

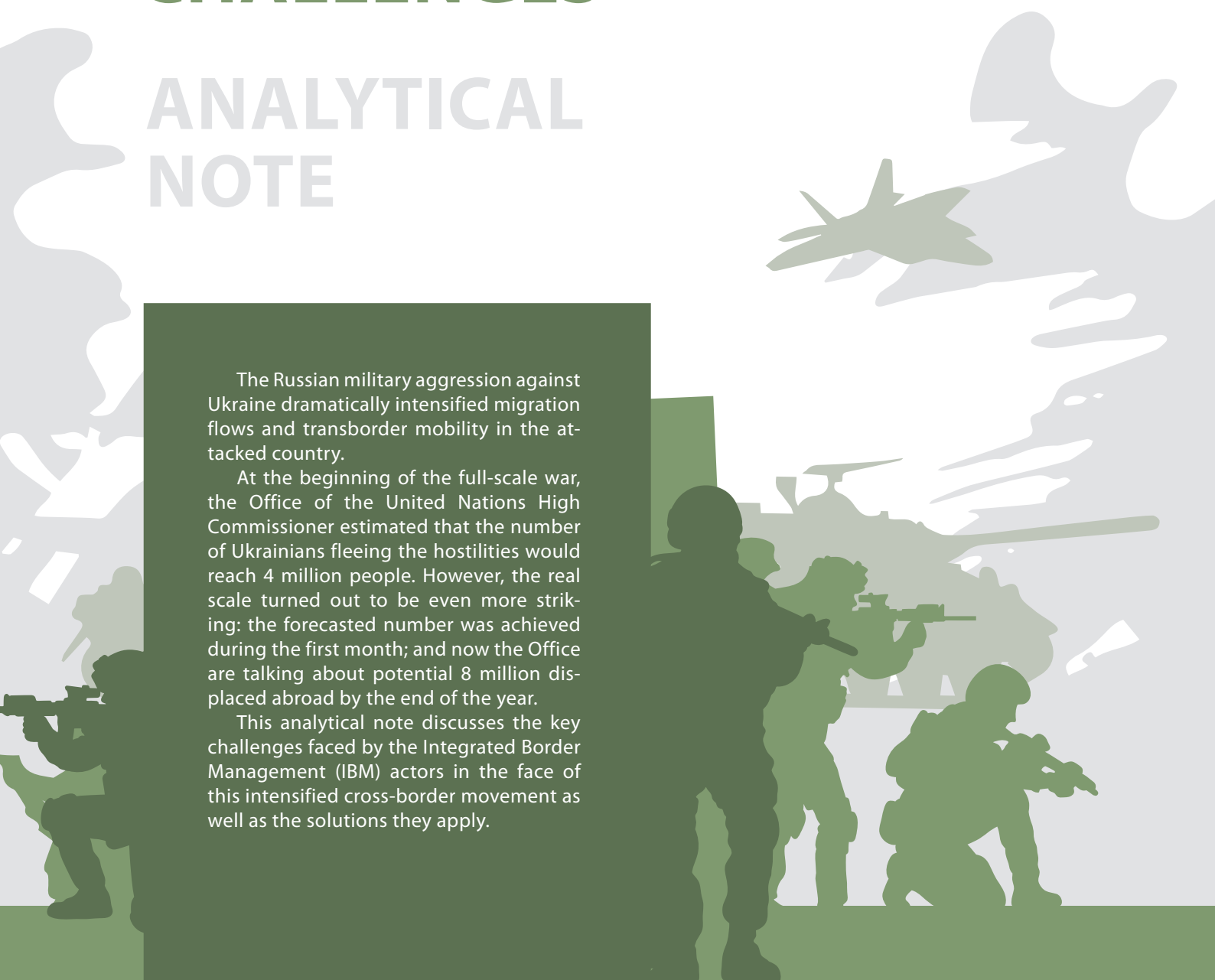
DISPLACEMENT OF PEOPLE BY RUSSIA'S ALL-OUT WAR ON UKRAINE: KEY BORDER MANAGEMENT CHALLENGES

ANALYTICAL NOTE

The Russian military aggression against Ukraine dramatically intensified migration flows and transborder mobility in the attacked country.

At the beginning of the full-scale war, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner estimated that the number of Ukrainians fleeing the hostilities would reach 4 million people. However, the real scale turned out to be even more striking: the forecasted number was achieved during the first month; and now the Office are talking about potential 8 million displaced abroad by the end of the year.

This analytical note discusses the key challenges faced by the Integrated Border Management (IBM) actors in the face of this intensified cross-border movement as well as the solutions they apply.



1.

