



Ukraine crisis response: 6-month report

Poland – Romania – Hungary – Germany – Slovakia

BY THE NUMBERS

4,500+

refugees

supported with free short-term accommodation.

1,200+

refugees

supported with subsidized midterm accommodation.

10,000+

refugees

supported with shelter services at the border.

14,000+

refugees

provided with household items through the Habitat ReStore in Warsaw, Poland.

100+

sector partnerships

in place to support long-term shelter.

The six months that have followed the Russian invasion of Ukraine have forever changed the lives of millions of people, both inside and outside of the country. In addition to thousands losing their lives, many people have seen their homes destroyed. Others have fled severely damaged houses and apartment buildings. Families have been split apart, often with the men staying in Ukraine while women, children and elderly family members seek shelter in other countries as the war still rages.

Habitat for Humanity has been supporting shelter needs in Central and Eastern Europe since 1992. While we continue to partner with a wide range of vulnerable groups and communities in securing decent shelter, we immediately responded to the needs of refugees from Ukraine. Habitat for Humanity's response started with providing temporary shelter and other urgent assistance as refugees began arriving in neighboring countries. We have since ramped up our work with local and national governments and partners to help those fleeing the conflict obtain mid- to long-term housing. As of Aug. 24, the six-month anniversary of the beginning of the war, the fighting had forced nearly one-third of the population of Ukraine out of their homes. Among the 13 million people displaced, over 6.8 million refugees are in Europe, according to the U.N. Refugee Agency. Poland has taken in the largest number of refugees, followed closely by Germany.

While many Ukrainians have returned to their home country because they sense active fighting has waned in the places they call home, the situation remains highly volatile and unpredictable, with dynamic human mobility patterns emerging. Millions still need and will need our help. As winter approaches, we can expect new challenges, including a new wave of refugees. We at Habitat for Humanity understand that our expertise in long-term housing solutions is needed more than ever. We will continue to use our resources to support refugees in the short and long terms, while advocating for more systemic housing solutions and exploring new avenues to address the challenges that lie ahead.

FACES OF THE CRISIS



Finding stability in Poland

At the sound of air raid sirens, 3-year-old Marta ran to the side of her mother and her grandmother, begging them to help her get dressed and put her shoes on so she could run to the bomb shelter. But there was no need. The family was safe in Warsaw, Poland.

Just a few months earlier, the habit of waking up at dawn to flee to a nearby factory that doubled as a shelter had been a regular occurrence for Marta; her mother, Yana; and her grandmother, Liliia. They are from Cherkasy, in central Ukraine.

Marta was diagnosed with autism just a month and a half before the Russian invasion. Worried about their safety, and with Marta's condition deteriorating because of the war, the family decided to flee their home.

The family had never left Cherkasy, let alone the country. "Your house is your home," Yana says from an apartment in Warsaw, with a sad look in her eyes.

After arriving in Poland, Liliia and Yana struggled for stability – two days with a couple here, a week with a family there, finally a month in a house somewhere in Warsaw. Liliia suffers from cancer, and Marta's autism complicated matters for the family. Feeling they had no place left to turn, the family began planning to return to Ukraine.

Just when they were about to give up, the family learned of Habitat for Humanity Poland. Soon enough, Habitat's representatives were greeting them at Habitat's housing help kiosk at one of Warsaw's main train stations.

"They took us to an apartment – just for us," Yana says. "I was in shock. We were so desperate. We would have been glad to share a bed between the three of us. But the volunteers made us so happy. They brought us pots and pans, dishes, blankets, and personal hygiene products. They even brought me a new mattress."

The apartment, although small, has everything they need. "It's a very nice neighborhood," Yana says, adding that there is a small park where she spends a lot of time with her daughter. "Habitat volunteers Tania and Carolina are always calling us, asking how we're doing and if there's anything else that we need. My mother's treatment involves self-administered shots, which need to be kept cold. The refrigerator was not working very well, and Habitat immediately replaced it with a new one."

Although Liliia's condition is terminal, she is slowly starting to feel better.

The family still hopes to one day return to Ukraine, but for now they feel safe and supported thanks to Habitat for Humanity Poland's social rental program, which has been adapted to serve refugees and has helped hundreds of people who fled Ukraine find a place to live in Poland.

