



## **Ireland gives warm welcome to Ukrainians fleeing conflict. Asylum-seekers from elsewhere point to unequal treatment**

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When 25-year-old Maria Kozlovskaya gazes out of the window, she sees the green fields of the west of Ireland. It's a far cry from the shelled apartment buildings of her home city of Zaporizhzhia in southeastern Ukraine. Forced into exile by conflict, the young mother has found an unlikely refuge in a 15th-century castle in County Galway.

"I never dreamed that I could live in a castle in the future," she says, still in awe after two months of living in Ballindooley Castle with her sons, 5-year-old Illya and 7-year-old Matvey.

Owner Barry Haughian, who bought the castle as a second home in 2016, was inspired to travel to Poland after watching CNN coverage of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Kozlovskaya, who traveled with Haughian to Ireland, admits that she didn't fully grasp the scale of the castle until she arrived.

Great efforts have been made to accommodate the 11 refugees who now call Ballindooley Castle home. The grand Great Hall, once the setting for lavish banquets, now serves as a breakfast table for the young children.

Down south in County Cork, 31-year-old Vera Ruban finds herself in less regal surroundings. She was one of the first Ukrainian refugees to be placed in Irish government emergency accommodation after hotel rooms ran out. The interpreter from Hostomel, near Kyiv, now sleeps on a single bed inside the Green Glens Arena, an equestrian and entertainment venue in the small town of Millstreet.

Although their living situations could not be more different, both women have managed to settle quickly into life in Ireland. The smooth nature of the process has prompted questions from asylum-seekers fleeing conflicts in countries other than Ukraine who say they encountered an arduous asylum process that can take years to navigate.

Ireland, an island of just over 5 million people, has taken in more Ukrainian refugees than many of its larger Western European neighbors. Ukrainian refugees began arriving in early March and so far more than 30,000 refugees have arrived.

Nick Henderson, chief executive of the Irish Refugee Council, an NGO providing services and support to refugees, says the government got off to a "positive start" by quickly invoking the Temporary Protection Directive, an exceptional measure activated by the European Union that allowed member states to waive visa requirements for refugees for up to three years.

Ukrainian refugees have so far been mainly housed in hotels, B&Bs and volunteers' homes. As the approaching tourist season looks set to create a shortage of hotel rooms, the Irish government has plans to repurpose vacant vacation homes, convents and student halls to accommodate further arrivals.

The government has not indicated how long these settings will be used to house refugees. Prime Minister Micheal Martin has repeatedly pledged not to place a cap on the number of Ukrainian refugees that Ireland takes in.

Roderic O'Gorman, the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, told CNN that despite it not being "all the kind of the gold standard accommodation that we'd like," Ireland is doing its "best to make sure Ukrainians here have security."

Ruban, who decided to travel to Ireland after hearing about the welcome it offered to refugees, told CNN she "didn't have any expectation" regarding accommodation.

The arena where she now lives has been partitioned into a series of living spaces, containing a small kitchen, living room area, and separated beds.

The majority of the arena's residents, she believes, are "happy to have a roof above their heads."

"A lot of people who came here, they left good facilities, a good life and they're very shocked... But they don't complain," she said.

In Galway, Kozlovskaya is thrilled that her sons were able to attend school within five days of arriving and have so far found it "easy" to make new friends.

Not all are pleased with the Irish government's response, however. Ireland's warm welcome of Ukrainian refugees has reignited a fractious debate about its treatment of asylum-seekers fleeing other conflicts in places such as Afghanistan and Syria.

Over the years, the country has been repeatedly criticized for the way it deals with asylum-seekers. Under its direct-provision system, asylum-seekers are housed in temporary accommodation as they wait to find out if they have been granted refugee status. Initially introduced as an emergency measure in 1999 in response to higher numbers of asylum applications, and subsequently formalized in 2020, the reception system has become mired in controversy in the two decades since.

Asylum-seekers have lodged many complaints about the system's lengthy processing times, substandard accommodation and impingement on core rights including, notably, the right to work.

It has drawn criticism from opposition parties, NGOs and, most significantly, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), who in a 2015 report said long stays in direct provision impeded asylum-seekers from integrating properly into Irish society.

