Another Winter of War? What Next for the Protection of Refugees from Ukraine in Europe

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Since 2022, Russia has systematically attacked Ukraine's energy infrastructure. The first wave of strikes targeted substations, cutting off power distribution; the second hits generating capacity directly [1]. According to data cited by BGK, Ukraine has lost around 70% of its pre-war generating capacity, while gas production fell by around 40% in 2025 [2]. The aim of this energy terrorism remains to paralyse the economy and break the will to resist – not only through the hardships caused by restricted access to electricity, water and heating, but through conditions that directly endanger civilians' lives, especially in winter. Despite efforts to protect and rebuild damaged facilities, and growing imports of gas and electricity from Europe – in 2026 electricity imports from the EU nearly doubled compared with the previous winter, and Ukraine, previously a regional energy exporter, became a net importer [3] – every successive winter becomes an existential challenge. The winter of 2025/2026 was therefore another test of humanitarian pressure – but it turned out the opposite of what might have been expected, and did not translate into greater interest in seeking shelter outside Ukraine.

The question of Poland's readiness for another wave of refugees from Ukraine has lost none of its relevance. In the summer of 2026, at a press conference in Belgrade, President Volodymyr Zelensky said that Ukraine now has practically no undamaged thermal power plant left. The country is already preparing for the 2026/27 heating season, strengthening the protection of energy infrastructure, speeding up purchases of repair equipment, expanding distributed generation and building up gas reserves [2]. Support is also coming from outside – the Ukraine Energy Support Fund, managed by the Energy Community Secretariat, has already raised more than €2.1 billion from donors in over 25 countries [4], while at grassroots level in Poland, grassroots fundraising campaigns in Poland last year helped pay for, among other things, power generators sent to Ukraine. For Poland, this means that the scenario of an increased inflow of refugees in the event of a worsening energy situation in Ukraine still remains on the planning table – even if data from the last winter suggest its probability is lower than previously assumed. All this is happening exactly as two parallel decision-making processes unfold in Brussels: on the future of temporary protection, and on the money meant to fund it after 2027.

The Winter That Never Came

The scale and rhythm of the movement of Ukrainian citizens is best seen in the Border Guard's annual data. In 2022, the year the full-scale war broke out, arrivals exceeded departures on the border section with Ukraine by more than 2.06 million people – almost all of this surplus arose within the first three months of the year. For the rest of 2022, the balance was already slightly negative, driven by departures most likely motivated by optimism that the Ukrainian state had survived the hardest, initial phase of the full-scale war. From 2023 onward, this pattern did not repeat. The net balance was slightly negative in 2023 (−28,695) – more people returned to Ukraine than arrived from it. In 2024 there was a rebound to +234,127, which coincides in time with the intensification of Russian attacks on Ukraine's energy infrastructure that year and may reflect real humanitarian pressure from that period. In 2025 the balance fell again, to +74,223. Regardless of these fluctuations, in each of these three years total border traffic in both directions oscillated within a narrow range of 17–18.6 million crossings – and the difference between arrivals and departures amounted, in every case, to a marginal percentage of that traffic, an order of magnitude smaller than in 2022. The 2022 wave thus remains a statistical outlier, not a starting point for extrapolation [5].

Within this pattern, winter is not a period that concentrates inflow. December 2024 illustrates this well: on 22 December, at the peak of pre-holiday traffic in the Podkarpackie section, a total of 89,000 Ukrainians crossed at the border checkpoint, of whom as many as 49,000 were departures from Poland – the Border Guard explained this directly as standard, cyclical pre-holiday traffic, not a new humanitarian wave [6].

The biggest test of this pattern, however, was the winter of 2025/2026 – six months of attacks on the power grid and frosts as low as -20°C, preceded by estimates of a possible new influx of people seeking shelter. The official bulletin of the National Headquarters of the Border Guard for Q1 2026 shows the opposite of the expected wave: in the January–March period, 19,109 more people left Poland for Ukraine than arrived in the other direction [7]. The number of Ukrainian citizens entering Poland in the same quarter fell year-on-year by 5-6 percent. Not only did forecasts of a possible new refugee wave fail to materialise, but during this humanitarian low point, border traffic actually pointed to an outflow of Ukrainian citizens back toward their homeland.

