

The forgotten front: Slovakia at center stage of Ukrainian refugee crisis



This article is the first in a series of reports on the war in Ukraine's effect on bordering Eastern European countries. It is written by two Colorado College students traveling through the region and gives an overview of the war's spreading, collateral impact on the region.

BRATISLAVA, Slovakia • The room around Lukáš Novák was out of order. The walls were sparsely decorated. Folded office chairs leaned up against the wall. Cardboard boxes lay on the floor — some half unpacked, others still full.

In the corner of the room, a small couch faced two chairs on the opposite side of a coffee table. The young lawyer, wearing a pair of thin black glasses, poured water from a glass pitcher and set it on the table.

Novák is an attorney with the Human Rights League, a non-governmental organization founded in 2005 to give legal assistance to migrants and refugees. He works in the Bratislava office, which recently relocated to accommodate a growing staff.

Since Russia first invaded Ukraine in February 2022, more than 100,000 Ukrainians have migrated to Slovakia and taken temporary refuge, according to the Slovak Republic Ministry of the Interior.

As the conflict grew and progressed, the Human Rights League saw an increase in size and funding. They moved from a small, one-room workspace to a new office suite. The staff, which numbered less than 10 before the war, is now made up of over 50 administrators and lawyers.

"Also, at this moment, we employ Ukrainian lawyers who are refugees themselves," said Novák.

One of the largest initiatives of the HRL was the establishment of mass capacity centers, completed in collaboration with municipal governments, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, and other nongovernmental organizations.

"The idea with the center: We wanted to implement the concept of a one-stop shop. So under one roof, they could get all the necessary services they needed," said Novák.

At mass capacity centers, refugees can find "legal, psychological and social services." In addition, state agencies help migrants with requests like finding child care or work.

The center's main function, though, is registering refugees for temporary protection. Slovakia allowed Ukrainians to apply for this special status only 18 days after Russia's initial invasion, enabling refugees to live and work in the country until March 4, 2023. In January, the government extended the expiration date another year.

So, until next spring, registering for temporary protection in Slovakia

remains fairly easy.

"It's like 30 minutes, because they just check your documents. You have to have proof that you are coming from Ukraine," said Zuzana Številová, director of Centrum Právnej Pomoci, a state budget organization based out of Bratislava.

Številová's organization is also finding a new place as a result of the war. In years past, CPP's work consisted mostly of providing help to Slovaks who didn't have the resources to afford their own legal counsel. Much of their assistance centered on personal finance; in 2017, they sorted through more than 10,000 bankruptcy cases.

But now, almost 60 members of Številová's 160-person staff are dedicated to helping Ukrainian refugees.

"Refugees can come to our offices because, as they are inhabitants of Slovakia, they are also qualified for free legal aid," said Številová. With the refugees, CPP's work becomes focused on property law, contract law and labor law.

But some Slovaks criticize the CPP's newfound attention on refugees.

"Citizens sometimes think that Ukrainians are getting something for free, and that (they) are not getting something for free," said Številová. "At the beginning, I think everyone was really about helping. But in every crisis, it's natural that if it lasts very long, and now it's more than a year, people start to be tired."

In summer 2022, four mass capacity centers opened up around Slovakia. Now, only two remain: one in Bratislava and the other in the eastern city of Michalovce.

Galina, a schoolteacher in Bratislava, does not enjoy the addition of the four Ukrainian students who joined her kindergarten class in the time since the war began.

"They are no good," she said, wagging her finger and shaking her head. "Absolutely different culture."

These feelings of disapproval toward the refugees are common. According to a European Commission report in September 2022, while most Slovaks "considered it necessary" to aid refugees in the first four months of the conflict, over 80% said that the "comprehensive and concentrated support" for Ukrainian migrants is perceived as being given at the expense of Slovak citizens.

But some Slovaks are simply indifferent to the Ukrainian influx.

Sitting with a friend in a quiet, shady corner of a downtown park, a university student named Dunsin had little to say about his new Ukrainian classmates.

"I like them, maybe?" said Dunsin. He wasn't bothered.

For citizens like Dunsin, Slovakia doesn't have a place in the conflict. Life goes on. But it is not clear if Slovakia can stay removed.

The small Eastern European nation, a country with roughly the same population as Colorado, faces political influence from all directions. Pushed and pulled by Western influence and communist nostalgia, social media has become a battleground. It is polarizing the Slovak electorate.

"Russian propaganda works in a way where they find an existing problem," said Pavol Kosnáč, director of the DEKK Research Institute, which focuses on social analysis. "They use it and just embellish it and make it bigger and longer term."

Slovaks are being asked to take a side. And their decision to help Ukrainian refugees, while supported by the United Nations, North Atlantic Treaty Organization and European Union, is challenged every day by Russian propaganda and "local representatives of the pro-Russian or anti-Western sentiment," according to Kosnáč.

For Slovakia, this is nothing new. The country's recent history is torn between east and west. The nation has been a junior partner in different federations for the past 200 years. In the 20th century, it formed alliances with the region's greater powers, becoming an Axis satellite state during World War II and then a vassal nation of the Soviet Union.

"Slovakia was always small," said Kosnáč. "There was always a bigger brother."

Russia's advance into Ukraine will not test the country's ability to fight, but its ability to stand ground, push back against the influence of a dominant power, and provide aid to those in need.