights, needs and discrimination. The situation of Roma refugees from Ukraine in Poland. <wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2022/10/2022-report-ukrainian-roma-refugees-in-poland-pl-web-version.pdf> (20.06.2023)





Children sleeping on the ground - "Roma corridor" in December 2022

## ANTI-ROMA RHETORIC BY STATE REPRESENTATIVES

It has recently come to my attention, but I guess it is not only me, that Przemyśl has been visited by so-called "hordes" of Ukrainian Roma (Councillor of Przemyśl Marcin Kowalski, original spelling)

Over the course of a year's work with the Roma community, the Foundation's research team has noted an increase in anti-Roma rhetoric in the context of migration from Ukraine, including from representatives and officials of the Polish state. In its report *We Have Come Here, They Would Not Let Us In*, Amnesty International also highlighted the dangerous tendency, incompatible e.g. with the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination. This rhetoric prevents effective integration and in some cases has the characteristics of incitement to hatred, as stipulated by the Penal Code.

In June 2022, Przemyśl city councillor Marcin Kowalski published a post on his official profile with the characteristics of xenophobia, directly writing about so-called "hordes of Ukrainian Roma": The practice involves the Roma, most of them women with small children, being brought to Poland with the sole purpose of obtaining a PESEL number, which is used to receive all the benefits granted by the Polish government (...) Once all the formalities have been completed, the Roma leave our country, return to Ukraine and wait quietly for funds from Poland, which will come to the account set up earlier during the completion of so-called formalities<sup>32</sup>. The councillor described this as an "illicit procedure" and a "trip to Poland for our money", before writing about "exploiting toddlers" and publishing photos of Roma children without their or their guardians' consent. It is worth noting that this post was not supported by data. In the following days, the councillor's post was repeatedly quoted as a source in local media, e.g. on *Dziejesienapodkarpaciu.pl*<sup>33</sup>, *Kresy.pl*<sup>34</sup> and *PrzemyślNews.pl*<sup>35</sup>. The councillor's post was forwarded by 800 people, and the comments included threats of violence or organised action against the Roma in Przemyśl, which the councillor did not address.

That very day, social media was flooded with anti-Roma content, such as e.g. a film on YouTube *Polska Gada "Hordes of Ukrainian Gypsies on the Way for a Welfare Benefit in Przemyśl"*, also using the image of minors in this discriminatory footage without the consent of their legal guardians<sup>36</sup>. The contributions arguing against the councillor's words also reproduced stereotypes of the Roma community, justifying the terms used ("horde") and -

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<sup>32</sup> Entry of 24 June 2022, Facebook, orig. spelling. Source: <https://www.facebook.com/WspolnieDlaPrzemysla/posts/600328441423584/>

<sup>33</sup> *Dziejesienapodkarpaciu.pl*, Roma coming from Ukraine to extort benefits? [video], 25.06.2022. Source: <https://dziejesienapodkarpaciu.pl/romowie-przyjezdza-z-ukrainy-do-przemysla-wyludzac-swiadczenia-video/>

<sup>34</sup> *Kresy.pl*, Przemyśl councillor raises alarm about Roma "trips" from Ukraine for the 500+ benefit, 24.06.2022. Source: <https://kresy.pl/wydarzenia/polska/radny-przemysla-alarmuje-o-wycieczkach-romow-z-ukrainy-po-500/>

<sup>35</sup> *PrzemyślNews.pl*, They beat Poland on the ass? It is Kowalski who beats... the Roma. He calls them hordes. He publicised the problem and may have caused another one, 1.07.2022. Source: <https://przemysl-news.pl/6500-2/>

<sup>36</sup> *Polska Gada*, 24.06.2022. Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6NSRfaLTvtY> (stan na 18.06.2024)

while critical of marginalisation - stating that Roma were "regrettably used" to show loopholes in the legislation<sup>37</sup>. Similar arguments do not justify the intentional publication of content by an official of the state, whose has other tools at his disposal (deputies' questions, etc.). The post of the councillor, a representative of the municipal and state authorities, was in the opinion of the research team instrumental in spreading hate speech and increased the risk of organised attacks on the Roma refugee community, who enjoyed equal rights to the benefits to which they are entitled by virtue of statutory amendments. It is the responsibility of the Polish state to monitor possible abuses arising from legislative loopholes and to counteract discrimination and hate speech in public debate, as is required by the standards of international and constitutional law, something that has been repeatedly raised by the Ombudsman<sup>38</sup>.

In September 2022, Mayor of Przemyśl Wojciech Bakun of the Kukiz 15' party published a post from his official profile "on a topic that has already been raised" as an "objective assessment of the situation", referring to the aforementioned "practice of (...) organised transports of women with children who have procedures written down on pieces of paper (...) to receive material or financial assistance"<sup>39</sup>. The photo attached to the post shows people from the Roma community; the post itself was shared by more than 1,500 people, writing in the comments about "swindlers" and "self-proclaimed refugees". In response to the post, MP Paweł Szramka sent an inquiry to the Minister of Family and Social Policy<sup>40</sup> concerning tightening the welfare system regulated bby the Law on Assistance to Person Fleeing Ukraine. In her reply to the inquiry, Undersecretary of State Barbara Socha indicated a number of instruments regulating the provision of benefits<sup>41</sup>.

Ukrainian refugees, including Roma, are entitled to assistance and social benefits set out in the above law, and preferential treatment based on membership of a particular social, ethnic or national group would be deemed discriminatory. In the case of suspected abuse, similar issues should be monitored and substantiated by appropriate investigations and then reported to the legislator, especially if the reporting person holds public office, as in the above cases. Concern for the legitimate use of social benefits and humanitarian aid is justified; the manipulation of graphic material and photographs of minors and the targeting of a specific social group without the aforementioned steps, with a documented rise in anti-

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<sup>37</sup> PrzemyślNews.pl, They beat Poland on the ass? It is Kowalski who beats... the Roma. He calls them hordes. He publicised the problem and may have caused another one, 1.07.2022. Source: <https://przemy-sl-news.pl/6500-2/>

<sup>38</sup> Letter of the Ombudsman to the Prime Minister of 19.02.2019. Source: <https://bip.brpo.gov.pl/sites/default/files/Wyst%C4%85pienie%20do%20Prezesa%20Rady%20Ministr%C3%B3w%20z%20rekomendacjami%20ws.%20walki%20z%20mow%C4%85%20nienawi%C5%9Bci.pdf>

<sup>39</sup> Entry of 22 September 2022, Facebook, orig. spelling. Source: <https://www.facebook.com/BakunWojciech/posts/pfbid02aH1oq9PUWPn7x4Ydd3TKSQgLy9MTJiArFxRe1MQ5yCaMeCAGdWDozQdzzT2MLmNI>

<sup>40</sup> Deputies' inquiries no. 34374 of 30.06.2022. Source: <https://www.sejm.gov.pl/sejm9.nsf/interpelacja.xsp?documentId=1283F24A48C79A3DC1258875002FE073>

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

refugee sentiments and Romaphobic rhetoric in public debate<sup>42</sup> with respect to a group of refugees excluded from the debate and vulnerable, is especially dangerous and, as indicated by the Ombudsman, has irreversible effects.

This rhetoric is not limited to single cases and is thus replicated by some of the decision-makers of the City Hall and the Voivodeship Office in charge of humanitarian aid distribution and systemic solutions. Over the course of intervention activities, interviews with representatives of the City Hall and international organisations, the research team have experienced this rhetoric on several occasions. In a conversation with one representative of the City Hall regarding the Roma: They come here to collect benefits, nothing more. They are not refugees; they are economic travellers<sup>43</sup>. In response to the Ombudsman's intervention regarding the treatment of the Roma community in Przemyśl in November 2022, Voivode of Podkarpackie Ewa Leniart stated that "they are treated like all other refugees arriving from areas directly affected by warfare", also referring to the "specific way of functioning", and stated that "in the opinion of the Municipality of Przemyśl, the main purpose of arriving in the territory of the Republic of Poland is to obtain a PESEL number and receive social benefits under the law"<sup>44</sup>.

As the Migration Consortium observes: Similar attitudes and negative and stereotypical comments from central and local government representatives (...) perpetuate prejudice and create a harmful atmosphere of widespread and systemic approval of discrimination<sup>45</sup>. A similar message is conveyed by the seemingly humorous comments, such as Polish President Andrzej Duda's February 2022 Twitter post on how "Kherson's Roma stole a tank from the Russians"<sup>46</sup>. By referring to the Roma community only in this manner and context (theft; a joke), in the context of the ongoing military action in Ukraine and the presence of Roma refugees in Poland, this manner, in the team's view, provides a framework for the public debate concerning a particularly marginalised group.

Furthermore, this rhetoric has an impact on being echoed by aid organisations and volunteers in Przemyśl, and thus on access to and the quality of the provided services, which should be the same for all beneficiaries<sup>47</sup>. The research team have gathered evidence of anti-Roma attitudes and comments from volunteers and helpers.

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<sup>42</sup> Kołaczek, Talewicz, Mirga-Wójtowicz (2022). Human rights, needs and discrimination. The situation of Roma refugees from Ukraine in Poland.

