

The rapid reactions of the Central European countries to the war in Ukraine

Europe is being confronted with one of its largest crises since the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991. On the 24th of February 2022, Russia began a military invasion of Ukraine, sending shockwaves throughout the continent. The aggression of Russia is an unprecedented act of iniquity. The unrest is deeply alarming for all European countries, which showed with their decisive responses to the crisis, more unity in ten days from the start of the war, than they have in the last ten years. This unanimity also reflects the concerns of the European leaders that if Putin's aggression succeeds, Russia might not stop its endeavors at the Ukrainian borders.¹ The Central European countries deeply affected by the war, being in close proximity to Ukraine, reacted quickly, by supporting the strongest sanctions in history and sending direct military assistance to Kyiv. Known for their slow, foreign policy decisions, often complicated by internal division, these countries didn't hesitate to take pivotal steps this time, to help Ukraine, including decisions to deliver lethal weapons to a third country; to support openness to EU membership for the bloc's eastern neighbor after years of enlargement fatigue; and to grant temporary residency to Ukrainian refugees according to the 2001 Temporary Protection Directive.²

Dismay could be heard from all corners of Europe after the start of the war and countries responded with united disapproving reactions. The Czech foreign minister called the Russian invasion a "barbaric act of aggression".³ The Austrian leadership directly addressed the Ukrainian people with a message of solidarity. President Alexander Van der Bellen and Federal Chancellor Karl Nehammer expressed to the Ukrainians that the Austrian people "deeply sympathize with their fate".⁴ The President of the Republic of Croatia, Zoran Milanović, strongly condemned the Russian aggression against Ukraine,

and considers the attacks of the Russian military forces an unacceptable violation of Ukrainian sovereignty.⁵ The Slovak Parliament condemned the unprovoked, unjustified, and unlawful military aggression of the Russian Federation against Ukraine.⁶ Slovenia strongly condemned Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, and PM Janez Janša has proposed that the EU should promptly assure that Ukraine will get the prospect of full EU membership. He said the attack constituted unprecedented military aggression against Ukraine and President Borut Pahor called it a violation of international law and UN principles of peaceful resolution of disputes.⁷ When it comes to Hungary, this country sent out mixed signals regarding Ukraine. Hungary stressed that it fully supported Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity.⁸ However, it has insisted that the country must "stay out" of the conflict and that Hungary itself will not supply weapons to its neighbor. Furthermore, Hungary would not allow the transit of lethal weapons to Ukraine through its territory.⁹ Poland and Slovenia called for Ukraine's accession to the EU by 2030, issuing a letter to the European Council President Charles Michel and their EU counterparts.¹⁰ All of the aforementioned countries have also immediately started preparations to receive hundreds of thousands of people fleeing Ukraine.

Poland

Within three weeks of the Russian invasion, more than three million people – half of them children – had fled Ukraine, with around two million arriving in Poland. Almost overnight, Poland went from being one of the ethnically most homogeneous societies in Europe to a country with the fourth largest refugee population in the world (after Turkey, Colombia, and the United States). The Polish society was eager to help and organize accommodation, transport, food, and psychological care on an

unprecedented scale. While the first wave of refugees fled the coming danger and escaped in time, the second wave is made up of people who have already experienced bombings and suffered injuries. They have no resources or connections in Poland.¹¹ All refugees have been allowed to stay and work in Poland for 18 months with the possibility of extension, and the EU has done the same. Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki said that Polish families hosting refugees will receive 250 euros per month for each protected refugee. The financial assistance is to last for at least two months. The government opened the health care system to refugees, gave them small initial grants and a child allowance of €120 a month (the same as Poles receive), exempted them from paying for public transport, and provided them with work permits. More than 50.000 underaged refugees have already been enrolled in Polish schools. The vice-mayor of Krakow, Andrzej Kulig, has announced that Krakow can no longer accept new refugees from Ukraine and that the situation in the city is critical. 120.000 refugees from Ukraine have arrived in Krakow since the beginning of the war and new refugees are still arriving, as Krakow is the main destination for those coming from the eastern Polish city of Przemyśl. The Polish government approved a bill to legalize and simplify the stay of Ukrainian refugees.¹²⁷