Today is a good day for Liliia and Yana. They have prepared a lunch to share with three Habitat employees who have visited them. Marta excitedly helps her mother bring extra chairs into the kitchen. They are eager to play the role of host. And with each bite of food and bit of conversation, the apartment feels a little more like home.





OUR RESPONSE: EMERGENCY ACCOMMODATION, BUILDING STABILITY AND LONG-TERM SHELTER

The massive influx of refugees from the war in Ukraine quickly overwhelmed the absorption capacity of the neighboring countries. Governments, the public and nongovernmental organizations, or NGOs, collectively mobilized to support the refugees arriving in large numbers during the initial weeks of the invasion. Habitat for Humanity was among them, immediately organizing support for displaced families on the move to ensure they had a place to stay during their first days outside of Ukraine. Habitat supported 10,000 people with shelter services at the border and provided guidance on shelter options for thousands more. Habitat secured short-term accommodation for over 4,500 refugees, mostly in Poland and Romania. We have furnished transit centers with equipment that improves living conditions, such as air heaters and air conditioners. Habitat provided refugees on the move with emergency travel kits and public transport vouchers in Romania. We placed appliances such as washing machines, dryers, microwaves and refrigerators in individual residences and collective shelters across eastern Slovakia and various facilities in the capital, Bratislava.

We also have built key civil society, government and private-sector partnerships to provide immediate assistance to refugees moving through Poland, Romania, Hungary and Slovakia. In collaboration with Caritas Bratislava, for example, we helped procure and distribute

hygiene products for refugees in Slovakia, mainly at the Bottova support and information center in Bratislava. In Romania, we partnered with hotel chains to provide refugees with vouchers for overnight accommodations.

In Poland, the city of Warsaw asked Habitat Poland in early March to establish a housing kiosk for refugees arriving at the Warsaw East railway station. Initially, the aim of the housing help desk was to connect refugees arriving from Ukraine with over 4,000 solidarity housing units – Warsaw households volunteering to host refugees for free and vetted by the city. A Habitat Poland volunteer was assigned to each of the families to follow up with them and ensure they had settled in and had information on schooling and essential services. Because of the great need for immediate housing, Habitat Poland has also secured hostel and hotel rooms to supplement the city's accommodation inventory.

The city has seen a gradual decrease in hosting offers from individual families. This has increased the need for and importance of short-term accommodation for refugees. Though it has become more challenging because of the shortage of apartments in the rental market, Habitat Poland continues to solicit available housing units to receive arriving refugees and continues to provide temporary accommodation in hostels. We remain concerned that the anticipated harsh winter in Ukraine will bring more refugees to neighboring countries, putting pressure on already stretched resources.

ON THE MOVE

up to 2 weeks

Emergency accommodation

BUILDING STABILITY

up to 6 months

Interim shelter solutions

Habitat also has helped refugees secure midterm accommodation in subsidized rental apartments or upgraded dormitories. So far, over 1,200 refugees have benefited from midterm accommodation in existing apartments or refurbished vacant spaces in Poland, Romania and Hungary.

The challenge in Poland is particularly daunting. The country has fewer rentals than its European neighbors and was already facing an affordable housing deficit before the crisis, with a gap of 2 million units.

In response, Habitat Poland has ramped up a social rental program that it piloted with the city of Warsaw over the past four years so that it now supports refugees as well as Polish communities. The program acts as a mediating agency, leasing units directly with flat owners and then renting them at affordable rates to refugees. Habitat ensures rents are paid on time and that flats are returned in a condition no worse than at the beginning of the lease.

Specifically for refugee households, Habitat Poland implemented a component to provide rental support, or subsidies, to cover midterm accommodations within the social rental program while refugees work on settling in their new locations. For more vulnerable households with no possibility to earn an income, Habitat is providing fully subsidized rental accommodation until they find more durable solutions. In partnership with a local NGO, Habitat Poland also distributed prepaid cards to the refugees, allowing them to procure needed items such as groceries in a popular retail store. This support has so far reached over 515 people.

