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Ukraine: protecting the rights and dignity of all refugees

Joint EI-ETUCE statement on Ukraine's refugee crisis

The global turmoil of recent decades causing crises, conflicts, and wars and the consequences of climate change worldwide have led to millions of individuals fleeing their countries in search of safety and shelter.

Education International and ETUCE advocate for the rights of refugees and migrants in every continent and works with member organisations to ensure that every child, every student, every teacher who flees their home has a welcoming education community to learn and thrive.

Today, as war broke out following Russia's attack on Ukraine, Europe now faces a new wave of refugees. UN High-Commissioner for Refugees Filippo Grandi reported that, as of 8 March, 2 million people have fled Ukraine. As conflict escalates, it is likely that millions more will be forced to flee Ukraine and seek refuge across borders, joining what is already a record 31 million refugees and asylum seekers worldwide.

The immediate response by surrounding countries and local communities has been heartfelt and impressive. Neighbouring countries such as Poland, Moldova, Romania, Hungary, and Slovakia have kept their borders open, and civilian volunteers, NGOs, religious organizations, trade unions, and governments have come together to offer shelter and support to displaced populations.

However, there are also disturbing cases where not all seeking refuge were welcomed. Reports indicate that individuals of African, Asian, and Middle Eastern background, including international students, have faced discrimination and racism while crossing to safety. Education International and ETUCE denounce any type of discrimination. All people fleeing Ukraine must be treated with dignity and allowed to cross the border, regardless of nationality, race, ethnicity, religion or any other background.

"As educators and unionists, we stand for the rights and dignity of all migrants and refugees. Any act of discrimination towards those seeking safety is unacceptable. We applaud the overwhelming mobilisation in neighbouring countries and across the world to help those fleeing the war in Ukraine. We call on governments to wholeheartedly support school communities who are welcoming students and families traumatised by war."

David Edwards, EI General Secretary.

"In ETUCE, we promote universal values and the principles of democracy, tolerance, human dignity, the rule of law, and solidarity. Education trade unions across Europe – teachers, academics and other education personnel - are engaging in manifold initiatives and actions to defend the rights and freedoms of migrants, refugees, and displaced children with a view to support those in need. Ensuring that all students have access to inclusive and quality education is key to recognizing the value and potential of the young generation in shaping our common and prosperous future in peace."

Susan Flocken, ETUCE European Director

Education provides a critical sense of normalcy for children and youth exposed to conflict-related trauma and is the cornerstone of inclusion. Inclusive education systems and education communities where migrants and refugees feel safe and welcome, and all students can learn together, are fundamental for all students to reach their full potential. For this to happen, significant investments in education will have to be made to support teachers and education personnel as they work to address the learning needs of children affected by the pandemic and their new students impacted by war. Education International and ETUCE also call for host nations to welcome and give accreditation and recognition of the qualifications of refugee teachers.

The arrival of millions of refugees, mostly women and children, many unaccompanied, represents a great challenge for education systems and societies across Europe. Education systems, communities and personnel, already struggling with the impact of the pandemic must be supported to take on this unprecedented challenge.

Many education unions in countries bordering Ukraine have already expressed solidarity with the Ukrainian people and stepped in to support refugees, especially children and youth.

Seeking asylum is a fundamental human right that must be recognised by all states. The global education union movement stands in solidarity with the Ukrainian people and those forced to flee their country. Education International and ETUCE have also condemned the Russian invasion of Ukraine and called for an end to the war in the region.