The Czech Republic

The Czech Republic, which is also sending military and humanitarian aid to Ukraine, has once again presented itself on the international scene as an ally that stands behind Ukraine in its time of need. The number of refugees is increasing. Accommodation capacities are already virtually exhausted in Prague and central Bohemia, where most of the Ukrainian refugees are heading. Prague Mayor Zdeněk Hřib (Pirates) has already asked individual city

districts to start setting aside gymnasiums to accommodate refugees. For example, the government is offering hoteliers money to accommodate refugees from Ukraine.¹³ Czechs have already raised more than CZK 1.5 billion in collections by non-profits to help Ukraine, and tens of millions of crowns are coming in every day. They allowed the deduction of gratuitous aid from the tax base. Donations made directly to Ukraine, for example through the Ukrainian Embassy or to Ukrainian non-profit organizations, can also be deducted. Taxpayers from Ukraine will also be able to take advantage of the deduction if their income from the Czech Republic accounts for 90% of their taxable income. From the recipient's point of view, no withholding tax will be levied on the humanitarian donation. The income of Ukrainian employees will also be exempt from tax when the company provides them with accommodation in the Czech Republic due to the war. If this employee receives a financial gift from his employer, he will be exempt from income tax.¹⁴ In the Czech Republic, the refugees are issued special long-term visas. More than 150.000 refugees have already arrived in the Czech Republic. Roughly a quarter of them headed to Prague. Regional assistance centers have been set up in the Czech Republic to provide refugees with accommodation and transport in addition to registration and medical check-ups. The Czech government activated temporary protection, which applies in the European Union, at its meeting on the 9th of March. With a certificate of temporary refuge, a refugee will be able to leave the Czech Republic for another EU country. At these centers, refugees can also obtain special long-term visas that will allow them to work in the country, and they will also be included in the public health insurance system. More than 91.000 of these have been issued so far. The government has approved a humanitarian benefit for Ukrainians who have been granted residency in the Czech Republic since 24th of February, which should cover their basic living costs. They will automatically receive €195 per month from March onwards and will be able to receive such aid for half a year. If the refugee has a long-term visa, they will also be allowed to work.¹⁵

Slovakia

Many Slovak companies and entrepreneurs are now selflessly helping refugees from Ukraine both materially and financially. They also try to help Ukrainians who stayed at home during the war and have already transported more than 6 tons of relief aid to Ukraine. After Russia's actions, Slovakia responded by approving the delivery of air defence systems, anti-tank missiles, ammunition, demining equipment, and other military equipment with a total worth of €46 million.¹⁶ To date, more than 205.000 refugees have crossed the Slovak-Ukrainian border, and around 25.000 of them have applied for temporary shelter. Today, the state does not have precise figures on how many of them will eventually remain in Slovakia. After crossing the border, refugees can legally stay in Slovakia for 90 days based on a valid visa-free regime. The second option is to apply for asylum. The third option is to apply for temporary refuge. When Ukrainians are granted refugee status, it guarantees them access to health and social care and to the labour market. At the same time, they are entitled to material hardship benefits and children can start school. The benefit amount is €68.80 per month for an individual; €130,90 per month if it is an individual with a child. Employers can provide Ukrainians with a job through a simplified process. In Slovakia, refugee status is valid until the end of the year.¹⁷

