



*Dear Sir or Madam,*

A year has passed since – in March 2022 – millions of refugees, including children, started coming to Poland from the war-torn Ukraine. Across the eastern border of our country a full-scale war started by Russia's invasion of Ukraine is still going on. In another neighboring country – Belarus – Lukashenko's authoritarian regime supports Russia in its attacks against Ukraine by sharing Belarusian territory and airspace with Russian troops and providing the Kremlin with political, military and logistic support.

Soldiers, mostly men, are fighting and dying in this war. Unimaginable tragedies are also experienced by their families: wives, mothers, but first and foremost children. Missile barrages and airstrikes are spreading destruction and death also among civilians – children, women or elderly people. The turmoil of the war has been forcing millions of Ukrainian citizens to flee their country and leave behind their houses, properties, families – generally speaking – the lives they have had there. For most of them it is a leap into the unknown.

One year after the invasion the question about the number of Ukrainian refugees in the world remains just as pending as in March 2022. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reports that more than 14 MM people have had to leave their homes. More than 8 MM of them escaped to other European countries. Nearly 6 MM Ukrainian citizens have been resettled to other regions of their country, while 2.9 MM – to Russia, which makes up one third of Ukraine's population. The chaos of the war persists and imposes the necessity to relocate people to safe places, which results in plenty of unimaginably dramatic situations. Currently Poland is home to over 1.5 MM Ukrainian refugees, including 450 thousand children of school age.

At the same time, in the shadow of war the auto-proclaimed Belarusian leader keeps on repressing unscrupulously Belarusian people. A couple of thousands of people have been sentenced to long-term imprisonment, some of them to more than twenty years of prison. Even now, nearly two years after the falsification of election results and the protests it brought, people are arrested and new sentencing judgments are pronounced every day. The media report the cases of people known to the public, yet the problem also concerns an average Joe, whose voice is heard less and less. Currently nearly 1500 people kept in temporary detention or sentenced to jail have the status of political prisoners. The authoritarian regime has forced a lot of representatives of the Belarusian democratic opposition, people protesting against the falsification of the election results, to leave Belarus and emigrate. Nowadays in Poland there are tens of thousands of families with children – representatives of the Belarusian democratic opposition - who also need support in the country they don't know and where they have to stay.

There are plenty of challenges resulting from the inflow of Ukrainian refugees and families of Belarusian democracy supporters, including the organization of education and care for Ukrainian and Belarusian children.

In Poland more than 450 thousand Ukrainian citizens of school age have been offered personal identification numbers (PESEL), which does not mean that all those children attend Polish schools and education centers.

Those children who speak Polish joined their Polish peers in public schools. Those who do have not learnt to speak it fluently yet are studying in the so-called preparatory classes in Polish public schools. In those two schooling models Ukrainian and Belarusian children were offered the possibility to attend Polish schools on the same terms as Polish children do. However, those two schooling models are both affected by the same problem – they aren't large enough to welcome all the children of school age staying in Poland right now.

Hence, in the school year 2022-2023 no more than 200 thousand Ukrainian children and a few thousands of Belarusian children were admitted to public schools, whereas over 200 thousand have been remaining outside of organized schooling.

To respond to the need of taking care of and to provide education to children who have not been admitted to Polish public schools NGOs have organized social centers which owe their existence exclusively to the support and assistance from companies, financial institutions, international partners and NGOs. They are also used for integration purposes where children can learn Polish. You can also find there playgrounds for younger children who stay there while their parents work.

There might be a need to provide this kind of services to all children in need of care and education. Otherwise it will be hard to expect their mothers or guardians to find jobs. It is quite a big challenge for women who take care of their children, but they must stand up to it. In Warsaw such kind of services is provided in the non-public school at 6, Oleandrów Street. The school operates under the auspices of Polonia Union Foundation and runs a center for children from Ukrainian and Belarusian families who have found their temporary home in Poland. Within the framework of the purposes defined in our statute – that is integration in the Polish civil society of foreigners persecuted in their countries, which also includes our compatriots – Ukrainians and Belarusians with Polish origins – we provide care and support for families with children who found refuge in Poland.

Currently there are 200 students in our school. The school – which had been established for Belarusian children – admitted last year a lot of kids of Ukrainian refugees. It needs however conditions and infrastructure for online and brick-and-mortar teaching on a non-public basis. The list of our school's needs is long. We need computers, slide projectors, musical instruments, furniture and school stationery, tools and didactic materials for teachers, remuneration for teachers and tutors, education games, handbooks, books, sports equipment, clothes for kids and toys for the youngest children, detergents, meals for children, funds for organization of summer camps etc.

The situation of Ukrainian children forced to leave their homes along with their moms is simply dramatic. Those admitted to our school have experienced difficult things, or even traumas. Before they emigrated from Ukraine they had experienced the horrors of war, whereas children from Belarus often witnessed their parents or family members being arrested, searches of their houses or violence of the Belarusian authoritarian regime. Some of them have been living in Poland with their relatives, because their parents are fighting against Russian soldiers to defend their country or serve political sentences in Belarusian prisons. Hence, any kind of help and support for those children is very much welcomed.

Your kind heart and support can change the fate of many Ukrainian children affected by Russia's hostile aggression and escaping the war in their country as well as Belarusian children forced to leave their homeland as a result of persecution suffered from the hands of the Belarusian dictator. Your help will certainly contribute to the prevention of social exclusion, to the implementation of activating and development actions as well as integration of Belarusian and Ukrainian kids with their Polish peers. It will prove that your company is socially responsible and involved in helping and supporting those in need.

Let's help those who cannot help themselves, let's comfort those who need it. Let's do our best to make out of the global community a lighthouse of hope and life for people endangered with social exclusion.

We kindly request you to provide us with financial support to help Ukrainian and Belarusian children, including those of Polish descent, who have found their refuge in Poland.

For payments from abroad:

Fundacja Polonia Union

ul. Marszałkowska 115 lok. 349

00 - 102 Warszawa Polska

Bank account:

IBAN: PL 33 1910 1048 2203 4719 2847 0001

SWIFT (BIC): WBKPPLPP

Santander Bank Polska S.A.

Children fleeing the war-torn Ukraine and persecutions imposed by the Belarusian authoritarian regime upon their parents is what breaks our hearts.

Let's remember that children are the most vulnerable in any situation.

Let's stay united in helping those in need!

Thank you very much in advance!

***Yours faithfully,***

President of the Board