Habitat Hungary put in place a “solidarity accommodation program” that extends to midterm housing solutions, ranging from two weeks to six months. To date, the program has helped accommodate 38 families. It is managed with local partners such as the From Streets to Homes Association and the City is for All organization. Refugees are informed about temporary accommodation provided by homeowners and collective crisis shelter via posters, leaflets, online tools or colleagues. Habitat staff members and volunteers match families in the database, mediating between parties and providing refugees with various social services, essential equipment and logistics.



Warsaw's Habitat ReStore finds a new purpose

As added support, Habitat Poland has repositioned its Warsaw ReStore to act as a distribution center for household items. It collects furniture, mattresses and other donated goods from various sources, including large corporate donors, and supplies them to families supported by Habitat and to multiple partner organizations. In greatest demand are bed frames, mattresses, bed sheets, furniture and dishes. As of August, Habitat had provided more than 14,000 refugees with household items through the Warsaw ReStore.

The refugee crisis has added a new dimension – and a new purpose – for the Warsaw location, the only Habitat ReStore in Europe outside of Ireland. It opened just as the COVID-19 pandemic hit Poland more than two years ago, making for a difficult debut. The ReStore's focus on helping families access home improvement materials makes it well-placed to respond to the practical needs of refugees.

Habitat Poland has secured a dedicated warehouse to store donations from corporations and other partners. The Warsaw Restore had the capacity to furnish 15 apartments per week as of August, with plans to ramp up to 20 apartments per week.





People living in temporary shelter in the Carousel center in Bucharest, Romania, celebrated Children's Day in the shelter's exterior kitchen and dining area.

LONG-TERM SHELTER

6 months +

Housing solutions

While the number of Ukrainians returning home has increased during the summer months, many more are staying in Europe and will be seeking long-term shelter solutions.

Habitat for Humanity is developing rental support programs in all our response countries to support refugees in their search for long-term housing.

In Poland, Habitat has been advocating intensively for a city-run social rental agency, or SRA, to address the persistent housing issues in major cities. While this has been approved by Warsaw, implementation has been delayed pending procedural clarifications. Other cities have already expressed interest, and Habitat Poland is working with a leading law firm on a detailed guidebook for municipalities to streamline the enactment of such programs in their jurisdictions. The guidebook will soon be presented to decision-makers, including the Polish Ministry of Economic Development and Technology, as well as to experts. Habitat is also planning trainings and webinars to educate stakeholders about the potential of SRAs to address long-term housing challenges.



Olga and her older daughter Liija are able to keep their two cats in their temporary apartment in Hungary's capital, Budapest. Many pets were abandoned in Olga's hometown, Bucha.

Habitat Romania initiated the next phase of its housing assistance program in early June, focusing on social rental support. Over 100 refugees have already found long-term accommodation, with a six-month minimum, in fully equipped one- to two-bedroom apartments in Bucharest. Habitat Romania also has provided household items, including pillows, blankets and kitchen appliances. There is also a plan to rehabilitate and refurbish the Bucharest Ferdinand school dormitory so that it can host up to 130 refugees, with a projected October completion date.



Before and after refurbishment of a student housing center of the Technical University of Civil Engineering in Bucharest.

Habitat Hungary put a similar rental support program in place at the end of June, through which volunteers and staff members match homeowners and refugees. After an official tenancy agreement is signed, Habitat Hungary and its partner organizations support part of the payment obligations. This includes the amount of the deposit – up to €400 – along with monthly rents up to €150, move-in costs, starting kits, housing equipment, and furniture. Besides housing assistance,

the program includes intensive social work with the refugees to increase the quality and sustainability of the interventions.

In Germany, which is largely viewed as a destination country, Habitat launched a pilot project supporting refugees in Overath, a town in North Rhine-Westphalia. We help find and secure long-term apartments for families who are currently living in transitional collective shelters or in private solidarity accommodations. The project acquires apartments and provides support, advice and consultancy services to bring together refugees, landlords and the municipality. As of August, 45 apartments had been provided for 154 refugees. At that time, about 37% of all refugees coming from Ukraine were living in the city of Overath in decent, secure, long-term shelter. Habitat Germany is now extending this service to other small and midsize municipalities. Habitat signed an agreement with the municipality of Bergisch Gladbach, where we will try to find long-term apartments for as many refugees from Ukraine as possible, given that over 800 in this city are currently living in private solidarity accommodation.