Hungary

Despite its strict asylum policy, the Hungarian government has reacted relatively quickly to the Ukrainian refugee crisis. On the very first day of the conflict, it issued a regulation on new asylum rules. It allowed foreigners arriving from Ukraine to Hungary, who were in Ukraine legally, to cross the Hungarian border. Before the conflict, refugees had to apply for asylum before crossing the border into Hungary. The Hungarian government adopted a regulation on the temporary protection of refugees from Ukraine. The temporary refugee status should be in force in Hungary until the 1st of June 2022. While refugees receive temporary protection, they can be

accommodated in a refugee camp, where the state will provide them with food and medical care and an allowance for essential expenses. Children have the right to education. If they apply for temporary shelter at the immigration police offices, they can work in Hungary without a permit, but only in selected professions. With the second regulation, the government changed the rules on residence tax in the Local Taxes Act. Those who host refugees do not have to pay accommodation tax.¹⁸ Despite the aforementioned, Hungary keeps on sending out confusing signals. The recent Visegrad 4 meeting of defense ministers will not take place as both Poland and Czechia have canceled the meeting, which was set to take place on 30-31 March. This is due to Hungary's latest actions. While Hungary voted in favor of all four packages of EU sanctions imposed on Russia, it has opposed sanctions targeting energy imports. Budapest has rejected calls for banning Russian energy exports.¹⁹ Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy openly criticized Hungary in an impassioned speech to European Union leaders. "You have to decide for yourself who you are with," Zelensky said, addressing Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban directly.²⁰ After Hungary's nationalist Prime Minister Viktor Orban won a fourth term by a landslide in the country's general election, in his victory speech, Mr Orban reacted and criticised Brussels bureaucrats and Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelensky, calling them "opponents."²¹

Slovenia

Slovenian political parties have stressed the need to end the military activities to give way to diplomacy. Ukraine thanked Slovenia for its support and assistance. In a press statement, Natalia Markevich, charge d'affaires at the Ukrainian embassy in Ljubljana, expressed the need to the world and Europe to hold "a united and strong response to Russia's aggression". The PM of Slovenia, Janša, stated that 30 years ago, Slovenia was in a similar situation. "We know how the Ukrainians feel, so our expressions of solidarity come from the heart."²² Slovenia has sent rifles, ammunition, and helmets to Ukraine. Defence Mi-

nister Matej Tonin announced that aid had been dispatched and donated rifles were Kalashnikovs that the Slovenian Armed Forces had used before receiving newer equipment and which have been set aside as a strategic reserve. The shipment was sent via a hub in Poland.²³ The government has also recently established a new centre for Ukrainian refugees at the premises of the Interior Ministry on the Debeli Rtič peninsula, which has been transferred to the Government Office for the Support and Integration of Migrants.²⁴ Slovenia has also issued a law granting temporary protection for displaced persons from Ukraine, providing them with temporary residence, access to the labour market, accommodation, education, social care, and healthcare without needing to undergo asylum procedures.²⁵

Austria

The emergency aid from Austria totals €17.5 million since Austria responded rapidly and approved €2.5 million from the Auslandskatastrophenfonds (AKF) as an initial aid measure. Of that amount, €1 million were allocated to the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and €750,000 each to the Austrian Red Cross and Caritas for emergency humanitarian aid. Further support was provided by the Ministry of the Interior, which sent two convoys to Ukraine with urgently needed helmets and body armour, as well as 100,000 litres of fuel for civilian forces. The additional €15 million will now go to the ICRC, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), and Austrian NGOs in Ukraine.²⁶ There were measures taken when it comes to public transportation as well. Ukrainian refugees may take ÖBB-trains in Austria without needing a ticket by only showing a Ukrainian passport or ID. The same applies for public transport in the city of Vienna and in the so-called VOR region. When it comes to accommodation, in many parts of Austria accommodation for Ukrainian refugees is available.²⁷ On March 4th, 2022, the EU decided to apply the provisions standardized in the EU Directive 2001/55/EC to refugees from Ukraine. In

concrete terms, this means the following for Austria: according to a decree of the Federal Government in agreement with the Main Committee of the National Council, all Ukrainians who have fled will be granted temporary protection. This concerns displaced Ukrainian nationals, Ukrainian nationals who were already residing in Austria before February 14, 2022, third-country nationals with international protection in Ukraine, and family members as well. Regarding education and labour, Austria aids on the ground and in its own country within the framework of neighbourhood assistance. The Ministry of the Interior, the Ministry of Labour, the Ministry of Integration, and the Ministry of Education all tackle this crisis. In addition, the Federal Government of Austria is also helping people in need and refugees on the ground with aid shipments to Ukraine itself and its immediate neighbours.²⁸