<sup>43</sup> City Office of Przemyśl, January 2023.

<sup>44</sup> Reply of the Voivode of Podkarpacie to the letter of the Ombudsman's Office of 9 November 2022. Source: <https://bip.brpo.gov.pl/pl/content/rpo-przemysl-dworzec-uchodzczy-ukraina-romowie-wojewoda-odpowiedz>

<sup>45</sup> Polska Szkoła Pomagania. Reception and integration of refugees from Ukraine in Poland in 2022. <https://konsorcjum.org.pl/storage/2023/04/Polska-Szkola-Pomagania-raport.pdf>

<sup>46</sup> Twitter account of President of the Republic of Poland Andrzej Duda, 27.02.2022: <https://twitter.com/AndrzejDuda/status/1497899381697257475?lang=en>

<sup>47</sup> Apart from persons with special needs.

Somehow, I don't feel very sorry for them. I think to myself that for them it is pretty much the norm, said in an interview a volunteer<sup>48</sup> at the Przemyśl Railway Station, referring to the Roma group in the so-called "Roma corridor"<sup>49</sup>. They are all very sly – said another volunteer, working for an international aid organisation<sup>50</sup>. Staff members of the railway station called the Roma "Romans", also in communication with the local NGOs<sup>51</sup>. The Foundation team further reported that this makes the provision of support and integration services considerably more difficult, and often sets an aggressive tone in the debate with authorities or organisations; it even excludes them, despite the support offered. On the other hand, in the case of organisations or volunteers, this attitude is less frequent than on the part of the authorities.

A repetition of anti-Roma or stereotyping rhetoric on the part of centre managers, even when they did not have this intention, has also been documented. Roma children were described as those who "have lice" or who steal in the vicinity of a collective accommodation centre, e.g. in Kidałowice<sup>52</sup>. During the Foundation's visit with a representative of the Ukrainian House in Przemyśl, a worker reported that the staff stated that the Transcarpathian (Magyar) Roma were "not Roma", which was then repeated by the station's staff. She also indicated, referring to her experience of over a year working in Przemyśl, that officers of the Territorial Defence Force completely dehumanise and discriminate against the Roma<sup>53</sup>. Another interlocutor offered the following account:

We knew from previous visits that the place where this group stayed was called the "Roma corridor". We were advised not to go there for security reasons. When we approached them [the Roma group], it turned out that they knew what we were doing (...); they started talking to us. During the conversation, an employee of an international organisation approached us and asked if we were safe because we were after all surrounded by a group of Roma.

During an intervention at the Przemyśl Railway Station of April 2023, described later in the report, a Foundation employee heard from the railway station staff that "our rules and regulations set out that we are not to let Roma in" [the Mother and Child facility], even though, despite several requests to be shown the rules and regulations, they turned out to be a "spoken agreement". In the same conversation, with regard to the Roma group staying at the station, a person working there remarked that "the so-called Roma make encampments"<sup>54</sup>.

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<sup>48</sup> Przemyśl, January 2023.

<sup>49</sup> A term used by the railway station staff, December 2022. The name was regularly used in conversation with the staff over one year.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> December 2022.

<sup>52</sup> Based on direct action of the emergency response team.

<sup>53</sup> December 2022.

<sup>54</sup> Audiovisual records in the Foundation's possession, April 2023.



In the period after the Foundation's intervention (May-June 2023), there was an improvement in the situation of the Roma at the railway station and the cooperation between Roma employees and the station staff intensified. Importantly, large groups continued to show up (e.g. a group of several tens of Magyar Roma), but they were treated better and admitted to the reception point. At the same time, the reception point itself, by the decision of the Voivode announced at the Podkarpacie Coordination Meeting in June 2023, will only operate until 15 July 2023. Thus, refugees arriving in Przemyśl will be forced to seek support at private points or from international organisations, without being able to count on such support at the transfer point itself; this also applies to incoming Roma.





Children sleeping on the ground - "Roma corridor" in December 2022

## **INTEGRATION.**

### **ACCESS AND STANDARD OF ACCOMMODATION AND SOCIAL SERVICES**

#### **Our rules and regulations set out that we are not to let Roma in**

(employee of the Przemyśl Railway Station)

Since the first months, the housing situation of Roma refugees both in Przemyśl and nationwide has been significantly worse than that of other people fleeing Ukraine (Amnesty International 2023). Roma men and women are increasingly facing difficulties and resistance from private landlords, due to a range of factors, from documented cases of anti-Roma attitudes to financial constraints<sup>55</sup>. In the first weeks, Roma found accommodation mainly in private housing thanks to groups on social media, with no noticeable support from the state (Kończak, Mirga & Talewicz 2022); a year later the housing situation of refugees from Ukraine was dramatically worse (Migration Consortium 2023), which was especially detrimental for the Roma community, relying predominantly on the support of civil society organisations.

A 2023 Amnesty International report identified systematic restriction of access to reception centres for Roma people fleeing Ukraine, e.g. in the centres in Nadarzyn, Hrubieszów or Krakow, describing this as a "worrying pattern of actions taken towards Roma refugees". The regular monitoring by social organisations in Przemyśl and the evidence collected there confirms the above, too.

#### **RECEPTION CENTRES AND COLLECTIVE ACCOMMODATION FACILITIES**

Although this was not the case at the beginning of the war, currently no centre run by the city or the voivode supports the accommodation of refugees for more than two weeks (humanitarian worker, April 2023)

In Podkarpacie, as a border transit voivodeship, the large-scale collective accommodation sites and reception points that constituted the first line of reception for refugees in the first months of the invasion have been gradually phased out as of 2023. These sites, usually administered by public authorities, cities and municipalities, were set up ad hoc in sports halls and shopping centres, schools and farms; their nature was ultimately intended to be temporary, and they often did not offer a standard of sanitation, privacy or security, especially at the outset (Amnesty International 2022; Ombudsman 2022). According to the voivodeship's data, at its peak in 2022 there were six reception points providing assistance to up to 120,000 refugees per day; only one such facility is currently operational (June 2023).

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<sup>55</sup> FRA (2022), Roma in 10 European countries. Main results; according to the report, as many as 80% of Roma live at subsistence level, which confirms earlier periodic studies of the Agency of 2009 and 2016.

The statutory introduction of the participation fee in January 2023 and the gradual phasing out of these sites, coupled with incomplete coordination and communication of these activities, only exacerbated the housing exclusion of refugees, often without offering an alternative; the minority groups such as Roma people are particularly vulnerable. As the Ombudsman noted, Roma families would not like to be separated in accommodation, and therefore need bigger living quarters and stay longer at the reception points, which they often have problems accessing (July 2022). There are few centres in the voivodeship that are not administered by the state and receive Roma, such as the UNITATEM or the Open Heart near Przemyśl; they too still need support to continue their activities, as is evident directly from the Foundation's monitoring. Faced with difficulties and exclusion, Roma people often decide to return to Ukraine, including the war-ravaged region of Transcarpathia; if they later decide to return to Poland, the first safe country, the offer of support for them diminishes due to their departure.

From the first months of the invasion, access for Roma to collective accommodation and reception centres was tougher than for other refugee groups. In July 2022, in response to alarming cases of Roma not being admitted to reception centres, the Ombudsman reminded that staff and volunteers at reception sites should be made aware that lack of documents does not mean that they are not war refugees and are not entitled to support, and that the Border Guard are able to verify that a person has crossed the border (Ombudsman 2022). The standard of these places also differed, as highlighted by Olena Vaidalovych, a human rights expert, in an interview with OKO.press: I have visited several reception points for refugees from Ukraine. I noticed that the places for Ukrainians are well-equipped and relatively comfortable, while those for Roma have essentially nothing and the conditions are much worse<sup>56</sup>. This in large measure tallied with the conclusions drawn after long-term monitoring carried out by the Foundation in Przemyśl, including preventing Roma women from accessing the Mother and Child Facility in Przemyśl Railway Station, documented examples of anti-Roma attitudes and comments of some volunteers and managers of the centres, internal restrictions and making admission conditional on, for example, train tickets or stamps without prior information, poorer standards of accommodation and hindered access by civil society organisations or a lack of adequate response by international organisations and authorities to symptoms of stigmatisation in the centres.

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<sup>56</sup> OKO.press, Roma from Ukraine treated as second-class refugees, 1 April 2022: <https://oko.press/romowie-z-ukrainy-traktowani-jak-uchodzcy-drugiej-kategorii-slyszymy-tych-ludzi-nie-przyjmujemy> [access: 16.06.2023]

## RECEPTION POINT AT PRZEMYŚL CENTRAL RAILWAY STATION

In the summer and autumn of 2022, the attention of civil society organisations and the Ombudsman was drawn to groups of Roma refugees sleeping on the ground at Przemyśl Central Railway Station, despite the presence there of the city and voivodeship crisis staff and international organisations. Since December 2022, the Foundation's team have intervened several times in relation to reports of discrimination against Roma people, also in cooperation with the Ombudsman.

