

Rapid Assessment of a Selection of Transit Centres on the South-Eastern Poland-Ukraine Border

Version: 29 April 2022



Medyka transit site and border crossing, April 2022

1. Executive summary

Since the recent escalation of the conflict in Ukraine (24 February 2022), neighbouring countries have seen the massive displacement of over five million refugees - mostly women, children, and the elderly. Local government, organisations, volunteers, and communities continue to support people fleeing the conflict, but the resources to continue are becoming strained.

Poland is receiving most of the refugees from Ukraine; currently over three million refugees have entered Poland (UNHCR, 29 April). It is estimated that 50% have moved on to other parts of Europe, but a large caseload of refugees will stay in Poland due to the proximity to Ukraine, existing Ukrainian community (more than one million were already in Poland) and possibilities to connect with family members who are still in Ukraine, or until they can eventually return home. Moreover, a significant number of Ukrainian refugees are staying near the border to be close to friends, family, and property, or because of a lack of options/plans for relocating elsewhere.

The main findings and recommendations in this report are based on NRC's visits to border areas in April 2022. The commendable response at the border points and transit sites is being led by local municipalities and volunteers, however, these networks and resources are becoming strained and additional support is required to ensure these sites meet and maintain protection and safeguarding standards. NRC's findings echo those in recent assessments by other actors, namely, the need to strengthen service provision and capacities of sites to be protection sensitive. However, the findings in this report place greater emphasis on strengthening protection and other services in transit sites close to and on main border crossings, to reach and respond to the greatest number of refugees.

Key findings

- Not all refugees who cross the border pass through the transit sites and reception centres where services are available
- Medyka border crossing has the highest number of refugees in transit but the least developed infrastructure
- Provision of information on access to services, legal information and counselling, and capacities for safe identification and referral are limited at border points and transit sites