Croatia

To date, over 8,300 Ukrainians who fled the war have found refuge in Croatia, according to Interior Minister Davor Božinović. About 40% of the refugees are women and 40% are children, and all of them will be eligible to receive one-off aid of HRK 2,500 (roughly €333).²⁹ Croatia has also decided to grant Ukraine's request for weaponry and will send infantry weapons and protective equipment in the amount sufficient for four brigades. Defence Minister Mario Banožić told the press that the value of these weapons is HRK 124 million (€16.5 million).³⁰ Croatia wants to provide the best possible care that not only includes accommodation and food but also access to education and the labour market as well as to social welfare services.

European leaders meeting the head of Ukraine

A recent strong and important gesture towards Ukraine could also be seen by a series of visits to Kyiv to meet President Zelensky. A group of European leaders, visiting as "representatives of the European Council", met Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky. According to Barend Leyts, spokesman of European Council President

Charles Michel, Morawiecki informed him about a potential visit to Kyiv on the side-lines of an informal EU summit in Versailles. Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki, Deputy Prime Minister Jarosław Kaczyński, Czech Prime Minister Petr Fiala and Slovenian Prime Minister Janez Janša travelled by train to Kyiv to support Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky. The trip showed that European leaders are not afraid to meet the Ukrainian president and demonstrate their abiding support to the Ukrainian effort of defending against Russia. Fiala said he has not given much thought to the trip, which he learned about at a meeting of European heads of state in Versailles. Slovak Prime Minister Heger, who preferred to not travel to Kyiv due to security reasons, made a statement admitting it was a mistake and he would have decided differently given the chance again.³¹ He confirmed his words with actions two weeks ago, when Heger seized the second opportunity and decided to visit Kyiv to meet with President Zelensky. He was travelling to the Ukrainian capital with European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and the EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs Josep Borrell as part of a wider EU delegation. Slovakia's Prime Minister Eduard Heger confirmed that his country had provided an S-300 air defense system to Ukraine against Russia's aggression and promised to support Ukraine further. "The head of the Ukrainian state thanked Slovakia's people and Heger not only for supporting Ukraine verbally, but also for the weapons aid for our country to resist the Russian invasion."³²

Austrian chancellor Karl Nehammer visited Kyiv recently as well and promised to keep up the sanctions against Russia until the war ends. Nehammer (ÖVP) spoke with the Ukrainian leader in Kyiv during a "solidarity visit" and promised more support for the country's armed forces, including rescue vehicles and fire trucks. Nehammer also promised more fuel donations. Austria is a neutral country, and it therefore cannot send deadly weapons or military assistance to Ukraine. Zelensky thanked the Austrian authorities for "providing help by other means."³³

Outlook

It is unlikely that the Kremlin would change the hostile nature of Russian foreign policy nor seek détente with the West. However, Russia's threat environment will become more challenging as a result of a united Europe and the "rebirth" of NATO.³⁴ Europe's worst security crisis in decades has prompted the EU to take united decisions on security, defence and EU enlargement and stand strong in support for Ukraine. The recent developments also initiated the shaping of the EU's external action more broadly, opening new questions for Brussels and member states. European Union has demonstrated that it will maintain efforts to end the bloodshed in Ukraine and manage the threat the war poses to Europe's security as a whole.³⁵ The suffering of innocent civilians on European soil evoked the trauma of World War II, which is why Europe was so fast to react. But it is also COVID-19 that paved the way to better reactivity in crises. As Europeans are now used to crisis government, huge public expenditures in response to emergency conditions. Two years of extreme public-safety measures have prepared the public for exactly the type of radical overnight shifts that governments are now making in response to Russian aggression. It is remained to be seen but hopefully the fierce sanctions will impact Russia's economy and erode the invaders' ability to sustain a prolonged occupation.³⁶

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