Habitat continues to lend its technical support to the sector and is co-leading the shelter working group in Poland in partnership with the U.N. Refugee Agency. Priority topics for a coordinated approach among agencies operating in Poland include a common needs assessment, research on feasibility of extending solidarity housing, a longer-term housing strategy aligned with government plans, and a unified referral pathway for refugees in greater need of accommodation.



Habitat for Humanity Romania rented an apartment in Bucharest for Olena and her children. They came from the Ukrainian city of Vasytkiv.



Sharing what is good

The people of Europe have been incredible partners for Habitat for Humanity and other organizations, as they have generously opened their homes to refugees from Ukraine and provided critical housing during the regional crisis. Among them is Arpad, who provides solidarity accommodation in Hungary. He does so through a joint program by Habitat for Humanity Hungary, the From Streets to Homes Association, and partner organization The City is for All. When the war began, Arpad and his wife felt compelled to help and signed up to be a host family. “Everything happened so fast,” he says. “A couple of days after we applied, the program operators reached out to us. There was a mom and her 17-year-old daughter who were looking for a place to live in Budapest for a few months.” The refugee family came from eastern Ukraine, close to the Russian border in an area that is badly affected by the armed conflict.

Arpad and his wife let the family stay in a second apartment unit they own in the building where they live. The family plans to remain in the city and do not plan to leave Budapest, Arpad says. “They have started to look for jobs; the mother now works as a cleaner in a school.”

Even though they live in the same building, Arpad says he does not talk or meet with the family often because he senses that’s the way they prefer it. “In my opinion, when I provide accommodation for a family, I also need to ensure their privacy. In the beginning, we brought them a couple of things, but it made them rather uncomfortable. We want to respect their boundaries and let them keep their dignity. I feel it is better to give them space.”

Arpad says a priest once told him, “Should you get any good, share it with others. Should you get any bad, keep it to yourself and turn it into something good.”

Now he is trying to live by this principle. “If there is anything I can give to someone, I will not keep it to myself. I would rather give it to someone in greater need. Of course, we could use the income from renting the apartment. But comparing our needs to this family’s, we would happily give up that money for a while.”



Homesick, but safe

On Feb. 24, 2022, the sound of air raid sirens and bombs dropping echoed deafeningly in Lilia's home in the town of Bila Tserkva, near Kyiv. On the very first day of the war, she hastily packed up herself, her two daughters, her mother and the cat. They stayed in a bomb shelter for seven days until they found a way to cross the border to Poland. After two weeks, they arrived in Romania.

Lilia's mother, Tatiana, was the one who wanted desperately to leave Ukraine as soon as possible. In 1994, she lost her husband in the conflict between Russia and Chechnya. She made a promise then that the war would never take another loved one away from her.

Lilia, her children – Milana, 14, and Emili, 6 – Tatiana and Marchis, the cat, have been living in the temporary refugee shelter managed by the Carusel Association in Bucharest since June. The center offers them safety, socialization and good living conditions. The space was rehabilitated and refurbished by Habitat for Humanity Romania to ensure the comfort of the families living here in the short or medium term.

At the beginning of March, the Carusel Association, in collaboration with the Capital City Hall, opened a temporary accommodation center. The shelter was designed with a modular structure made of containers to accommodate approximately 40 people in the winter. Two hundred seventy-eight people had been accommodated as of May, putting much strain on the bathroom facilities, which fell into disrepair. Over the course of 17 days in June, Habitat Romania rehabilitated the sanitary facilities, organized a place to prepare and serve meals outside, and set up a garden and a safe playground for the children in the center. The new spaces can't cure the homesickness that so many refugees feel, but they do provide the warmth and safety of a secure shelter.

LOOKING AHEAD

The situation in Ukraine continues to deteriorate, particularly in the east and south of the country. Because of the unpredictability of the military offensive, no place can be deemed completely safe from air strikes and shelling. Safety threats around Europe's largest nuclear power plant in Zaporizhzhia add to the volatility of the situation. The resulting uncertainty, coupled with ever-growing damage to vital public infrastructure, could force even more people to seek safe shelter outside of Ukraine. Many inside and outside of Ukraine fear the situation will get worse with the arrival of winter. To address these new challenges, Habitat for Humanity is stepping up our response, leaning on our technical expertise, key partnerships and long-term approach to shelter and housing-related solutions.

