

EDITORIAL

The empowerment of Ukrainian nursing: a call to action for Central European EU countries

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The invasion of Ukraine by Russia on 24 February 2022 has generated by far the largest refugee crisis in Central Europe since World War II (United Nations Refugee Agency, 2023). As reported by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the largest groups of refugees, mainly women of working age (27–44 years) and children under the age of 18, reside in Poland (1.5 million people) and in the Czech Republic (500,000 people) (Statista, 2023). These groups includes representatives of various professions, including nurses who worked in Ukraine before the outbreak of the conflict (Chmielewska-Kalińska et al., 2023). Objectively, it is impossible to estimate the exact number of Ukrainian refugee nurses, as there is no official register containing data on refugee education. Estimation is made all the more difficult since medical professionals are fleeing their home country under the fog of war.

After the urgent need to find accommodation in their host country, securing work is a top priority for refugees. Therefore, as early as mid-March 2022, Poland passed an Act on Assistance to Ukrainian Citizens in Connection with the Armed Conflict on the Territory of that Country (European Union, 2001; Chancellery of the Sejm, 2022), regulating most issues related to the unprecedented number of refugees staying in Poland, including the terms of employment of Ukrainian refugee nurses. Based on the available data, 65% of refugees currently residing in Poland have taken up employment, most of whom plan to return to Ukraine immediately after the end of military operations (Chmielewska-Kalińska et al., 2023). According to data from the Department of Medical Personnel Development of the Ministry of Health (responsible for issuing permits for refugee nurses to perform professional work in the Polish healthcare system), by 3 April 2023 a total of 1,496 nurses had applied for work

permits and 365 had taken up employment (Ministry of Health, 2023). Despite the current simplified legislation allowing Ukrainian refugee nurses to work in the Polish healthcare system, there are three main barriers to their employment. The most important factor hindering employment of Ukrainian refugee nurses is lack of proficiency in Polish. The simplified work permit procedure facilitates access to work in health care since refugees do not need to prove their knowledge of Polish; it is the responsibility of the employer to offer them a post adequate to their language skills. In addition, the differences in undergraduate and post-graduate education of nurses in Ukraine and the European Union member states, including Poland, are also an important barrier, posing a significant problem in terms of the recognition of qualifications (for example, the Ukrainian “feldsher” – i.e. a medical practitioner without full qualifications allowed to practice as a nurse). Finally, there is the issue of varying professional competencies in terms of knowledge (e.g. administration of certain medications), skills (e.g. handling electronic medical records), or extent of professional autonomy (e.g. advanced nursing practice). These differences pose a huge challenge for employers in Poland, as ultimately they are responsible for the safety of patients and medical staff, including that of Ukrainian refugee nurses.

Regardless of all the aforementioned barriers, support for and solidarity with Ukrainian refugee nurses who wish, despite the very real difficulties, to undertake professional work in EU countries, is a moral obligation of the broadly defined nursing community of the Central European countries hosting Ukrainian refugees. It is an investment in the future of both Ukrainian and Central European nursing, and, indirectly, it will aid the reconstruction of modern

Ukraine and, through the training of nursing staff, it will strengthen Ukrainian state structures and its future healthcare system. Undeniably, the reconstruction of this system will be of particular importance for Ukraine after the end of the military operations. Refugee nurses, who will have gained new hands-on experience and, possibly, improved their competencies, both as healthcare professionals and as leaders, will have, on their return home, the opportunity to become leaders of change, and innovators and initiators of nursing development in Ukraine.

The need for frontline nurses who understand and are familiar with the nursing standards of EU countries will be of particular importance when Ukraine begins the intensified process of pre-accession preparations. Central European EU countries may share their own experience of the transition process before entry to the EU, along with examples of good practices, human resources policy, and infrastructure to empower Ukrainian nursing. In all Central European EU countries, an urgent call to action is needed to help nursing in Ukraine.

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