The Ombudsman received disturbing information regarding the situation of Roma people, war refugees from Ukraine, staying at the railway station in Przemyśl. As of 29 October 2022, more than 70 people of this nationality, mainly families with children, were sleeping in the corridor of the station building. They slept on the floor and had no access to toilets. According to reports, the free portable toilets are not usable due to their disrepair. There was a lack of funding for the use of paid toilets for the group staying at the station (Ombudsman to the Voivode of Podkarpackie, 11.09.2022).

Importantly, the Ombudsman notified this state of affairs as early as July, referring to the submissions made on March 19 and 20, and then in December that year. This contradicts the reply made by Voivode Ewa Leniart of temporary intensification (December 2022), also on the basis of observations made by such local organisations as the Ukrainian House in Przemyśl. Such experiences are also corroborated by the accounts of the refugee women themselves from the above period: one refugee woman in a city centre in Warsaw, who was in Przemyśl in July 2022 with her four teenage children, returned to Ukraine and then found herself in Przemyśl again in December 2022, confirmed that she had seen groups of Roma sleeping on the ground of the railway station on both occasions. Another Roma woman said in November 2022: There was nowhere to go, nothing to do (...) We were not allowed into other places. Maria, who has been to Przemyśl three times, recalls that they feed well at the station (...) they give food to everyone, including children. They can't play at the station, but they don't go hungry. According to Maria's account, the biggest difficulty was sleeping on the ground and the lack of information; people slept on the ground due to the increasingly rare free transport, and information was provided by a Roma humanitarian worker, as those dressed in blue did not say anything to us.

Roma people were regularly denied access to the Mother and Child Facility at the train station, which was brought to the attention of the Ombudsman. During the Foundation's intervention activities in April 2023, one person offering support at the station said: our rules and regulations set out that we are not to let Roma in<sup>57</sup>. The Foundation's team confirmed that they have heard this justification since the onset of interventions:

Since the beginning of our visits, we have heard that there is a provision in the regulations about Roma not being let in there, but when we repeatedly inquired about the regulations

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<sup>57</sup> Audiovisual records in the Foundation's possession.

and wanted to be shown this provision, we heard that it is an oral agreement (intervention coordinator, May 2023).

As one of the humanitarian workers at the station reports: You need a ticket to enter, although there are also people there without a physical ticket to Germany or the Czech Republic; nevertheless, Roma are not allowed in. The workers quote the words of Deputy Mayor of Przemyśl, who ordered them not to let Roma women and children in. We filed a request for them to comment on this, but received no response. In our presence, they said that the disabled and Roma are not welcome here.

In December 2022, the Voivode of Podkarpacie, responding to a letter of the Ombudsman, justified the situation of the Roma by mentioning that the way of functioning, language problems and above all cultural differences make it difficult to provide assistance, while at the same time explaining, in response to a request concerning specifically the refusal of access to the Mother and Child Facility, that the aim of the facility is short-term emergency assistance, addressed mainly to mothers with children, the sick and the elderly; and mentioning that the conditions of use of the Reception Centre apply in principle to refugees arriving from war zones, not to all travellers. In the Foundation's view and based on regular monitoring by e.g. Amnesty International, the practice of excluding Roma people, the vast majority of whom qualify, is still incomprehensible in such a case. In turn, the distinction between refugees and all travellers in the provision of assistance to Roma refugees raises serious concerns.

In turn, the Voivode's argument about language difficulties, raised in another letter from the Ombudsman, with proposed positive solutions, was met with a response from the Voivode only a month later: With regard to the Ombudsman's suggestions concerning the problem of the language barrier among the Roma community, I believe that this is an apparent problem (...) These people are Ukrainian citizens, they present documents which are issued in Ukrainian. In addition, all these persons do not have language problems when they need to deal with formalities related to the allocation of a PESEL number or concerning other formalities related to their benefits. Such a sudden change of position on the part of the Voivode in just one month is worrying in that it justified both the difficulties in aiding Roma, including access to accommodation and assistance, and the refusal of the authorities to introduce solutions such as the employment of Roma interpreters/assistants. Moreover, a major difficulty faced by both border services and community organisations is precisely the undocumented Roma, who are denied such assistance; something that cannot be established and verified without the support of interpreters, and which often impacts the very lives of the refugees.

Crucially, also volunteers and station staff have reported racism and discrimination against Roma people at the station. One volunteer's correspondence with the Foundation in March

2023 confirms a number of abuses and anti-Roma attitudes among some staff. According to the volunteer<sup>58</sup>:

While working at the station, I experienced an extraordinary scale of humanitarian aid, but also racism incomparable to anything I had known before (...) I don't want to belittle this aid, but to draw attention to a problem that many of us have been struggling with for over a year now (... ) I have seen Roma families who, by the dozens and even sometimes over a hundred, have been forced to sleep on the floor of the station since refugee centres and NGOs refused to put them up for the night (...) I have seen them thrown out of the station by the station and city authorities to sleep on the ground, because they are "too dirty to sleep here".

He goes on: I have seen them denied food because someone similar-looking - that is, non-white - has just finished their meal. And this is just the tip of the iceberg. In general, most non-white Ukrainian citizens are not treated as refugees by the city authorities and the station administration because of their ethnicity.

On 14 December 2022, in the presence of the Foundation staff, a forced disinfection of the so-called Roma corridor took place: They decided to throw the Roma out of there. They didn't understand that they had to take their luggage with them, so the Polish Rail employees threw the luggage into the rubbish bins. Almost all the employees of the international organisations saw this, but no one reacted. Roma women and children pulled their belongings out of the garbage bin with their own hands. Under the impact of these events, a third of the group decided to return to Ukraine, she explains. This discrimination and sleeping at the station made it seem safer in the war zone (February 2023).

These testimonies are a particularly incisive analysis of the double standard of assistance directly experienced by Roma people at the Przemyśl Railway Station. Individual parts of this account overlap with the experiences of the staff of the Foundation and other organisations, as well as of the refugees themselves. As one of the interviewees, a journalist, reported, the police kicked Roma people out of the station area on the pretext of a risk of theft (February 2023).

The main argument for denying Roma people access to the Mother and Child Facility was the criterion of having train tickets, but as the April 2023 intervention proved, this too is a criterion used selectively, to the disadvantage of Roma people. The Foundation team met two mothers with five children who had been waiting for the 4:20am train to Bydgoszcz since at least midday, who despite having tickets were not allowed into the Mother and Child Facility. Nor were they informed about this possibility but were given blankets to sleep on in the so-called Roma corridor. The team looked for accommodation for a night for a group and then reported to the railway station staff on behalf of the Voivode.

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<sup>58</sup> Correspondence in the Foundation's possession, request for anonymity. Translation from English.



We ask whether these women can use the Mother and Child Facility, because they have tickets, which means that, according to the regulations (!), they can enter the area. The workers carefully inspect the tickets, check whether there are free seats in the Facility. There is no room, so they send them back to Bielany (...) At 8pm that day a train leaves for Hanover, so there will be free seats, we suggest that mothers with children can wait in the waiting room and then go to the Mother and Child Facility. They are heading to Bielany until the morning (...) transport from Bielany to the station on their own. It is unclear what will happen by the evening and whether these places will continue to be there. Mothers and children are dog-tired and exhausted<sup>59</sup>.

During the intervention, an employee of the Ukrainian House working at the station reports that there was a ban on the use of this space for Roma under the auspices of Medair, as confirmed by employees of other organisations. The coordinator of the point denied this, explaining that the Roma are offered access to the point and receive assistance in kind. However, the problem is that the Roma block places and set up encampments. Following an intervention, the group stayed for the night on the premises of the train station.

Another humanitarian worker confirmed in an interview that on 14 December 2022 they received notification from the Ukrainian House to intervene as the staff of the Mother and Child Facility had not let in a Roma mother with a child despite her showing a Flixbus ticket. The day before, they had refused to hand over blankets and warm clothes to children sleeping on the floor of the station<sup>60</sup>.

Similarly, in the aforementioned correspondence, one volunteer reported in March 2023:

Going back to the situation from two days ago. There was a "Roma" family who had bought a ticket for the next one and wanted to enter the waiting room, while one of them was looking for a hotel room for the night. The Territorial Defence Force soldier on duty at the time, as he approached the entrance to the waiting room, refused entry to the family, saying that he "needed the supervisor's permission to let them in". When my supervisor and I went to ask her supervisor, who is also the "coordinator" of the train station, to let them in, he refused, too. After asking him why, he simply stated: "They are gypsies, look at them"; "if I let one of them in, they will all somehow find a ticket and will want to get in". When the father of the family heard us, he asked the Coordinator directly why they were not allowed in, to which the soldier replied: "You are a Gypsy".<sup>61</sup>

A similar account points to blatant discrimination and antigypsyism on the part of authority representatives, contrary to declared standards, also recorded in the case of the reception

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<sup>59</sup> Record of an intervention of a Foundation employee.

<sup>60</sup> Humanitarian worker, January 2023.