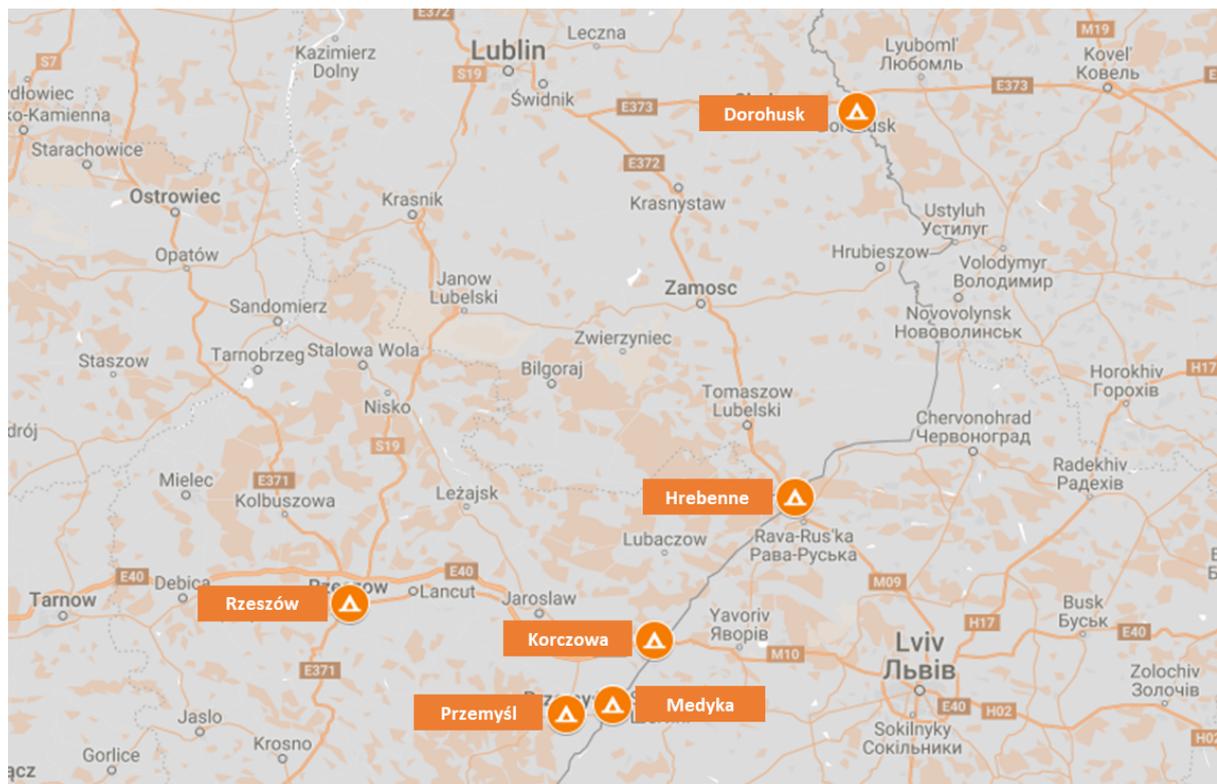
Recommendations

- Humanitarian partners should increase legal information provision at border points and transit centres
- Humanitarian partners should increase cash registration at transit sites for most vulnerable households
- Humanitarian partners should support volunteers and municipalities with staffing, training, and technical support for a more sustainable response
- Humanitarian partners should invest in the Medyka border crossing to increase the protection-sensitivity of this transit site

2. Introduction

Findings and observations in this document are based on NRC's visit to the border and nearby receptions areas on the Polish border with Ukraine. This was undertaken over two visits: 11 to 13 April 2022 and 26 to 28 April 2022. The locations visited were: Przemyśl-Tesco transit site, Przemyśl train station, Medyka border crossing, Korczowa transit site, Hrebenne transit site, Hrebenne border crossing, Rzeszów Market Transit Centre, Dorohusk border crossing point and reception centre.

Figure: Location of transit sites and border points visited by NRC team



The first few weeks of the escalation of war from 24 February saw the largest influx of refugees since the Second World War, which put tremendous strain on local authorities and Polish civil society to support. With the retreat of the Russian Armed Forces from Kyiv (early April), the number of people crossing into Poland from Ukraine has decreased steadily.

April 1st saw the first time when the number crossing into Ukraine (21,100 individuals) exceeded the number arriving to Poland (20,830 individuals); however, this is partly and likely a result of pendular movements, rather than safe and voluntary return, given that the situation remains highly volatile and uncertain.

Research undertaken by REACH-UNHCR¹ highlights interesting points on why people are returning, and from where they are returning. Given that most refugees fled to Poland, it is not surprising to see Poland as the largest country of departure (77% of those leaving neighbouring countries), but it is interesting to note that the majority of those leaving Poland were going to Lvivska Oblast and that the reasons for returning can be grouped in the following three categories:

- Feel that it is safe or reuniting with family: 59%
- Pendular movement: 29%
- Returning as they feel they have no choice: 6%

Given the complex and dynamic nature of the conflict, with civilian infrastructure being targeted, it is difficult to predict if there will be another mass influx of refugees in the coming weeks or months, if the number of people arriving will stabilise, or if the steady decline in numbers will continue as people prefer to return/remain within Ukraine. For the foreseeable future, transit sites will provide essential assistance and will need to remain operational with a flexible capacity to support the needs of those seeking safety should there be another large influx of refugees, while ensuring a sustained quality of support for smaller numbers of people as needed. Moreover, these key sites can serve a role in supporting and informing those returning to Ukraine, whether as part of a pendular movement, or as part of safe and voluntary return.

3. Main findings

3.1 Not all refugees who cross the border pass through the transit sites and reception centres where services are available

Data from the Polish Border Guard, from 24 February to 24 April, shows that main border crossing from the west of Ukraine is, by far, Medyka near Przemyśl, followed by Korczowa, Dorohusk and Hrebenne border crossings².

The starting points for journeys in Poland are at the transit and border sites where people congregate before they disperse throughout Poland and to other countries – largely to other European Union member-states where they enjoy a similar level of legal protection. Information provision at this point will support the agency of refugees to make safe and informed decisions for their onward journey.

Based on discussions with volunteers and local authorities:

- Refugees crossing through Medyka are advised to go to Przemyśl-Tesco transit site for travel onto other EU member states, or to go directly to the bus or train station in Przemyśl if they were planning on remaining in Poland; however, refugees crossing by foot or by car may choose to continue onwards to other destinations without first passing through these sites.
- From the Korczowa border crossing, refugees can go to the Korczowa transit site; however, refugees crossing may choose to continue onwards to other destinations without first passing through the transit site. This site was taking the overflow of people from Medyka crossing when capacity at Przemyśl-Tesco was reached. The Korczowa transit site provides support for those wishing to, both, stay in Poland or travel on internationally.
- Those crossing from Hrebenne and Dorohusk crossings, access the respective nearby transit sites; however, refugees crossing by foot or by car may choose to continue onwards to other destinations without first passing through these transit sites. The municipality in Hrebenne