Stabilisation

Eurostat data on beneficiaries of temporary protection show the other side of the same phenomenon, this time at the scale of the whole Union. At the end of June 2026, 4.41 million non-EU citizens who had fled Russian aggression remained under temporary protection across the EU [8]. The countries hosting the most beneficiaries in absolute numbers were then Germany (1,286,230 people, 29.2 percent of the total EU population under protection), Poland (961,170, or 21.8 percent) and Czechia (390,810, 8.9 percent) [8]. Per thousand inhabitants the picture looks different – Czechia had the highest rate (35.8 per thousand), ahead of Slovakia (27.2) and Cyprus (26.8); Poland, despite having the second-largest absolute population of beneficiaries, was for the first time not in the top three in terms of relative burden. Earlier readings of the same indicator – 26.4 per thousand in October 2025 and 26.5 in January 2026, against an EU average of around 9.5-9.6 – show, however, that Poland has long maintained a rate significantly above the EU average per inhabitant, even if it trails Germany in absolute terms.

Eurostat's monthly readings themselves, however, can be volatile, and trying to read a migration direction out of them is misleading. Eurostat itself notes that deregistration procedures differ between countries and can cause large monthly fluctuations if not carried out continuously. Changes in the figures can therefore be the result of administrative decisions on the part of host states – for example, a mass deregistration of people with inactive status, or the effect of administrative rotation between legal categories – rather than of real migration movements.

A fuller picture is given by the Polish Office for Foreigners' (UDSC) own, more detailed reports. As of 1 July 2026, 1.55 million Ukrainian citizens held valid residence documents – a decline of just 0.7 percent (11,000 documents) compared with the end of 2025. UDSC interprets this as a signal that the size of the Ukrainian diaspora in Poland has stopped growing and has stabilised in the range of 1.5–1.6 million people – though the office itself notes that this small net decline masks two parallel, larger processes: an outflow of migrants (returns to Ukraine, departures to other EU countries, acquisition of Polish citizenship) and, at the same time, an inflow of new applications for legal residence that offsets it [9]. The UDSC report further notes that the category of ordinary temporary residence – 471,000 people, 30.4 percent of all documents – is steadily gaining in importance as some people give up temporary protection in favour of this residence title. In other words, some of the people disappearing from the register of temporary-protection beneficiaries are not leaving Poland, but moving onto a different residence title – since May 2026 this has been possible thanks to the new CUKR residence card, a three-year temporary residence permit for people who have continuously held UKR status for at least a year. At the same time, the inflow into the PESEL UKR register has not dried up: according to data from the Ministry of Digital Affairs provided to PAP, more than 950,000 people still hold UKR status, and in 2026 alone it was granted to 47,000 new people [10].

What It Costs – and What Comes Back

The scale of the budgetary cost is documented by an audit by the Supreme Audit Office (NIK): spending from the Aid Fund (Fundusz Pomocy) on tasks related to the presence of Ukrainian citizens in Poland exceeded 11 billion zlotys in 2022 [11]. The Fund's own reports – its operator is Bank Gospodarstwa Krajowego (BGK) – allow this picture to be completed for subsequent years: spending was 15 billion zlotys in 2023, 10.5 billion zlotys in 2024, and 8.5 billion zlotys in 2025. This money went mainly on family and social benefits, healthcare, tasks coordinated by the Ministry of the Interior and Administration (MSWiA), and support for local governments in funding school places for children from Ukraine (part of the budget in individual years also went on national food security in connection with the war, e.g. grain subsidies and support for farmers affected by market disruption). In total, over 2022–2025 spending from the Aid Fund therefore exceeded 45 billion zlotys [12].

