

## 24 February 2026

THE FULL-SCALE WAR IN UKRAINE ENTERS ITS 5TH YEAR

# BEYOND TEMPORARY PROTECTION

## Preventing Exploitation of displaced persons coming from Ukraine by durable and accessible rights-based solutions

Today, four years since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the war continues to devastate millions of lives, and many have been forced to leave the country. The latest UNHCR figures indicate that **over 5.8 million refugees from Ukraine are currently recorded globally, 90% of whom are in Europe**.<sup>1</sup> For many, displacement is no longer temporary but an extended reality marked by uncertainty and fragile living conditions.

Since February 2022, around 6.9 million people fleeing Ukraine have been granted Temporary Protection in the EU with around 4.35 million still benefitting from it.<sup>2</sup> The swift activation of the **EU Temporary Protection Directive (TPD) marked an unprecedented and timely response**, providing essential rights, including immediate legal status and access to work, housing, education, healthcare, and social support for Ukrainians arriving in the EU. This coordinated response has significantly **reduced exposure to exploitation and human trafficking and demonstrated the value of safe and regular pathways in times of crisis**.

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<sup>1</sup> UNHCR Data Portal (last checked February 19 2026) <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/ukraine>

<sup>2</sup> Eurostat, Temporary protection for persons fleeing Ukraine (last checked, February 19 2026), [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Temporary\\_protection\\_for\\_persons\\_fleeing\\_Ukraine\\_-\\_monthly\\_statistics](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Temporary_protection_for_persons_fleeing_Ukraine_-_monthly_statistics)

However, legal status alone does not remove vulnerability. La Strada International's [case assessment report](#) on the “Indications of Human Trafficking and Labour Exploitation” of displaced persons from Ukraine, based on the cases that our members assisted, shows that many experienced various forms of exploitation, despite being beneficiaries of Temporary Protection. These persons were exploited in various labour sectors, including construction, domestic work, agriculture, hospitality and manufacturing across Europe. Persons were deceived with false promises about wages, job roles, or working conditions, and reported poor living conditions, excessive working hours, no or severely underpaid wages or wages being withheld to “repay” transport or housing, as well as unsafe work environments. Coercion and control, including surveillance or restrictions on movement or rights, threats of violence, physical, sexual, or psychological abuse were further reported, which shows how people are making use of their vulnerability.

Often, we see that recruitment takes place online and through informal networks, which creates further vulnerabilities especially when language barriers, and limited access to reliable information persist. These patterns highlight the need for stronger oversight and enforcement to prevent exploitation, including monitoring of employment and recruitment practices, the provision of clear information on workers' rights, risks of exploitation, and accessible reporting mechanisms. At the same time, States must ensure that Ukrainians - and other third-country nationals - are effectively protected in practice, including through secure residence status and access to justice.

The EU Temporary Protection is currently set to expire on March 4, 2027. While extensions have provided short-term stability, **the continued ‘temporary’ nature creates uncertainty for millions of people trying to rebuild their lives.** Current discussions in several Member States suggest a growing preference for transitioning beneficiaries of Temporary Protection to employment-based residence permits once the TPD expires, alongside an increasing emphasis on return.

Following ongoing discussions, access to alternative residence permits after the TPD is likely to involve strict requirements, such as proof of independent housing, stable employment, or financial self-sufficiency, that many current beneficiaries may be unable to meet. These risks excluding persons with disabilities, older people, students, caregivers, those facing labour market discrimination, as well as third-country nationals and stateless persons previously protected in Ukraine, many of whom cannot safely return. **Without accessible pathways to remain, they face a heightened risk of irregular status and exposure to exploitation and abuse.**

However, **preparations for future return must not replace the obligation to ensure effective protection for those who cannot safely or sustainably return.** As the war continues, vulnerabilities of Ukrainians increase, particularly due to the sobering of the assistance and support offered to this group.

***Currently in Ukraine the war is one of the main drivers of exploitation and trafficking. Many refugees have no home to return to, as entire cities, like Mariupol and Bakhmut, have been destroyed by the Russian attacks. Rebuilding a life from nothing is difficult for anyone, but especially for older people. When people lose everything and face financial insecurity, they become far more vulnerable to exploitation and are more easily drawn into abusive situations through deception and false promises.***

**Olga Dunebabina, La Strada Ukraine**

Four years into this war, **Europe must move beyond short-term emergency responses and commit to sustainable and inclusive protection frameworks.**

La Strada International calls on Member States to maintain and strengthen their support for people displaced from Ukraine and to ensure access to the rights guaranteed under the TPD. Ukrainians living across Europe need sustained legal protection, secure housing, access to healthcare, education, decent work, and psychosocial support to ensure stability and dignity in displacement.

Protection gaps, weak labour oversight and unregulated recruitment practices increase the risk of abuse, particularly where legal status becomes uncertain. A coherent EU-wide approach is therefore essential to uphold workers' rights, strengthen monitoring and enforcement, and ensure secure legal status for those at risk. In doing so, Member States must uphold their obligations under international and European law, including the principle of non-refoulement, and refrain from policies or practices that could result in unsafe or premature returns.

**Clear, durable and accessible solutions towards integration in host countries and/or safe and voluntary return are essential to reduce risks of exploitation and further abuse.**