

Ukrainian refugee crisis could become Biden's next political problem

by Naomi Lim

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The humanitarian crisis unfolding in Ukraine as Russian President Vladimir Putin unleashes his military's might is starting to exhibit ripple effects in the United States.

The Biden administration announced this week that it will shield Ukrainians already in the U.S. from deportation if their visas expire in the next 18 months. But experts are imploring President Joe Biden to send help to Ukraine, and Europe broadly, as the United Nations estimates that 1 million people have fled the war-torn country.

The Department of Homeland Security granted Ukrainians in the U.S. temporary protected status this week. The Migration Policy Institute, a nonpartisan think tank, approximates that the designation will cover roughly 30,000 people. Canada and the European Union have also offered similar programs to Ukrainians.

But the number of TPS-eligible Ukrainians in the U.S. is surpassed by the 1 million people who have spilled mostly into Poland and its neighbors Hungary, Moldova, Romania, and Slovakia. Half of them are children, many of whom are unaccompanied because adult men have been drafted by the Ukrainian military. Filippo Grandi, the U.N. high commissioner for refugees, has described the immigration situation, Europe's worst since World War II, as one of the quickest exoduses from a nation he has seen in 40 years.

White House press secretary Jen Psaki repeated this week that the U.S. would accept Ukrainian refugees. But "the vast majority of them have expressed an interest in going to European countries and neighboring countries," she said. She added she was unaware if Biden's 62,500 person cap, raised as part of a campaign promise, had to be lifted again.

"Trickles" of Ukrainians will likely be resettled in the U.S., according to Erol Yayboke, director of the Center for Strategic and International Studies's Project on Fragility and Mobility.

"Preparations should always be made," he said. "The resettlement agencies are right, I think, to encourage the administration to take Ukrainians, particularly Ukrainians that may have family in

the United States. Certainly, there should be options for those people to be unified with their family members."

For Cato Institute immigration research fellow David Bier, Ukrainian demand to come to the U.S. could change depending on the war's length. But application delays and outcome uncertainty make it an unattractive process.

"We hope Putin withdraws, but if he doesn't, we don't have a plan. I think that's what's happening here on immigration," he said.

Biden's Ukrainian response may be weakened by stretched resources thanks to the southern border and Afghanistan, according to Lora Ries, former acting Homeland Security Department deputy chief of staff. Ries was concerned that Ukraine's TPS status could be "overextended" and misapplied outside "the proper scope" as, she contends, has happened with the humanitarian and significant public benefit parole scheme.

"The administration's priorities are completely off the mark," she said.

Refugees and asylum-seekers may be driven from Russia, too, according to Cato's Bier. Thousands of Russians have left this week, terrified that Putin will declare martial law, slam borders shut, and clamp down harder on dissent, according to anecdotal reports. Upward of 8,000 Russian anti-war protesters have been arrested, per human rights project OVD-Info, including at least five children and an elderly woman. Independent Russian news outlets have been shut down, and the Kremlin has blocked access to outside sources spreading "fake information," from the BBC to Facebook.

"There is a potential that a lot more Ukrainians and Russians will find their way to the southern border to request asylum," Bier said. "It's easier to get travel authorization to Mexico or Central America, and then you just take a bus up."

Yayboke, of CSIS, added, "There has been persecution for decades there, so this could just be the latest form of it."

Biden adopted a different immigration message during his State of the Union address this week when he said, "We need to secure our border and fix the immigration system." The rhetoric reflects his average net negative 19 percentage point foreign policy approval rating and net negative 23 point immigration rating, according to *RealClearPolitics*.

At the same time, Biden pledged military, economic, and humanitarian support to Ukraine.

"The Ukrainians are fighting back with pure courage," he said. "But the next few days, weeks, and months will be hard on them."

Biden's speech was preceded a day later by a \$10 billion Office of Management and Budget request to Congress for Ukrainian defense equipment and food supplies as well as funding for sanctions enforcement, cyberattack and disinformation countermissions, and electrical grid reinforcement projects. The U.S. has spent \$1.4 billion on Ukraine since 2021.

"I don't know how many internally displaced people there are in Ukraine," Yayboke said. "It's likely larger than the refugees that are outside of Ukraine, and the degree to which we can provide assistance to those people within Ukraine, that's really going to be critical."