

## Poland: the needs of older refugees

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### Context

As of 29 March, 2.3 million refugees have crossed the border from Ukraine to Poland. Currently it is estimated that more than a third are expected to remain. While some older refugees are sheltering in the reception centres and collective sites across Poland, most are either staying with friends and relative or renting accommodation which is becoming increasingly unaffordable.

While the rate of arrivals has slowed since the start of the conflict, new refugees still enter Poland every day. This latest wave of new arrivals is also likely to have fewer financial resources and fewer connections within Poland and Europe. Furthermore, if fighting escalates again, a new influx is expected.

Of those crossing the border into Poland, preliminary estimates suggest that some 20% are over 65. However, this cannot be verified as the Polish authorities are not currently collecting disaggregated data on demographics. Older people in Ukraine are a significant demographic, with 1 in 4 people over 60. Therefore, ensuring that assistance is tailored to the specific needs of older people is critical in all interventions.

### Methodology

To provide a snapshot of the current needs, 148 people were interviewed by Bonum Vitae volunteers between 24 and 29 March using a short multi-sectoral needs questionnaire. Of these, 97 were over 50 and 48 were under 50. HelpAge categorizes those over 50 years as older people and this is therefore the focus of this analysis. All the interviews were conducted in the state of Lublin, including in the city itself as well as other urban areas including Świdnik, Nowy Krępiec and Krępiec. Most of the interviews were conducted at refugees' centres (51%) while the rest occurred in variety of public locations including at the city hall, train station, bus station and information centre.

Convenience sampling was used to identify older people. The small sample and approach used limited the representativeness and the scope for data disaggregation. Therefore, we advocate that other actors should, in time, conduct larger needs assessments and ensure that this data is disaggregated by sex, age, and disability and the anonymised data is shared across the humanitarian sector and with the Polish authorities. Also, the refugees interviewed may not yet have a clear picture of their longer terms needs. As the crisis evolves, their responses may change, as may their needs; thus assessments should occur frequently so that the latest information can be captured and analysed.

### Movement

- **55%** of older refugees reported that they were travelling with children. As most men under 60 have remained in Ukraine, and in many cases been conscripted into the army, the care burden of older people will have significantly increased. This equally applies to those under 50 with 71% traveling with children. Challenges they will face include enrolling children into local schools as well as in many cases having to seek jobs to financially support themselves and those in their care.
- Many refugees interviewed have made very difficult and traumatizing journeys coming **from across Ukraine especially from live conflict zones** such as in Kharkiv, Mariupol and Kyiv. The most common method used to arrive at the border was public transport, with fewer arriving by car.
- **38%** of older refugees reported that they are planning to stay in Poland for more than three months either with family, friends and/or in rented apartments. **18%** where planning to leave the country with popular destinations including Germany, Holland and the Czech Republic. Older people reported they were slightly less likely to be planning to move to another country as compared to those under 50 (21%). This trend needs to be explored in future assessments to verify if younger people are more likely to disperse across Europe as compared to those who are older.



- **28%** of older refugees reported that they did not know if they are going to stay in Poland. This is symptomatic of the uncertainty many refugees face regarding the length of their displacement. Information and advice must be provided to all refugees, who request it, to help plan for their future.
- **15%** of older refugees reported not having a place to stay in Poland. It is critical that safe accommodation is provided to all people, both temporarily and, in some cases, longer-term. Currently this is especially challenging given the shortages in Poland which is resulting in rent increases which is pricing out large number of refugees. Furthermore for older people with a disability, accessible and appropriate accommodation must be found so they can maintain their dignity and wellbeing.
- **13%** of older refugees reported to be traveling alone. This was the same percentage as for those under 50. These refugees are likely to face particular risks, and in some case their support needs may be higher. As the majority are women this also puts them at higher risk of sexual violence and exploitation. Where possible, helping them reunite with family and friends will be important, as well as ensuring that they can access mobile phones and sim cards.
- **90%** of older refugees reported Ukrainian as the main language at home while **9%** spoke Russian. This highlights that material needs to provide in both languages to ensure information is accessible to all.

## Cash and Food

- **51%** of the older people reported they did not have access to sufficient money while 5% were unsure if they have sufficient money. Those arriving often have limited cash and have left behind their assets and sources of income. In addition, older refugees, who have moved to Poland, are no longer receiving their pension. Taking away this often-vital financial income is putting many older people at risk. A longer-term solution needs to be found to resolve this for those who chose to remain outside of Ukraine.
- **4%** older refugees reported they did not have enough food. This reflects the immediate assistance provided to the refugees by the Polish government and its people. Nevertheless, as the crisis continues, resources within the country are expected to diminish, and it is important that assistance from outside the country helps fund the provision of cash assistance and social services targeted at refugees.



## Medication

- **63%** of older people need urgent medication, including for diabetes, blood pressure and pain relief, and **40%** reported that they need urgent medical attention. In both case medical needs were lower for those under 50. Many older people have multiple health conditions and complex health needs. The Polish government has assured all Ukrainians that they will be provided with free access to health services for a year. However, many refugees will be unfamiliar with local health services and lack funding to purchase medicines. An interruption in their medical routines is likely to accentuate underlying health issues and there is an urgent need to provide assistance to help identify needs and access support.
- Only **35%** of Ukrainians are fully vaccinated against COVID-19. This is especially concerning for older people who are at a significantly higher risk of dying from the virus. Therefore, it is important to ensure those most at risk have the opportunity to be vaccinated and receive personal protective equipment to reduce their risk of catching the disease.



## Disability



- **60%** of older refugees interviewed had a disability. This was significantly lower for those under 50 (17%). It is critical that future assessments explore this in more detail to understand the ramification of these disabilities and to understand if these are pre-existing conditions or have arisen because of the war, as they are higher than expected.
- The most common mentioned disabilities for older people were regarding sight (**30%**) and mobility (**20%**). Older people with mobility issues are often at greater risk of being excluded from assistance which requires beneficiaries to be present in-person to register and/or receive assistance. Therefore, it is critical the those with disability can access support. This may include providing assistance door to door.
- Of those older refugees interviewed **45%** reported they need assistive product, with **33%** mentioned they needed glasses. Other assistive product that older refugees need include wheelchairs and walking sticks. This was stated as priority by several of the refugee centres.

## Non-food items



- **71%** of older refugees reported that they need clothes. The top four most mentioned items of clothing needed were shoes (**56%**) followed by trousers (**33%**), underwear (**33%**) and jumpers (**18%**). Many have been forced to leave behind most of their belongings and need to be supported in either purchasing or being provided with appropriate clothes. As the seasons change, they will require different clothing items, which should be considered when distributing.
- Some older refugees reported needing a range of accommodation items including toilet utensils (**7%**), mattresses (**7%**) and kitchen utensils (**6%**).

## Hygiene items and water



- Nearly all refugees currently reported that they have access to sufficient water. This situation should however be closely monitored as refugee numbers may begin to stretch the country's resources if a new influx occurs.
- **10%** reported that they do not have access to sufficient hygiene supplies such as soap, shampoo, and toothbrushes.

## CONTACTS

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