¹ [Situation Overview: Movement of Ukrainians back into Ukraine from Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania and Moldova](#)

² [Polish Border Guard Twitter, April 25](#)

organises regular transport from the crossing to the transit site for those crossing by foot. Hrebenne transit site works to facilitate onward travel within Poland. The municipality organises special buses and trains as needed to support onward journeys as well as accommodation. The Dorohusk border crossing, the nearest border crossing to Kiev, is almost exclusively a car crossing. An estimated 95% of people using this crossing have an onward journey already planned, but stop at the transit site for rest, information, and access to services before continuing their journey.

Table: Overview of different transit sites visited, with the East Warsaw Train Station Transit Site as a reference

	Przemysł (Tesco site)	Hrebenne	Korczowa	Medyka	Rzeszów	Dorohusk	East Warsaw Site
How many people are in transit site at present?	800-1,000	450	400	-	180	11	200
What is the capacity of transit site, how many people can access the site at one time?	2,000 people (800 beds)	120 people (120 beds)	6,000 people (2,500 beds)	-	900 people (600 beds)	100 people (75 beds)	1500 people
How long are people expected to stay in the site?	24 hours	24 hours	24 hours, however, some have been staying for up to 2 weeks	2 hours	24-48 hours (people can stay longer if needed e.g., while waiting for visas)	24-48 hours (people can stay longer if needed)	2 hours -48 hours
Where do people travel on to from the transit sites?	This site is only for travel in Europe; top destination being Germany	The municipality coordinates travel to other locations in Poland for accommodation	Actors/ volunteers provide support for travel within Poland and international destinations	Travel onward to transit sites or own destination	Travel within Poland and international destinations	Travel within Poland and international destinations	Travel within Poland and international destinations
How is transportation to onward destinations organized?	Network of volunteers, driving buses to other EU Member States and UK.	Transportation is organised by the municipality, in some cases special buses and trains are provided	Through a network of volunteers and organizations, offering support to travel to member states and countries outside the EU	Buses provided to the transit sites, or refugees from Ukraine travel with pre-arranged people or people volunteering to drive them to their destinations	Self-organised	Most people arriving at this transit site arrive and leave the site in their own cars.	Buses and trains provided by the city of Warsaw, volunteer support to organise buses

3.2 Medyka border crossing has the highest number of refugees in transit but the least developed infrastructure

The sites and response at the border crossings appeared to be almost entirely run by independent volunteers or by local organisations and the municipalities, with oversight from the Województwo (voivodeships - administrative authority at provincial level), local authorities or civil society. The table below provides a traffic-light overview of the different sites and the assistance provided.

Table: Overview of level of infrastructure provided at transit/border point, with East Warsaw Train Station as a reference

Observations	Przemyśl (Tesco site)	Hrebenne	Korczowa	Medyka	Rzeszów	Dorohusk	East Warsaw Site
Is access to the site secure? Limited access points? Secure perimeter? (observation)	Green	Green	Green	Orange	Green	Green	Green
Does the transit site have electricity, heating and running water? (observation)	Yellow	Green	Yellow	Orange	Green	Green	Green

The transit sites themselves appeared, from observation only, to be secure spaces, with limited access points and checks at the door by civil defence. Access to Medyka, and the other main crossing points, are not controlled. Anyone can access the pedestrian border crossings, including the pathways and surrounding areas leading up to them. This means from the moment people cross the border they must immediately navigate through crowds, volunteers and people approaching them to offer transport, assistance, etc. This can be overwhelming, particularly for those who arrive exhausted, in shock with increased vulnerabilities or having trauma from their experiences during the war. This is also a very high-risk point for gender-based violence, including human trafficking.

The transit sites provide spaces and beds to rest, hot food, information on transportation, links to transportation, and are accessible for people with mobility needs. All locations provided donated NFIs, including dignity items, clothing, blankets, etc.

3.3 Protection services and legal services at border points and transit sites are limited

Information on access to services and legal information and counselling

There are information and advice desks at all locations, apart from Rzeszów. In the transit sites these are almost exclusively to provide information on transportation. Volunteers and municipal staff explained that the main need for information is on transportation, followed by questions about employment. At the Przemyśl-Tesco site, women were asking about informal employment (cleaning and cooking jobs, for example in preparation for Easter) that they can take on while still caring for their children.