<sup>61</sup> Correspondence in the Foundation's possession, request for anonymity.

of Roma refugees at other transit stations e.g. in the Czech Republic<sup>62</sup>. The very criterion of having valid travel tickets, especially after the withdrawal of cost-free travel for refugees to Germany in May 2023, compounds the difficulties for Roma people, who often cannot afford such a trip and who face additional discrimination and lack of access to services at the only current reception point in Przemyśl. Furthermore, interventions by the Ukrainian House in Przemyśl and the Foundation indicate that people repeatedly hang out at the train station due to their dire financial situation; they get cold and cannot become independent due to the poverty loop they are in; they "live on the rolls handed out at the train station" (December 2022).

The Voivode points to the relocation programme as a solution to this situation, but stresses that this offer is met with refusal from Roma people and the destruction of means of transport; the reason for this refusal is said to be the need for Roma people to stay close to the border with Ukraine. Importantly, a large proportion of Roma people have a bad perception of the relocation experience, especially to smaller settlements, where they were additionally exposed to stigmatisation; an additional criterion mentioned by the Ombudsman and the Voivode is the size of families that cannot be separated, which further discourages Roma people from accepting the relocation offer. Recruiting and engaging Roma people themselves to assist at the station, such as a UNHCR staff member, also proved to be good practice: [In the station] there were a lot of people and just as many volunteers: Ukrainian and Polish. There were a lot of them, but they didn't really want to take care of the Roma: they were mainly helping the Ukrainians. This was that situation until X arrived.

The lack of adequate sanitary infrastructure (apart from free portable toilets), absence of heating or Roma staff was also repeatedly raised in submissions made by the Foundation, local social organisations, and the Ombudsman's Office. These arguments were mostly criticised by the Voivode, who emphasises that the sanitary facilities are cleaned regularly, yet cultural differences and hygiene habits may sometimes make their condition distant from generally accepted standards (December 2022). Heated tents outside the station have never been put up, and the Voivode also stated that the station is heated, although the experience of the Foundation's staff is different. The Voivode pointed out as well that Roma people do not have difficulties requiring, for example, the presence of additional interpreters.

The isolated example of the practice of exclusion of Roma persons from accommodation and services at the Przemyśl Railway Station by municipal and provincial authorities, as well as the lack of adequate response from international organisations, especially those specialised in working with children, constitute a blatant and engrained practice that stands in contrast to humanitarian standards of support for vulnerable groups, to which stigmatised Roma refugees in Ukraine, mainly women and children, undoubtedly belong (Human Rights

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<sup>62</sup> The Guardian, 'They won't accept us': Roma refugees forced to camp at Prague train station, 25.05.2022: [theguardian.com/global-development/2022/may/25/they-wont-accept-us-roma-refugees-forced-to-camp-at-prague-train-station](https://theguardian.com/global-development/2022/may/25/they-wont-accept-us-roma-refugees-forced-to-camp-at-prague-train-station) (20.06.2023)

Watch 2022). The reaction of the authorities, including the Ombudsman's correspondence with the Voivode of Podkarpackie Region, does not in any way indicate that the authorities are actively seeking to improve the situation of Roma people in the last remaining reception centre in Przemyśl.

## **"ACCOMMODATION OUT OF OBLIGATION".**

### **Collective accommodation and participation fee in Podkarpackie Voivodeship**

It is not easy for me to be here on my own; I have come from far away. I would like to stay longer, but not here, not in this centre. I don't understand why they have brought me here. And then the bus was gone and I had no way to get back (woman, May 2023)

Within Podkarpacie, places of collective accommodation have been systematically closed down since the end of 2022 in order to emphasise the transit character of the voivodeship and relieve the aid and administrative infrastructure of the border cities. This trend resembles that of other voivodeships but proceeds incomparably faster. However, as studies conducted in this regard by the Union of Polish Metropolises (2022) and the Migration Consortium (2023) indicate, housing alternatives for collective accommodation remain a problem, especially for vulnerable groups such as Roma people (FRA 2022).

In July 2022, one of Poland's largest humanitarian aid centres in the former TESCO mall on Kapelanka Street was evicted. Despite the huge scale of the aid offered<sup>63</sup> and the number of involved actors, in the first months, it was a point of considerable risk in terms of sanitary conditions and security protocols, also due to unclear procedures for registering and transporting refugees from Przemyśl further into the country, and the fatigue of volunteers. "We're staying up a second night because we're providing assistance", explained an American volunteer in March 2022. Amnesty International delegations already drew attention in March 2022 to the preferential treatment of certain groups, particularly non-white refugees, including Roma, and thus instances of non-entry into centres or refusal of assistance provided to others (Amnesty International 2022). Potentially, this could have been due to prejudice, ignorance, a lack of clear instructions from coordinating staff, and compassion fatigue.

Many of the female interviewees recalled favourably their experiences at the TESCO reception desk: I was supposed to stay at Tesco for three days, but because of my condition I stayed a week. They treated me there, they even gave me a massage for my legs because I couldn't stand up. They took care of the children. I can't say anything wrong about that stay at Tesco – said Lisaveta.

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<sup>63</sup> Until July 2022, the aid of the CPK was used by approx. 250,00 refugees, according to the City Office of Przemyśl.

In July 2022, the Foundation received information that “due to disruptions in the departures and arrivals schedule of trains in Przemyśl, a large group of refugees from Ukraine, including around 100 Roma, gathered at the railway station. Mayor Wojciech Bakun, who was personally present at the station, demanded that volunteers never take Roma to the Tesco assistance centre”<sup>64</sup>. In response to the reports, Foundation staff came to Przemyśl on July 27. They met with the Roma community and volunteers, as well as the Director of the Tesco Centre, who informed us that it was planned to clean the Centre and thus close the said place from 2-7 August that year. As it turned out two days later, the Centre was not closed due to cleaning (letter of the Foundation to the Ombudsman, 1 August 2022). As a result, on July 31, the Centre ceased to register newcomers without offering any justification and communicating with the refugees staying on the premises, and afterwards began to forcibly evict people from the building.

The people in Tesco were told by the Municipal Police to leave for Hanover, Germany or Ukraine, as otherwise they would end up on the street. The whole situation, although no physical force was used, was chaotic and at times frightening. You could hear the cries and screams of people with whom no one had entered into dialogue and who did not know where they would go. Around 300 people, mostly of Roma origin, were transported to Warsaw. Many people who did not get on the coaches remained on the street or at railway stations (letter of Foundation Towards Dialogue to the Ombudsman, 1 August 2022).

In reply to the Foundation’s letter, on 2 August 2022 the Ombudsman’s Office sent an inquiry to Mayor of Przemyśl, reiterating that it is the authorities that under such circumstances bear the responsibility for finding substitute accommodation to refugees. Przemyśl City Office replied<sup>65</sup> that the Centre had not been designated by the Voivode as a reception point (as the facility at the railway station is such a point), and information about the fact that the Polish Red Cross on behalf of the commune would take over coordination of the Centre as of July 5, which was connected with a temporary closing down of it and the transfer of the residents, had been communicated a week in advance to all the residents of the premises personally, through the PA, and via posters in various languages<sup>66</sup>. Przemyśl City Office assured moreover that each refugee, irrespective of their origin, would receive full assistance in Przemyśl.

From August 2022, however, the Humanitarian Aid Centre in Przemyśl only accepted persons who were crossing the border for the first time and had to present themselves within 24 hours of arrival, which deprived Roma persons of support. As a result, families with children and elderly people stayed overnight for several days or more in one of the corridors of the

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<sup>64</sup> Available at: <https://adcmemorial.org/en/news/mayor-of-przemysl-wojciech-bakun-restricted-to-accept-roma-people-at-the-help-center/>

<sup>65</sup> Reply of the City Office of Przemyśl of 9.08.2022: <https://bip.brpo.gov.pl/pl/content/rpo-centrum-recepcyjne-uchodzczy-ukraina-przemysl-zamkniecie-odpowiedz>

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

Przemyśl Central Station: Nobody helps them here. They don't want them in the centre, we don't know how to work with them. They sit here all day, and even when we help them get on that free train to Germany, they are sent back - and so on and so forth, explained one of the employees of the Crisis Staff at Przemyśl Central Railway Station (Migration Consortium 2023).

In January 2023, the Centre was closed down. Simultaneously, on January 25 the Sejm adopted an amendment to the Assistance Law, imposing a so-called participation fee in the cost of collective accommodation on the refugees themselves of up to 50% for 120 days from registered entry to Poland; up to 75% for 180 days; and up to PLN 1,200 and PLN 1,800, respectively, per person, unless they qualify for a fee waiver. This change has come under considerable criticism from the social sector and has contributed to an increase in the scale of refugee returns to Ukraine; as evidenced by the Migration Consortium's research in six voivodeships, including Podkarpackie Voivodeship, regional authorities and local governments were not provided with precise guidelines on how to proceed, while site managers and refugees themselves were not familiar with the exact criteria for fee exemption and how to proceed if a person cannot pay such a fee (Migration Consortium 2023). With a significant deterioration in the housing situation for refugees, instead of professional activation, which according to the authorities was behind the amendment, the result could be an increased risk of homelessness for the refugees themselves, arbitrariness and misinformation on the part of the local authorities, and an overload on the part of social organisations shouldering the already difficult task of accommodating refugees. According to one social organisation worker: First the Roma were not allowed in, now those who are there have to look for a roof over their heads themselves (...) It's difficult, because hardly anyone wants to house Roma; hardly anyone wants to house refugees at all now. The state is messing with us again<sup>67</sup>.

