



Ukraine refugees: Why the US has allowed so few

Analysis by Zachary B. Wolf, CNN

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Many Ukrainians -- more than 3 million and counting -- have fled their country since Russia's invasion, with nearly 2 million pouring into neighboring Poland and hundreds of thousands going to other nearby countries.

But only the smallest trickle -- around 690 -- have come to the US as refugees since last October. That means essentially no Ukrainians of those 3 million who left since the war began have come to the US.

Why haven't more been allowed?

It's a story of red tape and the broken immigration system, which the Biden administration, despite a desire to welcome refugees, has been unable to change.

Americans want to help, if their Google searches are any indication.

CNN's Catherine E. Shoichet put together a story to answer the question: how to help Ukrainian refugees.

The US has provided money

Congress has approved more than \$4 billion in humanitarian assistance for Ukraine, which includes \$1.4 billion specifically to help with the refugee crisis.

The US has promised to take refugees

President Joe Biden has pledged to bring refugees to the US.

"I will welcome the Ukrainian refugees," he said from the White House on March 11.

But it is not currently possible for American families to sponsor Ukrainian refugees, as Shoichet points out.

On a stop in Poland, Vice President Kamala Harris met with refugees but would not commit to the US accepting a specific number. Poland's President personally asked her to do more to help Ukrainians unite with family members in the US.

Calls for the US to do more

Critics say the US should act more quickly to welcome Ukrainians.

"Words matter, actions matter," wrote Mark Hetfield, CEO of HIAS, the global Jewish non-profit that protects refugees, for CNN Opinion after Harris' trip to Poland. "When it comes to refugees and leadership, the United States is falling short on both fronts."

Similarly, in a Washington Post opinion column, CNN commentator Catherine Rampell writes, "We've done pretty much the bare minimum -- that is, we've allowed Ukrainians already here to stay longer. This is little comfort to families stuck in war-torn Ukraine, of course, or those who have fled with little more than the clothes on their backs."

Immigration is complicated in the US

Welcoming people fleeing a war zone sounds good, but it is a difficult political matter in the US, where immigration and fear of immigrants can turn elections.

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What about Afghanistan?

The US admitted more than 76,000 Afghans -- many of whom had worked for the Americans -- after leaving Afghanistan to the Taliban. Many of those Afghan evacuees were "paroled" into the US with temporary entry status, which is a quicker admission process.

How many refugees are allowed in the US vs. how many are resettled?

Last May, Biden raised the cap on US refugees from the very low 15,000 set by the Trump administration to 62,500 in 2021, in line with the recent past, and then raised it again to 125,000. But those caps are far below ones from the 1980s, when the US welcomed hundreds of thousands of refugees each year.

Even so, it's unlikely the US will reach that ceiling given the decimated refugee resettlement infrastructure left behind by the Trump administration and the overwhelming demand of the last several months following the fall of Kabul.

Refugees vs. asylum seekers

In addition to people who seek refugee status before coming to the US, there are those who seek asylum at US borders. An order put in place by the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention two years ago to stop the spread of Covid-19 -- known as Title 42 -- has essentially closed the US southern border to asylum seekers.

Some Ukrainians have been exempted from that order, and a few have been allowed to cross the border with Mexico -- including a woman and her three children, as CNN's Priscilla Alvarez wrote about last week.

When I asked Alvarez, who has covered immigration for years, why the US can't simply change things around, she said the system is complicated and hard to update quickly.

She sent me an email, most of which I've included below:

It takes years to become a refugee in the US

ALVAREZ: There are limited options for Ukrainians seeking to come to the United States, and most of those options take time to complete.

Take the US refugee admissions program. The process to come to the US as a refugee takes years because of the processing and screening that's required. The US has admitted Ukrainian refugees before, and since last October, at least 690 Ukrainian refugees resettled in the United States, according to State Department data.

Can the process be sped up for Ukrainians?

ALVAREZ: The Biden administration says it is weighing a range of options to expedite the refugee process for Ukrainians with family in the United States.

Are there ways around the official refugee process?

ALVAREZ: Some Ukrainians have sought tourist visas to come to the US, but that too is tricky. To obtain tourist visas, Ukrainians must apply, get appointments at US consulates and prove that they're coming to the US for a short period -- a requirement set in law. That's kept some Ukrainians from being able to travel to the US, given the uncertain circumstances in their country.

And then other Ukrainians have tried to enter the US at the southern border. The Department of Homeland Security recently instructed US Customs and Border Protection officers that some Ukrainians may be exempt from the Trump-era pandemic emergency rule to enter the US.

Where will most refugees end up?

ALVAREZ: Senior Biden administration officials noted this week that most Ukrainians will likely want to stay in Europe but acknowledged that efforts are underway to address those interested in coming to the US.

Secretary of State Antony Blinken said Thursday that the administration is working closely with the United Nations refugee agency to see how the US can support Ukrainian refugees and is assessing what the administration can do to facilitate family reunification.

We'll be coming back to this issue since the Ukraine refugee crisis appears to be just getting started.

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