#### 'Frustrating' system

Lucky Khambule is a former asylum-seeker who came to Ireland from South Africa in 2016. He is all too familiar with the workings of the direct-provision system, having spent three years sharing a room in a government-run facility in Cork.

"It took me by surprise that I could not do anything. You know, that was the frustrating thing. That I was in the system and suddenly, I could not work. I could not study. I could not make my own meals, you know. And I was just taught to be lazy, sleep and eat, sleep, and eat... Every day you hope that something will happen," he told CNN.

According to UNHCR, an asylum-seeker in Ireland can expect to wait 14 months for an initial decision on asylum status.

Khambule, who co-founded the Movement of Asylum Seekers in Ireland (MASI), which campaigns for better conditions for asylum-seekers, says the government's response to the Ukrainian refugee crisis has left asylum-seekers from other countries feeling "marginalized."

"With regard to the treatment of the Ukrainians... it showed that all along that the government is capable of treating us better," he said.

According to Khambule, whereas asylum-seekers have to wait on average three to four months to get a "blue card" simply identifying them, Ukrainian refugees have bypassed this step.

"It's not acceptable that we can as a state provide immediate supports to people at an airport when they arrive, (such as) PPS numbers, it's like our social security number. But at the same time, there's people living in Dublin for months, who don't get that same support," said Henderson, of the Irish Refugee Council.

Similarly, while Ukrainian children have been enrolled quickly in Irish schools, children of asylum-seekers in emergency accommodation have experienced delays in accessing school. A 2020 report from the Irish Center for Human Rights found that children in direct provision "are prevented from attending ordinary school with other non-asylum-seeking children for months on end and are instead segregated in emergency education settings that are unregulated and lacking in resources."

A spokesperson for the Department of Education told CNN: "In Ireland, all migrant children, including children of international protection applicants, refugees, migrant workers and unaccompanied minors, can access pre-school, first- and second-level education in a manner similar to Irish nationals, until they have reached the

age of 18 years. In Ireland, a school must admit all students applying where it is not oversubscribed and places are available."

The statement also noted that "schools are not required to check the residency status of refugees, or other applicants seeking a school place."

Khambule: 'We look different, we are treated different'

Khambule highlights that while Ukrainian refugees were allowed to swap their driver's licenses for Irish ones, "asylum-seekers were legally not allowed to even drive here" until a recent court judgment.

The war in Ukraine "caught people's attention," Henderson said, attempting to explain Ireland's change in approach.

Khambule accuses the government's response of being at its core "racist," saying that because Ukrainians "are their neighbors, because they look like them, they treat them in that way."

"We look different, we are treated different," he said.

CNN reached out to the Irish government for a response to Khambule's claims. A press officer for the Department of Justice told CNN that Ireland's action on the Ukrainian refugee crisis is "part of an EU-wide response" and "in keeping" with its obligations as an EU member state.

"Historically, when mass displacement of people has occurred as a result of violence and conflict in countries like Syria and Afghanistan, safety and shelter for people forced to flee has largely been provided to them by their closest neighbors," the press officer told CNN.

She said the Department of Justice strives to have decisions on asylum applications made "as soon as possible to ensure that those found to be in need of protection from the State can receive it quickly and begin rebuilding their lives."

The press officer also stated that Ireland has "historically provided a number of targeted protection programs to assist people fleeing conflict," referencing previous programs in response to conflict in Syria and Afghanistan.

Despite the disparity in treatment, Khambule says asylum-seekers in Ireland "are in solidarity with what (Ukrainians) have gone through."

"We don't want that to happen to anyone. But we are saying, remember, the other people from other countries who also are fleeing war. Palestine..., Yemen, Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Congo," he said.

Henderson said the government's response has fundamentally created "concern" and raised important questions. "Why aren't we able to do all the things that we've done for Ukrainian refugees and apply that to all people seeking asylum?" he asked.

Although Ireland "is great at emergency responses," he said, the government must now think of a long-term plan for dealing with the broader refugee crisis.

Back in the grandeur of Ballindooey Castle, Kozlovskaya cannot help but think of the future, too.

Although she hopes that the war will end soon and she will be able to return to Ukraine, she is now sure that Ireland is "really a good place for our life now."

CNN's Lauren Kent contributed to this report.

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