IOM provides information on access to services and some legal information and counselling on the Medyka crossing. This includes providing tailored support in cases where people have issues with documentation for onward travel.

It is important to make information on access to services, and legal information and counselling on rights and obligations in Poland and/or in other EU member states more easily available and with higher visibility on the border and reception areas.

From talking to municipal staff and volunteers there is an understanding that people are exhausted and in a hurry at these pivotal points in their journeys and may not be receptive to information beyond their immediate travel needs. Travel and transport are clearly the priorities of people, however information that will allow people to make safe and informed decisions about this onward travel and their destinations could be provided in a number of accessible formats. For example, access to digital platforms to be accessed later or booklets and leaflets that can be taken away. Having in person legal assistance available gives people the option, and the choice, to access tailored information immediately if needed or to establish contact for follow up later at a more convenient time.

The provision of information on legal stay in Poland, and EU Temporary Protection Directive, would help people in making these big decisions as well as counteract misinformation or information gaps that can expose people to risks and harm. Examples were given of women with children returning to Ukraine

because they thought they were not able to stay longer in Poland legally or of women leaving Poland to a third country because they thought that accommodation in Poland for refugees was ‘full’.

Safe identification and referral of vulnerable people

Volunteers and staff had not yet had training on the safe identification and referral of vulnerable individuals to specialised service providers, and principles such as confidentiality and do no harm. Safe identification and referrals necessitate clear, up to date, mapping of services and referral pathways that have yet to be established. Staff and volunteers should also be trained on Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (PSEA), safeguarding and humanitarian principles to support protection and accountability towards the refugee population. Given the number of vulnerable people entering Poland is expected to increase, this would be a high priority.

At present, only one site has a private space dedicated for the provision of Psychological First Aid (PFA), legal aid counselling or for disclosure of abuse or violence. As the vulnerabilities experienced by those passing through these locations are expected to increase, specialised protection services should be available to these individuals before they move on to other locations where they may not have the timely access the services they need.

Transit sites and the border crossings, are also areas where people are exposed to potentially high protection risks on their journey, including trafficking or other forms of exploitation and abuse. Refugees should have some degree of privacy and a safe space to collect their bearings immediately after crossing the border.

Overview of protection considerations for sites

The table below provides a snapshot overview of main considerations for protection-sensitive site management in the different locations visited. The general overview is based on discussions and observations intended to support NRC and partners identify which are the priority sites (columns) or areas (row) for support. Green indicates where provisions or services were sufficient, yellow is designated when provisions or services were present, but improvements required, and lastly, amber is where provisions or services were insufficient (based on observations). As a reference, NRC’s transit site at the East Warsaw Train Station was also included.

Table: Overview of level of services provided at transit/border point, with East Warsaw Train Station as a reference

Observations	Przemysł (Tesco site)	Hrebenne	Korczowa	Medyka	Rzeszów	Dorohusk	East Warsaw Site
Access for disabilities/ inclusive space	Green	Green	Green	Green	Green	Green	Green
Medical and health providers, including first aid	Green	Green	Green	Yellow	Green	Green	Green
Hot food and drink (provided on site)	Green	Green	Green	Green	Green	Green	Green
Safe areas for sleeping/resting	Green	Green	Green	Green	Green	Green	Green
Seating areas	Green	Green	Green	Green	Green	Green	Green
Breast feeding areas/ Female friendly space- private areas	Green	Green	Amber	Yellow	Green	Green	Amber
Provision of NFIs	Green	Green	Green	Green	Green	Green	Yellow