The European Union supported Poland in connection with the wave of refugees from Ukraine in many ways and through several parallel mechanisms, launched mainly in the first months of the war. As early as April 2022, advance payments were increased under REACT-EU (the EU's post-pandemic economic recovery fund, part of whose resources were redirected to refugee assistance) – Poland received €562 million, qualifying for the increased, 45-percent advance-payment threshold reserved for countries where the number of refugees exceeded 1% of the population [13]. On 6 April 2022, the European Commission launched the CARE mechanism (Cohesion's Action for Refugees in Europe – a package of changes to cohesion policy allowing unspent funds from the 2014–2020 perspective to be used for refugee assistance, with 100-percent EU co-financing), and in June of the same year extended it with FAST-CARE (a further financial-flexibility package, adding further cohesion-policy advance payments) – for Poland this meant access to more than a billion euros in previously unprogrammed tranches [14]. A separate track was the European Investment Bank's Solidarity Package, under which Poland received €2 billion – albeit in the form of a loan, not a grant [15]. On top of this came direct European Commission grants under the emergency-assistance instrument: in 2022 Poland received a total of €144.6 million, of which €68.4 million was disbursed through AMIF (the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund – as an ad hoc, emergency component of the fund, separate from its multiannual structural envelope), and €76.2 million through the Border Management and Visa Instrument (BMVI) [16]. AMIF itself is a much smaller, multiannual structural instrument; the national programme for 2021–2027, approved by the European Commission, has a budget of €313.5 million, of which €264.7 million is the EU contribution [17].

According to two independent but directionally convergent analyses, the presence of Ukrainian citizens brings a measurable return to the Polish economy and budget. Bank Gospodarstwa Krajowego, in its report "The Impact of the Inflow of Migrants from Ukraine on the Polish Economy," estimates that in 2024 migrants from Ukraine contributed to increasing revenue to the Polish budget – through PIT, CIT, VAT and social- and health-insurance contributions – by around 15.1 billion zlotys; the authors also calculate that for every zloty paid out to Ukrainian citizens under the 800+ child-benefit programme in 2024, 5.4 zlotys returned to the budget in taxes and contributions [18]. Separately, Deloitte, in the second edition of its report "Analysis of the Impact of Refugees from Ukraine on the Polish Economy," prepared for UNHCR, assesses that refugees' work and the associated rise in the productivity of Polish firms generated 2.7 percent of Poland's GDP in 2024 [19]. These are two different measures – budget revenue and contribution to GDP – calculated using different methods, but both pointing in the same direction: the cost borne by the budget is, to a significant degree, being recouped, not simply spent.

The scale and character of this presence is most fully described by a report of the Polish Economic Institute (PIE), based on research by the Centre of Migration Research at the University of Warsaw. According to this report, around 1.51 million immigrants from Ukraine currently reside legally in Poland – 964,400 on the basis of the PESEL UKR register, 482,600 with a temporary residence permit, and 57,700 with permanent residence. Of these, 854,200 are insured with ZUS, corresponding to 5 percent of all insured persons in Poland, 295,500 children attend Polish kindergartens and schools, and 47,500 people study at Polish universities [20]. The same report indicates that Ukrainians' economic integration – an adult labour-force participation rate of 75–85 percent, higher than among Poles – is progressing fastest, but it is not this that determines whether migrants will settle in Poland permanently: identity-based and socio-political integration influences that decision more strongly than economic factors. The report notes that the highest level of this is recorded among women employed in services, where the job requires constant contact with customers and fluent Polish – that is, where linguistic and social integration is functionally forced by the nature of the work [20]. According to the report authors' estimates, four in ten adult immigrants from Ukraine have a high or very high probability of settling in Poland permanently [20].

This data takes on added significance in international comparison. According to a study by migration expert Dietrich Thränhardt, prepared for the Bertelsmann Foundation and reported on by the German press, Poland and Czechia integrate refugees from Ukraine into the labour market more effectively than Germany does – Ukrainians there earn 79 and 85 percent of the local median wage respectively, against 50 percent in Germany, and in Poland and Czechia taxes paid by Ukrainians exceed the cost of the social benefits paid out to them [21]. This would mean that the country hosting the largest number of Ukrainian beneficiaries of temporary protection in absolute terms is a country with significantly worse integration outcomes than Poland.

Two Negotiating Clocks

All of this coincides in time with two parallel processes in Brussels. The first concerns temporary protection itself. On 26 June 2026, the European Commission formally proposed extending temporary protection for a further year, to 4 March 2028, with one significant exception: protection will no longer, as a rule, be granted automatically to people who leave Ukraine without the authorities' consent due to military obligations [22]. The Council of the European Union adopted this proposal on 15 July 2026, formally agreeing to the extension until March 2028 [23].