The statutory amendment lists seven groups exempted from the participation fee. However, Roma refugees are not included. The interpretation of the vague category of "vulnerable" persons is left to local authorities; support in the process of completing documentation and interpreting the fee exemption requirements to persons is in turn left to community organisations. In the case of the Roma, for reasons mentioned throughout this Report, this is an especially difficult process. First, it requires a favourable approach to and contextual knowledge about the Roma on the part of the authorities. Second, the presence and involvement of specialised Roma social organisations, which do not have the capacity to operate nationwide or even within a single voivodeship in Poland. Third, they further burden Roma refugees with an unclear, often inaccessible procedure. Alternatively, there are centres for which the state administration is not responsible, which also face (financial, administrative) difficulties; in addition, not all are adjusted to the needs of refugees.

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<sup>67</sup> Kraków, social organisation worker, March 2023.

In a reply dated 17 April 2023, the Voivode of Podkarpackie Voivodeship provided a list of places of collective accommodation in the voivodeship and confirmed that all procedures for the exemption of fees and the enforcement of dues remain the responsibility of local self-government units, i.e. in this case the Municipality of Przemyśl<sup>68</sup>. Podkarpackie Voivodeship hosted 79 venues of mass accommodation, with 778 residents; there are no such facilities within the city limits of Przemyśl or its vicinity (25.02.2023).

Importantly, in 2023 the Foundation acquired a list of venues of mass accommodation, distributed by INGOs and UN bodies responsible for support to refugees, with detailed and updated information about places which “do not allow the Roma”<sup>69</sup> in Podkarpackie Voivodeship. The purpose of distributing such a list remains unknown, but whenever international assistance organisations are in possession of such lists, they should be used to clarify discriminatory practices in accommodation and training, preferably including local and Roma organisations, rather than for logistical purposes. The Foundation has chosen not to disclose the details of the list.

## **“ACCOMMODATION OUT OF THE KINDNESS OF THE HEART”.**

### **Detailed characteristics of accommodation for Roma refugees from Ukraine**

The few facilities offering accommodation to Roma refugees in the region of Podkarpacie, the research team have identified first of all the Bilan Centre in collaboration with the Polish Red Cross and CORE; the UNITATEM in nearby Radymno, Kidałowice, and Jarosław; the centre of the Open Heart Foundation; Hope Shelter; and three facilities run by Caritas of the Archdiocese of Przemyśl. Additionally, it is worthwhile to scrutinise the Roma Task program initiated by the UNHCR.

The Bilan Centre was set up directly in response to the closing down of the Assistance Centre in the former TESCO mall. According to data provided to the Foundation by the management of the centre, the facility has 110 beds and 70% of the current residents are Roma men and women (May 2023). The stay is limited to 12 days and is conditional on the residents' having documents. In addition, this must be a person's first time in Poland. During the first month, more than 1,000 refugees passed through the point. One of the employees is herself a Ukrainian Roma who fled to Poland with her family after 5 months in a bunker in Kiev. After a stay in Katowice, Oksana was employed under the auspices of CORE in the Bilan Centre, where she supports refugees and has come to live with her family in the Open Heart Centre.

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<sup>68</sup> Reply of the Voivode of Podkarpackie of 17.04.2023 to the Institute of Legal Studies of the Polish Academy of Sciences.

<sup>69</sup> Original spelling. The letter in the Foundation's possession.

The Open Heart Foundation's Shelter is one of the few that offer long-term accommodation to refugees, including Ukrainian Roma. The centre houses up to 70 residents. One of the biggest challenges, as one of the people coordinating the centre pointed out, is the blatant discrimination of the Roma by non-Roma Ukrainians. The residents rebelled and decided not to use the shared kitchen and fridge claiming that the Roma would steal their food. A seven-year-old girl was attacked by residents with a ball, fell off her bike and suffered injuries. There are also incidents of verbal violence and hate speech<sup>70</sup>. The coordinator admitted that she feels helpless in the face of this situation although she made an ultimatum to the residents as to the rules of living in mutual respect. Oksana's family, who due to their Roma origin were unable to find accommodation, came to live in the centre. As Oksana herself observes: We have survived only thanks to you, madam (...).

The Hope Shelter offers short-term accommodation (up to three days), and the residents are not required to have documents and to be staying in Poland the first time. Many Roma interviewees identified this place as the best, welcoming to all, open to Roma and persons with disabilities (May 2023). There are 120 places; all work on a voluntary basis, and Oxfam is one of the organisations supporting refugees in the centre. There is a truly family atmosphere here; people help each other every step of the way. Apart from refugees, there are homeless people from Poland and other countries who can eat, shower, and find shelter (...) All can cook and use the kitchen at all times. The most crucial thing for the volunteers is the creation of a community; this can occur through equal treatment and respect for the guests (May 2023). It is also a place where discrimination against Roma has not been documented; on the contrary, the Roma have been included in the running of the centre almost from the start. Misunderstandings are clarified immediately and in the presence of the centre's managers.

We cannot say that we do not have instances of discrimination, but when it happens, we talk and address the incident. If someone nevertheless continues to discriminate, they break the rules and are then kicked out (...) In fact, there are Roma from Transcarpathia who often had no access to a toilet before; sometimes they do not know how to use the kitchen. We show them everything step by step at the start, involve them in the life of our centre and it turns out that Roma kids are the first to tidy the place up (April 2023). As a volunteer points out, it was one Roma family that showed him the enormous scale of the persecution of Roma in Ukraine. He also points out that the centre has no sustainable funding, so it is unclear how long it will survive, and there is a will to expand the centre's activities to include vocational activation and shoemaking workshops for refugees.

The CARITAS Foundation of the Archdiocese of Przemyśl coordinates three centres: the Centre for Assistance to Migrants and Refugees, the Centre for Social Integration and the Przemyśl Mother and Child Home. As part of their activities, they run integration courses,

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<sup>70</sup> A note from an interview with the centre's coordinator, Przemyśl.

Polish language classes, respite camps for Ukrainian children; they also run a day care centre for children and competence training for adults. As the Foundation's staff learned in an interview: Last year we had a lot of Roma beneficiaries because we ran a cash programme. Then they also benefited from material support in the form of clothes and food. At that time we were unable to encourage these people to participate in activities such as language courses or job activation. Since the end of the cash programme, occasionally Roma families will turn up for material support and then they receive what they need from us: blankets, pillows, logs, food, clothes (???). The offer of financial and in-kind support has proved crucial, but the centre's management admits that they have not been able to convince Roma people to make use of the rest of the Foundation's offer. If anyone comes - we support, he explains, adding that the future of the centres is very uncertain and looks dim. Fewer and fewer private individuals want to help Ukrainian refugees. Huge social discontent is growing (...) We live from day to day and have no stability. We are looking for resources all the time. Until the end of the year we are supported by UNHCR. We are living from grant to grant.

Particularly noteworthy are the UNITATEM centres in Jarosław, Radymno and Kidałowice, which over time have in a way become responsible for the reception of Roma refugees. The first centre is located about 30 km away from Korczowa, in an isolated area, and provides refugees with a long-term stay under the 40+ programme and donor support. The foundation started the day after the war, in March it gained legal personality: We opened this centre 48h after we saw Roma on the street, explains the coordinator. It operates without the support of the local authorities, and the Voivode refuses to meet despite the Foundation's requests. In July 2022, according to the coordinator, there were 240 people in the centre; out of the 60 Roma staying a month before, only two families remained. Psychological and legal support is offered as part of the centre's work, and Roma organisations can run workshops about working with the Roma community. The coordinator particularly highlighted tensions between Roma and non-Roma refugees and drew attention to frequent quarrels between Roma refugee women and reported child neglect (?). Another coordinator reported that the Roma refugees accommodated at the centre lead to frustration among the staff, as they are loud, dirty, and confrontational and that only 10% can read and write (July 2022). During the visit, two non-Roma refugee women complained about living with Roma people but did not report any discrimination at the centre.

In March 2023, there were more than a hundred Roma people (about 130), most from Transcarpathia. A visit of aid organisations and the Foundation shows a deterioration of accommodation standards, including sanitation. According to the evidence gathered in the field, mainly Roma people from the whole region are referred to UNITATEM in Radymno: the most marginalised group of Roma from Ukraine live here, the coordinator explains. Meals are brought in with the support of the DRC and Caritas, among others. As one Roma refugee who came with a group from Transcarpathia (some from Irshava, some from Cherkivsk) explains to the Foundation: We have been here about a month. We are both fine and not so



fine here. We have somewhere to lie down, somewhere to wash, somewhere to eat. We eat one meal a day at the centre, at 3 pm. On Mondays, they give us various products: pasta, rice, some potatoes (...) We tend not to go out of the centre, we have no contact with our neighbours. We get along with the other residents. We don't have any money. We are sent money by a family from Ukraine so that we have something to survive on. She adds that a doctor visits them, but they have no medications.

