Russia's war on Ukraine: The situation of Roma people fleeing Ukraine

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has forced millions of people, amongst whom Ukrainian Roma, to seek shelter in neighbouring countries. Roma fleeing Ukraine often face discrimination, segregation, deprivation and prejudice.

Risky humanitarian situation for Ukraine's Roma
According to United Nations (UN) Refugee Agency (UNHCR) estimates, as of 10 May 2022 more than 5.9 million people, amongst whom Roma, had fled Ukraine to neighbouring countries – mainly to Poland but also to Hungary, Moldova, Romania and Slovakia. Even before the start of the invasion, Ukraine's Roma population was already considered the country's most vulnerable minority group, and one which also faced a high level of discrimination.

Since the beginning of the conflict, the Council of Europe (CoE) has reported discriminatory treatments against Roma when fleeing Ukraine. According to civil society organisations and the media, Ukrainian Roma have been facing increasing difficulties along the evacuation route, at border crossing points and on arrival in Europe. Not only have they had to cope with racial discrimination and segregation in transportation, humanitarian assistance and accommodation, but also with food and water deprivation and terrible living conditions as a result of this treatment. Moreover, around 10-20 % of the estimated 400 000 Roma living in Ukraine lack the documents they need to acquire or attest their Ukrainian citizenship and to prove their residence status (around 30 000 Ukrainian Roma have no form of ID). Civil society organisations have voiced concerns that this could result in additional difficulties for Roma fleeing the war. Media reports confirm the above situation, saying that Roma are often denied access to neighbouring countries because they lack the documents to prove their residence status. While the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) has not observed incidents of discrimination or racism during its field visits, it is calling for vigilance.

International and EU response
UNHCR is working with partners and local organisations on the ground to reinforce vulnerability screening and referrals for people with specific needs, including Roma. The CoE, as well as humanitarian players and stakeholders, is stressing the need for safe and regular pathways to safety for all persons irrespective of their nationality, ethnicity and religion – including for stateless people and undocumented Roma people. The EU has stepped in to help civilians affected by the war in Ukraine with emergency aid programmes that cover some of their basic needs, and with operational guidelines on simplifying border controls for vulnerable groups at the EU borders. It has furthermore activated the Temporary Protection Directive, giving inter alia rights to a residence permit and to work. On 8 April, the Commission published a statement calling for the protection of Roma people fleeing Ukraine.

European Parliament position
Since the mid-1990s, Parliament has prioritised the fight against all forms of discrimination against Roma people. In a December 2021 resolution, Parliament stressed the need to focus on the situation of vulnerable groups at the Ukrainian border and in Russian-occupied territories of Ukraine. Parliament also recalled that when channelling its humanitarian aid, the EU must pay particular attention to vulnerable groups such as people with disabilities, minorities and other highly marginalised people. At its plenary session in April 2022, Parliament debated the situation of marginalised Roma communities in the EU with Commissioner Helena Dalli, highlighting the need for proper assistance to the Roma fleeing Ukraine.