Observations	Przemyśl (Tesco site)	Hrebenne	Korczowa	Medyka	Rzeszów	Dorohusk	East Warsaw Site
Are all staff/ volunteers wearing visibility?	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	Green
Complaints Feedback Mechanism	Orange	Orange	Orange	Orange	Orange	Orange	Orange
Have staff/ volunteers been trained/ have an awareness around humanitarian principles, safeguarding, PSEA?	Orange	Orange	Orange	Orange	Orange	Orange	Orange
Information and advice desks	Green	Green	Green	Green	Orange	Green	Green
Information and planning support for onward journeys (safe passage)	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow
Safe and private spaces for counselling (legal and protection)	Orange	Orange	Orange	Orange	Green	Green	Orange
Visible access to digital information access to key information? (UNHCR, signpost, blue dot, etc.?)	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow
Are there up to date service mappings/ referral pathways?	Orange	Orange	Orange	Orange	Orange	Orange	Orange
Are services and information provision safe and easy to access, highly visible and accurate:	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow
Visible safety information, including counter trafficking awareness	Orange	Orange	Orange	Orange	Orange	Orange	Green
Identification and safe referral of people at risk (protection teams)	Orange	Orange	Orange	Orange	Orange	Orange	Orange
Legal assistance and counselling-provision of information and rights and obligations for stay in Poland and for onward journeys beyond Poland	Orange	Orange	Orange	Yellow	Orange	Orange	Orange

4. Recommendations

The recommendations shared in the UNICEF & UNHCR Joint Rapid Assessment³ (11-13 March 2022) remain relevant and critical, and NRC would like to put the emphasis on the following recommendations:

4.1 Humanitarian partners should increase legal information provision at border points and transit centres

The provision of legal information and counselling should be strengthened at border areas. People should have the option, and choice, to access legal information and counselling soon after their arrival in Poland, and in a format that works best for them. Legal information and counselling should be available in Ukrainian and in multiple formats, such as in person, leaflets and booklets, and access to online platforms from where self-referrals can be made.

³ [UNICEF & UNHCR Joint Rapid Assessment: Border and Reception Areas in Eastern Poland](#)

All border areas, crossings, and transit sites were identified as pivotal locations on the journey of refugees where standardised, quality information provision is essential to reduce exposure to risks and increase capacities for self-protection. Widely available information on legal stay, rights, and entitlements in Poland and under the EU Temporary Protection Directive strengthens the agency of individuals and supports informed and safer decision making for their onward journeys.

Medyka border crossing is identified as a key opportunity to provide quality, clear and highly visible legal information and counselling, information on access to services (including emergency and other essential) and safety information.

It is expected that the levels of vulnerability of people arriving at the border crossings will likely increase as coping mechanisms and capacities are exhausted in Ukraine. In order for the protection response at the border crossings and transit sites to be equipped to meet these needs, safe and confidential spaces for the provision of legal counselling, PFA and safe identification and referral of vulnerable persons for specialised support should be in place.

4.2 Humanitarian partners should increase cash registration at transit sites for most vulnerable households

While not all refugees fleeing Ukraine pass through the established transit sites, often those that do have limited social and financial capital. For these reasons, short and medium-term stays in these sites are a proxy indicator for vulnerability. Registering these households for quick multipurpose cash assistance can help them in moving on from the transit sites to medium-term accommodation in the area, or elsewhere, while they register for their PESEL number and await government assistance.

4.3 Humanitarian partners should support volunteers and municipalities with staffing, training, and technical support

While it is commendable what has been accomplished by volunteers and municipalities at these sites, staffing for the response needs to be sustainable and more consistent in the longer term. Volunteers will need to return home, or to work, or will be available for increasingly short durations; municipal staff will need to attend to their other responsibilities. Our recommendation is for further discussions with municipalities and volunteer networks on how international partners can reinforce them to avoid them becoming exhausted. Providing financial incentives to volunteers could be a way of keeping staff for the longer term and would allow investment in training and capacity building (for example, in humanitarian principles, safeguarding, PSEA and human rights focused approaches) to strengthen quality service delivery and assistance. Similarly, providing the financial resources or staffing directly to municipalities could help them meet the huge staffing needs until such time when additional financial resources are made available directly to the municipalities.

4.4 Humanitarian partners should invest in Medyka border crossing to increase the protection-sensitivity of this transit site

Of the sites visited, Medyka is the only one not situated in a permanent building. Instead, a collection of tents has been erected by different volunteer groups and organisations. Having a space at Medyka that can provide a safe and controlled space on the border, where people can access support, information, and counselling would significantly contribute to ensuring dignity, safety, and well-being of refugees. Adequate infrastructure would include electricity, heating systems, WASH facilities with sufficient toilets with disability access, handwashing stations, etc. There should be enough space for the provision of various services so that service providers can carry out their activities efficiently. This would include dedicated safe and confidential spaces for the provision of legal counselling, PFA, and safe identification and referral of vulnerable persons.