As soon as the war is over, we will return to Ukraine, she explains.

The centre authorities reported that it was not easy to encourage families to send their children to kindergarten: now they go to kindergarten, but not all of them. They don't go now because they have lice (...) we teach them life: to write, to read, to use the toilet (...) Another problem is also that children steal. One resident, a 40-year-old woman and mother of 7, said in May 2023 that there are too many kids in the centre: I don't like it here; there are too many children, they make noise all the time, we can't sleep. My children are used to going to bed earlier: it's impossible here.

What draws particular attention, however, is the transport to the centre itself. As three interviewees (Roma women) noted, they found themselves in the centre because there was no room in the others. One interviewee in Kidałowice explained: I don't get why they brought me here. And when the bus was gone, I had no way to return (...) It is not easy for me here alone. At the request of the interviewee, the Foundation asked the manager of the centre to relocate the family.

The Foundation's experience in the aforementioned centres shows that the practice of grouping Roma people in specific places of collective accommodation, despite goodwill, in the absence of systemic support and training is a so-called double-edged blade, as is often the case when grouping a specific minority with traumatic experiences or intersectional violence. On the one hand, it makes it possible to work with a specific community and to profile the centre's offer according to the residents' needs, ultimately also removing the burden of potential tensions of different refugee groups. On the other hand, there is a serious risk of segregation and ghettoization. This further reduces the chances of integration of people of Roma origin and, an outcome which is easily overlooked in aid activities, it forces the organisation to have a specific aid profile to fill the so-called "state gap" and this is an additional burden.

The evidence gathered in the above places of collective accommodation in the vicinity of Przemyśl, both those managed by representatives of authorities of different levels and those supported and/or run by organisations, directly indicate good and bad practices of running such places and working with the Roma community, but above all, importantly, the long-term practice of local authorities in shifting the responsibility for a particularly vulnerable group of refugees to the social sector without addressing the real problem, which is the lack of

systemic support and recognition of the accommodation needs of people almost completely excluded from this offer. This issue is addressed in the next chapter.

The analysis of available data shows that some organisations do not have the necessary experience or support to carry out activities on a similar scale in crisis settings. Many of the good practices, such as the simultaneous integration of Roma and non-Roma people, are according to the organisations an ongoing challenge. Many of the bad ones, as shown by the Foundation's and UNHCR's monitoring of the centres, are due to ad hoc solutions introduced under immense pressure and, to a lesser extent, a lack of involvement of the people themselves in co-managing these places. In this case, what is needed, according to the team and centre coordinators themselves, is a transparent exchange of these practices, as well as financial stability and an offer of support from local and municipal authorities instead of, as one interviewee put it, keeping quiet unless they are the ones who want something (November 2022). A long-term strategy for working with minorities should, in view of the migration pressures of recent years, be one of the priorities of local and central authorities (Mirga-Wójtowicz, Kołaczek & Talewicz 2022; Migration Consortium 2023). This is not taking place, however, as proved e.g. by ill-advised legislation solutions such as the introduction of the participation fee or scrapping collective accommodation places with the concurrent meagre commitment to broaden the alternative housing offer (Amnesty International 2023). Therefore, the pressure to help and provide "customised assistance" falls not only on social organisations, but also on individuals, and leads to increased social frustration and anti-refugee sentiments, including anti-Roma ones, on the part of citizens who due to the inertia of the authorities have become hostages of assistance (Helsinki Foundation of Human Rights 2023).





Shelter in Kidałowice run by UNITATEM - May 2023

## **THE ROLE OF PUBLIC AUTHORITIES IN SUPPORTING THE ROMA IN ACCESSING THE HOUSING MARKET**

The housing market is not open to renting to Roma, irrespective of their economic status (volunteer)

The lack of systemic solutions for refugee access to the housing market hits the Roma refugee community from Ukraine particularly hard (Amnesty International 2022; UNHCR 2023). Refugees from the Roma community are much more likely to face refusal or eviction, which is compounded by misinformation on eviction and refugee tenancy rights in Polish society and a significant rise of compassion fatigue among Poles after a prolonged period of social mobilisation (Migration Consortium 2023).

As Mirga, Kołaczek & Talewicz indicate in their report (2022), unlike Ukrainian refugees, there are far fewer cases of Roma being accommodated in private housing. Private individuals who apply to reception centres to host Ukrainian families sometimes react in a racist manner, saying "we don't want Gypsies" (2022, p. 11). The authors note that this is not a rule, but this "selective hospitality" forces Roma refugees and refugee women to return to places of collective accommodation, which, as of January 2023, is very difficult in the case of the Podkarpackie border region; or it leads to a decision to leave, including a return to Ukraine. This is doubly dangerous, as due to re-entry the Roma often lose their UKR PESEL (personal identification number) and therefore the support and access to accommodation they are entitled to.

The account of one Roma refugee, Oksana, who arrived in Poland with her family after spending five months in a bunker in Kyiv, highlights the serious difficulties people from the Roma community face in obtaining accommodation. She explained in May 2023 that their family, including a seven-year-old daughter with PTSD symptoms as a result of the trauma suffered in Ukraine, not only struggled to join groups of those seeking housing, but also made appointments to view more than 10 flats. Usually the landlords were friendly during the conversation but when they saw that the family was of Roma origin, they changed their mind. "We don't rent to Roma, we have had bad experiences", "We are very sorry, but we will rent to someone else after all," they explained (May 2023). In the centre they were staying in, the rise in anti-Roma sentiments and violence forced Oksana's family to try even harder to find housing. Despite resources, Oksana's family was regularly turned down. The double hospitality standard was recognised also by Amnesty International in September 2022:

In the case of Roma refugees, it has been much more difficult to find such accommodation, on the one hand because of the many children in the families, on the other because of prejudice. Amnesty International has received information about at least several such

situations, which attest to the fact that the problem of accommodation for Roma families remains unresolved<sup>71</sup>.

The long-term monitoring of the housing situation of by the Foundation Towards Dialogue and the Migration Consortium in Podkarpackie Voivodeship confirmed that this exclusion is persistent and that the Roma do not receive support other than from social organisations. It is particularly difficult for those cross-discriminated and with special needs to find accommodation: the Roma elderly and those with disabilities, as well as a group of Magyar Roma identified by the Foundation who fled to Ukraine due to systemic violence against Roma in Hungary (Amnesty International 2019). Many of them do not speak Ukrainian, but Romani or Hungarian. The City Hall, as well as some of the international organisations in Przemyśl, even those working with the Roma community, have not responded to or ignored the need for a Hungarian translator, despite an obvious need.

Apart from the activities of social organisations, such as the Foundation Towards Dialogue, the Ukrainian House in Przemyśl, and the Union of Ukrainians, there are no actual or even declared activities to support Roma refugees in receiving accommodation (or facilitated access to other services e.g. education or employment), in recognition of their difficult situation. The provincial and municipal authorities emphasise the transitory nature of Przemyśl, which argues for the lack of a holistic and adequate support offer for the refugee Roma community. Moreover, in conversations with representatives of the Foundation and other organisations, they regularly emphasised that the Roma are only here to receive benefits and will soon be gone (November 2022, Municipality Crisis Staff) or claimed They are no refugees; they are economic travellers (March 2023). Similar arguments often accompanied the justifications for the lack of a profiled offer of accommodation or services. In contrast, in one interview, a Ukrainian Union employee explained, speaking of individual who offered accommodation<sup>72</sup>: (...) he accepts everyone, even the Roma (...) It is important as few people want to accommodate the Roma today (May 2023).

The lack of profiled and systemic support for the Roma community in finding accommodation from the City Council or the Office of the Voivode of Podkarpackie has led to makeshift solutions and exposed Roma people to additional violence. The Foundation's staff reported people leaving the flats in question due to anti-Roma comments or perceived resentment from landlords, or even their sudden change of decision. Furthermore, during monitoring activities in Przemyśl, the Foundation's team noted Roma groups checking out the city's vacant properties; in the case of eviction and the lack of housing alternatives, there is a risk that these spaces could be used and thus an additional burden on local

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<sup>71</sup> Amnesty International, 2022. *We came here, they didn't want to let us in. Roma from Ukraine treated as unwanted refugees*: <https://www.amnesty.org.pl/polska-przyjechalismy-tu-nie-chcieli-nas-wpuscic-romowie-z-ukrainy-traktowani-jak-niechciani-uchodzcy/>

<sup>72</sup> Here, a person from Małopolskie Voivodeship was referred to. As the employee explained, people from Podkarpackie Voivodeship were rather reluctant to accept refugees anymore.

authorities and organisations, as well as a potential increase in anti-Roma rhetoric in Przemyśl.

However, similar practices should be developed holistically, in support of existing guidelines for working with minorities; here, one can draw on e.g. the experience of Roma organisations, including international ones, which have a track record of working with Roma refugees or consulting on local refugee accommodation policies (also e.g. in Bulgaria or Greece), such as social tenancy agencies and community-based-sponsorship programmes, which are returning to the debate, and which aim to respond to the deficit of social and communal housing for refugees and offer integration activities in the local community (GRSI 2021; Habitat 2019).