The second process matters more from a financial perspective – and to understand it, it is worth first tracing how the fund has worked so far. The current AMIF envelope for 2021–2027 totals €9.882 billion, of which 63.5 percent goes to national programmes jointly managed by the Commission and individual states, and 36.5 percent remains at the Commission's direct disposal as a so-called thematic facility, earmarked among other things for emergency assistance, resettlement and relocation under EU solidarity [24]. What matters most, however, is how the national envelopes themselves are set: each consists of a base amount plus a variable component, calculated on the basis of criteria reflecting the "needs and pressure" experienced by a given state in the area of asylum, migration, integration and returns – but set in advance, at the start of the seven-year period, on the basis of historical data [24]. This is why Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022, which occurred after the current envelopes had already been set, required an ad hoc patch: a separate regulation allowing member states to use unspent funds from the previous financial perspective to cover new, unforeseen needs [24]. The fund itself also provides for a mechanism that directly ties money to the number of people admitted – lump-sum payments for each person resettled or relocated under EU solidarity – but this applies to resettlement and relocation programmes, not to the mass inflow covered by the Temporary Protection Directive, which has been managed under a separate procedure since 2022 [24].

In the proposal for the Multiannual Financial Framework for 2028–2034, presented by the European Commission on 16 July 2025, the home-affairs budget is to be tripled to €81 billion – of which, according to the breakdown published by the Directorate-General for Migration and Home Affairs, €25.2 billion will go to shared thematic instruments, €15.4 billion to border management, €12 billion directly to migration, and €11.9 billion to expanding Frontex [25]. AMIF itself is to be absorbed into a much broader reform of the entire EU budget: the National and Regional Partnership Plans (NRPPs), which will combine into a single national plan areas that have until now been separate – cohesion policy, the Common Agricultural Policy, and home affairs, including migration and border management. This means that money for migration policy will no longer be negotiated as a separate envelope, but as part of a much larger, integrated national pool [26]. On the same day, 15 July 2026, the Council of the European Union also adopted a preliminary negotiating position on EU support for migration, border management and internal security under the new budget [27]. The criteria according to which funds from this budget will be distributed among individual member states after 2027 are not yet known in detail, but the mechanism from previous financial perspectives suggests how the new formula might work. National AMIF envelopes have for years been calculated partly on the basis of the number of people under international or temporary protection in a member state during a given reference period – this is one of the fund's basic solidarity indicators. If this logic is maintained after 2027, what reference period is chosen will be of key importance. UDSC data show that the number of Ukrainians in Poland holding any valid residence title remains high and stable, yet some of them – those who have moved from temporary protection to the CUKR card or other forms of residence as part of successful integration – may no longer be counted in the narrow category of temporary-protection beneficiaries, on which the AMIF formula has traditionally been based. This is not a flaw in the mechanism, but a natural consequence of how the fund has always measured the scale of states' engagement – inevitably failing to keep pace with the dynamics of individual integration pathways.

Conclusions for Poland

Poland enters these negotiation with a mixed hand of strong and weak cards. On the strong side is a solid numerical and fiscal argument: Poland bore one of the largest start-up costs in 2022, has long maintained a system-burden rate significantly above the EU average per inhabitant, and at the same time – in light of the findings of German researchers and the Polish Economic Institute's report – achieves a better integration return from the presence of Ukrainian citizens than Germany, the single largest host country in the EU, independently confirmed by BGK and Deloitte in purely fiscal and macroeconomic terms. This is not so much a reason to demand more money as an argument that the new funding system – since, as the Commission announces, it is to be based on outcomes and reforms – should reward, alongside the actual scale of engagement over time, also measurable integration effectiveness, not just a raw, snapshot state of administrative registers.

The risk lies in how the initial formula for the new envelope will be constructed, and which criteria will determine its adjustment in the planned mid-term review – the new NRPP system, unlike the current AMIF, formally provides for such a review, but it is not yet known whether it will be based on the current state of the registers. The category of "registered beneficiaries of temporary protection", on which the NRPP formula may be based, increasingly poorly reflects the real scale of the population Poland has taken in. Some of the people who have moved from temporary protection to the CUKR card or other, more stable forms of residence – precisely as part of successful integration – formally disappear from this narrow category. If 2026 or 2027 becomes the reference period for the new formula, Poland could be assessed on the basis of a category that undervalues the scale of its actual engagement, precisely because integration success statistically moves people out of the formula's field of view. Poland has already shown, at the same time, in connection with the Pact on Migration and Asylum, that it can successfully negotiate exceptional treatment – it secured a full exemption from the solidarity mechanism for 2026. Whether the same assertiveness will be carried over to the parallel, politically less visible track of negotiations on the structural NRPP envelope remains an open question.

