



PROTECTING WOMEN AND CHILDREN FLEEING UKRAINE FROM TRAFFICKING

More than 12 million people have fled their homes in Ukraine as a result of conflict, according to the United Nations. Forced to leave possessions and loved ones behind, and often with no plans for where to go next, many have been put at risk of trafficking and exploitation. Now, further risks are emerging as many refugees, especially those who were already on lower incomes, run out of resources and become vulnerable to false offers of work by traffickers.

IJM'S IMMEDIATE RESPONSE TO THE CRISIS

IJM teams and partners are working to prevent trafficking and keep refugees safe. Since the start of the conflict, IJM has been on the ground at the Ukraine-Romania border providing vital support and preventing exploitation and now our work has expanded to cities and other regions where refugees are at risk. This has included:

- training agencies and shelters in how to identify and support women and children who are at risk of exploitation and trafficking
- employing Ukrainian and Russian speaking Protection Officers to work alongside authorities and NGOs to address potential trafficking cases
- providing practical support such as food and SIM cards to enable people to stay in touch with charities and families as they make onward journeys
- helping to coordinate safe transport, reducing the risk of people accepting offers of transport from exploiters
- working with shelters to prevent trafficking at the Romania-Ukraine border, the Romania-Moldova border and in larger urban areas like Bucharest
- through trusted partners in Ukraine, sharing and distributing information on how to stay safe when crossing the border, including contact numbers for authorities with Ukrainian speakers, border control, and the emergency services
- establishing an anti-trafficking department within a partner organisation with significant experience in shelter and accommodation for refugees in multiple sites across Romania, including providing mid and longer term support to trafficking victims

This support has prevented hundreds of people from falling into potentially exploitative situations.

LARYSA'S STORY

While fleeing the conflict in Ukraine, Larysa* was robbed and abandoned at the Romanian border by a man who had promised to take her to safety. She was picked up and cared for by an IJM-trained local shelter, who helped to arrange a safe and vetted onward journey to Nuremburg in Germany.

But part way through her journey, Larysa was contacted by another man online who, on the face of it, appeared to be offering genuine help. He convinced her to get on a bus to Berlin instead, with the promise of a job – a method we know is commonly used by traffickers.



Thankfully, the shelter team remained in close contact with Larysa and became aware of this man's suspicious behaviour. They quickly warned her that the job offer was a trap and, with their support and advice, she got off the bus to Berlin. Larysa continued her journey by train to Nuremburg, where a trusted partner NGO picked her up. Now she is safe, and staff are working with her to help her understand the risks of exploitation.

IJM'S ONGOING RESPONSE AND LONG-TERM PLAN

IJM's European Anti-Trafficking Programme has been working on cross-border trafficking in Romania and Eastern Europe for the last two years, making it uniquely well placed to provide support in this crisis and to help stop trafficking now and in the future.

We're scaling up our Anti-Trafficking programme more quickly in response to growing numbers of refugees, and the heightened vulnerability of already at-risk groups in Romania as resources are diverted to address the crisis.

Alongside continuing to support existing shelters with safeguarding procedures and policies, and providing advice at the border, we're paying close attention to changing needs and risks – including the fact that most refugees have now moved on from the border.

Those who have recently crossed the border and travelled to cities in Romania face on-going risks related to the vulnerabilities of losing homes, livelihoods, and family connections – and these risks will only increase as their resources run out. In desperate need of support, they are at risk of being taken advantage of by traffickers. We are working to ensure that those moving on from shelters have a trusted contact to help them integrate once they arrive at their destination and manage these mid to long term vulnerabilities, reducing the risk of trafficking.

The trafficking of people from Romania and other eastern European countries to the UK and elsewhere was already an established problem before the war, but the conflict has hugely exacerbated this risk. We will continue doing all we can, together with partners, to prevent the trafficking of women and children now and in the long term.



*Pseudonym.