Not only in the area of accommodation, it is also vital to monitor the scale of these needs, together with social needs and assessments of potential employment as an accommodation offer, even of a high standard, without access to kindergartens, schools, medical care, and employment opportunities, will lead to isolation rather than integration of Roma with refugee experience.

## **ACCESS TO SOCIAL SERVICES, EDUCATION, AND THE LABOUR MARKET**

The city says they are only coming for benefits (...) What else can it offer them? (November 2022)

The Foundation, local organisations, and humanitarian actors operating in Podkarpackie Voivodeship (INGOs) directly pointed to the exclusion or discrimination of Roma by the above sectors, essential for the integration of refugees. Amnesty International's report on access to education for refugee children from Ukraine clearly indicates that Ukrainian children face difficulties in accessing schools in Poland and adjusting to the education methods (2022). This is due to, among others, a lack of trained staff and materials in Ukrainian and Russian (and Hungarian), "dual teaching" in the Polish and Ukrainian systems (e.g. online) or anti-refugee rhetoric. In an interview with the Amnesty International team, an AI specialist confirmed that all of these factors are not only confirmed in the case of Roma children, but that access is actually significantly more difficult, and that the scale of discrimination documented in AI's research on Roma refugees, among others, is much more serious (2023).

Based on discourse analysis and interviews with authorities, the research team observed that the rhetoric of the city authorities, but also of the voivodeship authorities and local politicians, quite often boils down to saying that Roma refugees come "only" to claim social benefits. However, the experiences of local organisations and the Foundation are different; at most, they show a lack of action by the authorities to design an offer with Roma refugees in mind. As the Ombudsman emphasised, Roma refugees are entitled to the same social

benefits as other refugees, such as 500+ or social allowances, and any abuses should be monitored and accounted for individually by the relevant authorities (Social Assistance Centre, Labour Office, etc.), rather than being used for a campaign against the Roma (Ombudsman 2023). It is also worth recognizing what might be the causes of these abuses once they are documented.

There is also the question of what to do about integration activities at the local level in view of the observed increase in the number of Roma refugees and the gradual, partial or complete, exit of international organisations from activities in Poland. In this case, a lack of a comprehensive integration offer will lead to both isolation and stigmatisation of Roma refugees, who will simply fall out of the system due to the lack of systemic solutions. A good option, especially in Przemyśl and the transitory Podkarpackie Voivodeship, would be to use the potential and experience of refugees themselves and of international organisations to create Roma community assistants, available, for example, at key service points for refugees from Ukraine, such as Social Assistance Centres.



## **SHIFTING STATE RESPONSIBILITY TO COMMUNITIES AND ORGANISATIONS**

I felt thrown in at the deep end, but at some point it dawned on me:  
either I will help the Roma, or nobody will (humanitarian worker)

The unprecedented mobilisation of Polish civil society that took place after February 2022 is an extremely positive example of solidarity with refugees from Ukraine. Its extent exceeded all expectations, despite the enormous scale and pace of action. According to the Centre for Migration Studies, some 7 million refugees seeking assistance have travelled to and through Poland (Centre for Migration Studies 2022), and up to 1.7 million remain in Poland (June 2023). However, as highlighted by the Migration Consortium in its analysis of assistance and integration activities after 2022, while this urgency has produced new actors and networks, such as those between the private and non-governmental sectors or pointed to the huge role of the Ukrainian community, as the months went by, it also indicated a dangerous trend of permanently shifting the responsibility for helping refugees to social organisations and citizens (Migration Consortium 2023).

It was no different in the case of organisations and aid groups from the Roma community, which found themselves in the difficult position of "tailoring assistance" for a group of refugees which, as Amnesty International and the Foundation's reports indicated, were at best not taken into account by the Polish authorities at various levels when designing the aid offer and integration activities, and at worst targeted and/or stigmatised by state functionaries (Foundation Towards Dialogue 2022; Amnesty International 2023). Thus, a large part of these tasks had to be shouldered by the non-governmental sector and individuals from the Roma community, sometimes with the support of international organisations. Initial grassroots and intervention activities with Ukrainian Roma developed into an organised network of support, reception, and integration, not only in places of collective accommodation and at the border, but also in larger urban centres such as Warsaw and Krakow.

Priority was given to assistance provided directly in the border towns, and the transit city of Przemyśl and nearby border crossings were the most important terrain for working with Roma refugees, both at the reception stage and in creating bottom-up solutions and integration offers. The research conducted indicates that the scale of assistance, but also the challenges faced by local aid actors in working with Roma refugees from Ukraine, was clearly greater in Podkarpackie Voivodeship than in other regions of Poland, as emphasised by both the Ombudsman and the Voivode of Podkarpackie. Assistance and personnel deficits were identified primarily in the field of legal and translation/interpretation assistance, but also, for example, anti-discrimination workshops and social and streetworking work with minors.

The evidence collected shows that, from the outset, people from the Roma community have played a key role, being the fastest to identify refugee groups in need of assistance and their needs, and enjoying the trust of Roma refugees, many of whom had to leave Ukraine at short notice:

I met a mother and her daughter on the street. They saw that I was a Roma and stopped. The woman cried, she didn't want to believe that we wanted to help her. The woman's child was lying in a hospital turned into a refugee camp as she was sick with COVID (...) No one wanted to go out to them as all were afraid of getting infected (Paloma, community assistant).

Paloma and Dawid were one of the first to decide to help Roma refugees from Ukraine. Initially, they acted on their own and then supported various social organisation, such as the Foundation Towards Dialogue and the Ukrainian House in Przemyśl. Eventually, three people were hired by international organisations directly to work with the Roma community, including themselves:

Then they trusted us. Later we took care of them and looked for housing for them. I started going around to people, to organisations, telling them to rent flats to refugees, to Roma, I told them about the 40+ programme. We gave them phone numbers so they could call us if there was a problem (Monika, Foundation worker).

As the Foundation worker explains, thanks to advocacy, international organisations operating in Przemyśl recruited three people from the Roma community as part of Monitoring Sector: They saw a need (April 2023).

One of the obstacles that all three people identified was the grassroots nature of these activities and the lack of systemic support for working with Roma refugees, which resulted in a heavy workload and responsibility for the community, which they both also engaged in reception and humanitarian activities:

X: We organised Roma from the area: from Mielec, from Stalowa Wola, from all over the Podkarpacie region. They brought pampers, shampoo, and food. I was not at home for days at a time. There was a lot of work: no one was helping me here at the time. We drove everyone to the Ukrainian House. Later on, the director started calling me: as soon as there was a problem, I would go.

Paloma: I used to go with him to town and when he saw the Roma, he would ask: where are you from, how are you here, what do you want?

X: I already understood everything: whether they were going to get their PESEL, or to Social Security, or to look for a flat... (April 2023)

Gradually, the expertise and trust of both of them led to the formalisation of their work, first through their Polish Roma organisations and then international organisations and the UNHCR, which recognised the need for work profiled to the needs of Roma refugees: In December,

T. called me. He said he had heard that I was helping Roma and that they could help me, perhaps (...) We went to an interview with the UNHCR. We sat down at a table and started talking. I started work on New Year's Day (April 2023). Within a few months, X and Paloma, initially involved in grassroots activities, started working successively with the Foundation, UNHCR, and Oxfam.

A key element, repeatedly highlighted by the beneficiaries of this assistance and differentiating it from assistance provided by other volunteers, was the trust of the community and the professional knowledge of the needs and context of working with Roma from Ukraine, including Magyar Roma. An additional asset was both the ability to navigate the aid infrastructure of local aid groups and organisations and the willingness to support administrative work and assist in offices, often on an intervention basis. Of the seven people directly involved in working with Roma refugees in Przemyśl, all indicated that anti-Roma attitudes and stigmatisation impacted the quality of and access to humanitarian provision; in such situations, support from people able to handle both contexts of work proved essential.

The willingness of some international organisations to engage and employ people from the community in outreach and integration activities was recognised as a decidedly good practice, beneficial both to the organisations themselves and to the community, which was able to both respond to and self-represent its needs within intersectional networks. However, the evidence collected indicates that this stands in contrast to the activities of the City Hall, provincial authorities, and local state agendas (Social Security, Labour Office, Social Assistance Centre), which have not carried out similar activities (June 2023), rarely consulting challenges raised by community organisations working with Roma refugees. The staff of the Foundation and other social organisations as well as the Ombudsman's Office repeatedly reported the need to improve the situation of Roma refugees, pointing to the far lower standard of reception and integration offered, e.g. in Przemyśl (March 2022 - May 2023). At the same time, Roma organisations have frequently highlighted the need for representation and participation in the coordination and design of assistance activities at central and regional level.