All this is happening in the shadow of an unknown we now face. The coming winter could turn out to be the most severe, energy-wise, since the start of the war, and Poland must remain ready for a scenario in which part of Ukrainian society nonetheless decides to seek shelter abroad. Data from the four previous winters is no guarantee for a fifth, especially given a scale of infrastructure destruction not seen before. If, however, the pattern of recent years holds – that is, the overwhelming majority of Ukrainian society decides to endure another winter under attacks on power plants, water systems and heating plants without leaving the country – then the centre of gravity of Poland's engagement should shift toward supporting the protection of Ukraine's critical infrastructure, its defensive capabilities against further waves of attacks, and humanitarian aid delivered on the ground.

Notes

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[2] Bank Gospodarstwa Krajowego, Monitor spraw ukraińskich no. 10, June 2026, https://www.bgk.pl/files/public/Raporty/Monitor_spraw_ukrainskich/Monitor_spraw_ukrai%C5%84skich_nr._10_BGK_czerwiec_2026.pdf.

[3] Instytut Europy Środkowej, "Zrujnowana elektroenergetyka Ukrainy i rosnąca zależność od energii elektrycznej z Unii Europejskiej," March 2026 - https://ies.lublin.pl/komentarze/zrujnowana-elektroenergetyka-ukrainy-i-rosnaca-zaleznosc-od-energii-elektrycznej-z-unii-europejskiej/

[4] Energy Community, "What is the Fund?," Ukraine Energy Support Fund, as of 4 August 2026 - https://www.energy-community.org/Ukraine/Fund/overview.html

[5] Q1 2022 produced a net balance of +2,283,889 on the Ukrainian border section (3,258,753 arrivals versus 974,864 departures) – that is, more than the balance for the whole year (+2,065,526), meaning that in the April–December 2022 period the balance was negative (approx. -218,000). The net balance as a percentage of total border traffic (both directions combined) was: 2022 – approx. 12%; 2023 – −0.15%; 2024 – 1.3%; 2025 – 0.4%. It should also be noted that a distinction needs to be made between data on arrivals and departures on the border section with Ukraine and data on arrivals of Ukrainian citizens (all border crossings) – I focus primarily on the former.

Komenda Główna Straży Granicznej, "Informacja statystyczna za 2024 r.," Warsaw, January 2025, TAB.1 - https://strazgraniczna.pl/download/1/41000/InformacjastatystycznaSGza2024rnowe.pdf; "Informacja statystyczna za 2025 r.," TAB.1 - https://strazgraniczna.pl/download/1/42835/Informacjastatystycznaza2025r.pdf

[6] Piotr Zakielarz, spokesperson for the Bieszczady Border Guard Unit (Bieszczadzki Oddział Straży Granicznej), quoted in: "Propagandyści mówią o zalewie uchodźców z Ukrainy. Straż Graniczna uspokaja," PAP, 27 December 2024 - https://www.pap.pl/aktualnosci/propagandysci-mowia-o-zalewie-uchodzcow-z-ukrainy-straz-graniczna-uspokaja

[7] The equivalent balance for Q1 2025 was already negative at that time, though only slightly: -837. This means the Q1 2026 result was more than 20 times larger. Komenda Główna Straży Granicznej, "Informacja statystyczna za I kwartał 2026 r.," Warsaw, April 2026, TAB.1 and TAB.1a - https://strazgraniczna.pl/download/1/35804/InformacjastatystycznazaIkwartal2024r.pdf

[8] Eurostat, "Temporary protection for persons fleeing Ukraine – monthly statistics," Statistics Explained, updated August 2026 - https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Temporary_protection_for_persons_fleeing_Ukraine_-_monthly_statistics; News articles: "4.33 million under temporary protection in March 2026," 8 May 2026 - https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/w/ddn-20260508-1; "Temporary protection for 4.3 million in October" [2025], 10 December 2025 - https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/w/ddn-20251210-2; "Temporary protection for 4.33 million in November 2025," 12 January 2026 - https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/w/ddn-20260112-1

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