The challenges of winter

Inside Ukraine, damaged or destroyed residential buildings and infrastructure – combined with gas and electricity shortages and limited basic public services – could leave a large proportion of the population vulnerable to colder weather this winter. It's unclear how this will play out, but there may be an urgent need for winterizing damaged buildings in Ukraine. An increased influx of refugees into neighboring countries is expected as temperatures plunge below freezing. These journeys will be into countries also experiencing frigid conditions and with little additional shelter and housing capacity.

Cost-of-living crisis

The rising cost of living in Europe has already significantly affected communities' ability to provide support. Surging gas and electricity costs are expected to rise further, alongside food and commodity prices. Inflation is expected to remain high and persistent, making housing unaffordable for many who rent and further stretching the resources of more than a few host families. In Romania, for instance, housing need is one of the most severe in the European Union, with 25% of the country's 20 million people living in poverty and 20% of the houses in urgent need of repair. We also expect additional pressure on the management of transitional shelters and other facilities housing large numbers of people, especially in situations where it is not clear who covers utility expenses.

Social tensions

Skyrocketing prices may also lead to increased social tensions throughout Europe. Campaigns discrediting Ukrainian refugees are a growing form of misinformation in social media. According to a YouGov poll from early July, more than a quarter of Polish citizens (27%) felt that the government had done too much to help and take in Ukrainian refugees, the highest of any of the European nations surveyed. A further 22% felt the government still had not done enough, and 39% said it had done about the right amount. Only half of Polish citizens now say Poland has a moral obligation to offer asylum to Ukrainian refugees, down from two-thirds in March. In Germany, 22% of people say their country has been doing too much for refugees.

Decline of solidarity housing and government subsidies

Solidarity accommodation and the willingness to offer empty rooms or apartments for free is decreasing in Europe. At the same time, governmental housing subsidies that were released immediately after the crisis started are slowly coming to an end. This reduces the availability of housing for refugees from Ukraine. As a result, some are forced to return to collective stay facilities or hotels. At the same time, many collective centers are being shut down because of a lack of funding or political will. For instance, in Poland, many refugees are no longer eligible for housing subsidies after an initial 120-day period. Although changes to legislation are being planned, certain municipalities report that they ran out of available accommodation and that the situation is deteriorating. In Hungary, where there is no statewide monetary aid in place, some families organize individual fundraisers so that they can host refugees for longer.



Milena, 13, has a talent for drawing. Since the conflict began in her country, she finds the only way she can express her painful feelings is to draw. The inscription in Russian says, “No war.”

Habitat's long-term approach

The scale and complexity of the Ukraine crisis increase the importance of nongovernmental interventions such as those of Habitat for Humanity. Our national offices in Poland, Hungary, Romania and Germany, in particular, have been reacting to the challenges posed by the war since it began.

To address the evolving situation, Habitat will continue to explore a wide range of interventions that help meet the short-, mid- and long-term accommodation needs of the refugees. This includes leading and supporting social rental programs, coordinating in-kind donations – including through Warsaw’s Habitat ReStore – and providing energy efficiency consultations.

We will continue to advocate for legislative changes needed to clear the way for housing solutions, providing expert support for national governments and municipalities, and we will engage with news media to raise awareness of the housing issues arising from the conflict. Habitat will continue to leverage partnerships with governments, civil society organizations and the U.N., seeking durable solutions for people who remain displaced from their homes. In partnership with local and international organizations, we also will explore opportunities for cooperation within Ukraine.



“Habitat for Humanity’s Ukraine response represents a long-term commitment to the shelter needs of the people impacted by the war. We are focused on supporting people with their immediate and long-term shelter needs in concert with Habitat for Humanity’s Pathways to Permanence approach to reducing the vulnerability of disaster-affected families, putting them on a path to durable shelter solutions. The partners in this response — governments, corporations, U.N. agencies and community organizations — have been inspiring. We are eager to use our experience and shelter focus to support the needs across the impacted areas. I am confident that our response, by leveraging the organizational experience and powerful partnerships, will influence the scale and quality of shelter delivered by the sector and its partners.”

— Rick Hathaway
Vice President, Europe and Middle East,
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