Despite the long-term delegation of responsibility for humanitarian assistance, reception, and integration of Roma refugees in Poland largely to the social sector, this responsibility is not accompanied by long-term support (from representatives of central local authorities, but also from many international organisations). Both social organisations and volunteers have repeatedly raised concerns about an uncertain future; similar concerns have been raised by the management teams of collective accommodation, including those specialised in working with Ukrainian Roma: We don't know when our centre will close. I paid the rent for two months in advance out of my own pocket, but our hostel is not supported by the authorities in the long term, explained the coordinator of the Open Heart centre (April 2023). Since the beginning we have been patching up holes in the accommodation, including elderly Roma and Roma, people with disabilities, trauma, and depression, added an UNITATEM coordinator,

adding that the lack of systemic and long-term support could lead to the closure of the centre, leaving residents with no alternative accommodation. Grants finished at the end of December. The future is bleak. What scares us most is that the authorities are probably waiting until we fail and run out of funds. The costs are rising, though. Where are these Roma supposed to go? – adds the coordinator (April 2023). An employee of the Ukrainian House in Przemyśl explains that it is social organisation, with the support of international ones, recognise excluded groups intersectionally and offer them comprehensive support, which local and central authorities fail to notice or cannot do. Importantly, relocations to smaller towns and cities do not solve the problem, but in many documented cases insulate Roma people from the already difficult access to the service or labour market, and Roma children from the possibility of successful integration within the education system (also informal). One Roma worker provided an example of good practice - the Foundation also invites Roma workers to trainings to strengthen the competences of Roma workers from Ukraine and Poland, from Warsaw and Przemyśl (April 2023); a similar practice of multiplying trained Roma staff has the potential to work in smaller localities with local groups of Roma refugees, if also consulted at central level and within local migration policies (Foundation Towards Dialogue 2023).

Many organisations and volunteers reported compassion fatigue and minority stress, widespread in the social sector, in particular among the workers from the community who had earlier experienced Romaphobia and stigmatisation (Mirga, Kołaczek & Talewicz 2022). Similar tendencies were identified also among Ukrainian volunteers and workers (as e.g. in the Ukrainian House in Przemyśl). We help everyone but have no time for ourselves, and this has been going on a long time now - explains one of the workers (November 2022). Oksana, a Roma humanitarian worker, notes that Roma people involved in aid are often also affected by all kinds of community problems and social stigma but are additionally burdened by a sense of responsibility for their wellbeing. Equally important as psychological support is the creation of mechanisms and space for reporting abuse by other refugees, organisations or authorities at different levels, which would relieve the pressure on some Roma organisations whose intervention and case-to-case work consumes a lot of resources and time.

The Foundation Towards Dialogue operated in Podkarpacie since the onset of the full-scale war, initially as an informal group Poland-Roma-Ukraine, arranging transport to Roma families refused it due to their ethnicity. A similar onset of activity can be found in multiple organisations working with the Roma: from small informal groups through larger organisations and centres offering comprehensive and profiled assistance, or even monitoring, interventions, research, and advocacy.

One staff member of the Foundation Towards Dialogue refers to the early activities in Przemyśl and Nadarzyn: The Foundation built a relationship and understanding with the local Roma community; this community helped the Roma from Ukraine from the beginning, but on a voluntary basis. A lot of people stopped providing aid because of the economic situation;

they could not afford to spend their whole days at the station (April 2023). The short contracts and complicated settlement procedures and evaluation mechanisms of international organisations were repeatedly highlighted, which, among other things, proved counterproductive for many aid organisations newly established under the impact of humanitarian need (Migration Consortium 2023). Currently, the humanitarian sector in Przemyśl is one of the most employable professional areas for people of Roma origin. The question is what will happen next and when these large organisations will move out of Poland? (May 2023).

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the analysis of the evidence gathered, to improve the situation and living conditions of Roma refugees from Ukraine seeking shelter and support in Poland, which they are legally entitled to, we recommend as follows:

### **In terms of reception**

To the Voivode of Podkarpacie. It is essential to monitor and respond immediately to any instances of racism or discrimination in terms of access to the humanitarian offer, both on the part of designated government officials, international and community organisations, as well as border and public order officials. It is also recommended to retain the reception point at the railway station, which, precisely because of the transit nature of Przemyśl, plays a key role for refugees from Ukraine.

To the City Office and Crisis Staff. We recommend recruiting Hungarian translators/interpreters at the reception point for the refugees and the emergency staff.

To international organisations. We recommend employing staff from Roma communities or organisations in direct and integration work, especially in the border region. We also recommend prioritising a long-term, transparent and partnership-like (rather than just implementation) strategy for cooperation with the social sector and simplified financial settlement and evaluation mechanisms.

### **In terms of integration and access to services**

To the City Office and Crisis Staff. It is vital to adopt a long-term, comprehensive strategy for the reception and integration of Roma refugees from Ukraine, considering their specific needs, within the framework of local policies and with the involvement of Roma and local organisations working with this group on a daily basis.

To local and municipal governments of Podkarpacie Voivodeship. It is recommended that periodic training on work with the Roma minority should be conducted for public administration, including employees of the City and County Councils, social assistance centres, and labour offices. Recruiting and training Roma staff.

To Central Government. Adoption of a long-term strategy for helping those with an experience of poverty to break the cycle of poverty; the strategy must consider vulnerable groups.

To the Ministry of the Interior and Administration. It is necessary to lift in its current wording the amendment to the Law on Assistance to Refugees from Ukraine of 25 January 2023, which mandates refugees using mass accommodation to participate in the relevant costs (up

to 75 percent of the costs). The amendment is especially detrimental to Roma and other vulnerable groups not specified in the law.

To the Voivode of Podkarpacie. It is essential to carry out regular monitoring of places of collective accommodation, taking into account vulnerable groups (minors, the elderly, persons with disabilities, etc.); persons from the liquidated facilities, including Roma, must be provided with alternative accommodation, taking into account the offer of education, professional activation and access to services. The dismantling of these sites under the pretext of the transit nature of the voivodeship and the practice of relocation to smaller towns and cities, must not be done to the clear detriment of the Roma community or impose on Roma the risk of a crisis of homelessness or ghettoization and social isolation.

To civil society organisations and local informal groups. It is recommended that a common platform be set up for the exchange of practices and experiences of working with the Roma community in Poland, including social and educational work; the coordination of joint monitoring and advocacy activities to improve its situation.

### **In terms of preventing discrimination and human rights violations**

To the City Office and Crisis Staff. Immediate improvement of the situation of Roma groups deprived of access to services to which other refugee groups are entitled, such as at the Przemyśl Central Railway Station, is essential. Any discrimination in access to services must be reported and addressed immediately.

To the Voivode of Podkarpacie. A separate position should be created on behalf of the Voivodeship Governor, possibly as Representative for Work with the Roma and Sinti Community, with real influence on the activities of the community in the voivodeship, whose duties should include cooperation and communication with Roma organisations and regular monitoring of the situation of this minority in border towns (Przemyśl, Korczowa) and in accommodation places.

To Central and Local Government. We strongly recommend preventing hate speech and incitement against the Roma community and other minorities by government representatives in public debate. This practice should be recognised, reported, and prosecuted under Article 256 of the Penal Code.

Furthermore, it is recommended that the social sector and civil society, especially from the Ukrainian and Roma minority groups, be seriously relieved of the tasks that should be carried out by the Polish State. Roma/refugee workers and employees must have access to psychological support and social organisations must have the opportunity to work in a healthy working environment. Long-term overload of the social sector with tasks that remain the responsibility of the State and/or international organisations; without real access to the decision-making process and design of migration policies or integration solutions, leads to

burnout, compassion fatigue, deterioration of the standard of support offered to refugees, and the creation of a dysfunctional and makeshift aid infrastructure which e.g. Roma refugee groups, i.e. the beneficiaries and recipients of this aid, fall victim to.

The ongoing intervention work and patching up of the deficits of Roma community integration programmes documented in Przemyśl and other border towns, in the absence of dialogue or inclusion in the drafting of good practices and monitoring mechanisms, is detriment to all those involved in this assistance. The evidence collected in this report shows conclusively that the discrimination against Roma refugees is systemic, persistent, and affects many aspects of support, from reception through integration, to the fostering of an atmosphere of hostility towards Roma by representatives and officials of different level authorities.

The research material gathered here derives from the experience and accounts of the many actors involved in assisting refugees from Ukraine in 2022-2023 and is thus transversal rather than anecdotal. As such, the recommendations proposed herein are directly driven by the needs of these actors and the refugees themselves.



## AUTHORS' BIOGRAMS

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**Olena Vaidalovych** - a human rights lawyer from Ukraine working with the Roma community, with over 7 years of professional experience in this area. Currently, she is a senior legal and advocacy advisor at the Foundation for Dialogue. Previously, she was a Senior Minority Fellow at the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights; she also worked for several years at the OSCE ODIHR Contact Point for Roma and Sinti as a specialist in this field. In addition, she was an expert on minority rights, including the Roma, while working at the UN Human Rights Monitoring Mission in Ukraine, where she shared her knowledge of minority issues, human rights, political analysis and international instruments. Responsible for monitoring human rights violations, working with relevant stakeholders on the issues discussed, and analyzing policies, advocating national plans and strategies relevant to its remit (including preparation of HRMMU recommendations for a new Roma strategy for the government). She also has experience in the NGO sector and public administration, which allows her to look at human rights issues through the prism of different perspectives.