The first and foremost challenge was the **soaring pressure on the border and cross-border infrastructure as well as on the IBM agencies.**

Massive queues at the Ukraine-EU land border were caused by the airspace closed for civil planes^{1,2}, suspension of border crossing with Russia, Belarus, and on the Transnistrian part of the Ukraine-Moldova border³, as well as by sub-par infrastructure (lack of pedestrian and cycling crossing⁴, poor roads).

Between 27 February and 9 March, a total of 1,6 million fled the country, with 150,000 people exiting Ukraine daily on average. On 6 March, 210,526 individuals crossed the border - the highest daily number to date.

Since 17 March 2022, the number of people who leave has been gradually decreasing thus marking the end of the first exodus wave – a fact confirmed by the State Border Guard Service (SBGS) of Ukraine who reported a significant downturn of queues at the EU border as of 20 March⁵.

To respond to the pressure, relevant authorities applied a variety of measures to simplify border crossing and increase the throughput capacity. For instance, Ukraine managed to reach agreements with the neighbouring countries allowing people to cross the border without their international passports. Poland approved such simplification on 24 February⁶, with other countries, i.e. Slovakia⁷, Hungary, Moldova, and Romania, following shortly afterwards.

To process the sharply increased volumes of travellers, SBGS deployed extra personnel at the

western checkpoints by relocating border guards from the temporarily non-operational Ukraine-Belarus border⁸. The agency also informed and redirected travellers to less congested border crossing points through regularly updated information on its website⁹.

The opening hours of checkpoints changed as well, with additional points launching round-the-clock service¹⁰. Also, some vehicle-only checkpoints, such as Yahodyn and Uzhorod, were quickly redesigned to allow pedestrian border crossing as well, a change that required reaching agreement with the neighbouring states¹¹. The authorities try to further alleviate pressure on border infrastructure by opening brand-new checkpoints but also by returning reconstructed ones into operation. Two future openings have already been announced for Chernivetska Oblast¹².

As the regular international railroads passenger circulation was suspended during the coronavirus epidemics, the Ukrainian railroad operator Ukreizytsia allowed the evacuation trains to leave via the freight carrier tracks in some cases¹³.

1_ Ukrainian State Air Traffic Services Enterprise. Announcement on the suspension of the airspace of Ukraine.

2_ In 2019 movement of persons via air border crossing points constituted a quarter of all cross-border traffic (26%).

3_ State Border Guard Service of Ukraine. All border crossing points on the border with Russia, Belarus and "Transnistrian" part of the border with Moldova are closed since February 28th (in Ukrainian).

4_ Europe without Barriers. Border with human face. Recommendations, p.10 (in Ukrainian).

5_ Western regional department of the State Border Guard Service of Ukraine. Western border. Queues to leave Ukraine at the border crossing points with neighboring countries as of 14:00 20.03.2022 (in Ukrainian).

6_ Ukrainian citizens may enter Poland without the travel passport, still they should be able to explain why fleeing Ukraine (in Ukrainian).

7_ Slovakia to accept Ukrainians with internal passports – head of Transcarpathia regional administration (in Ukrainian).

8_ "Yahodyn" during war time: how international border crossing point functions (in Ukrainian).

9_ Almost 111 thousand people have crossed the western border: BCPs are working 24/7 (in Ukrainian).

10_ State Border Guard Service of Ukraine. Situation at the western border as of 18:00 24.02.2022 (in Ukrainian).

11_ A chance for a BCP "Uzhgorod - Vyšné Nemecké": what can and should be gained from Ukrainian-Slovak border during the war (in Ukrainian).

12_ Government has decided to open new checkpoints on the Ukrainian-Romanian state border.

13_ "Yahodyn" during war time: how international border crossing point functions (in Ukrainian).

2.

Another challenge was that a **significant number of people crossing the border belong to vulnerable groups.**

Before the all-out war, most travellers used to have planned itineraries, necessary cash and belongings.

The situation changed dramatically after 24 February. The deteriorating security situation in virtually all regions of Ukraine pushed to flee many of those who had never travelled abroad. A survey carried out in November 2021 showed that around 66% of Ukrainians had not crossed the border since 2017 when the EU visa waiver was introduced¹⁴. Such low mobility coupled with the lack of trans-border travelling experience resulted oftentimes in a low level of knowledge of how to cross the border, and entailed many risks.

According to recent estimates, around 90% of Ukrainians escaping abroad are women with children¹⁵ who are particularly prone to exploitation, violence or human trafficking. The relocation of social care facilities, such as foster homes, centres for children with disabilities, etc. meant that large groups of people considered vulnerable were crossing the border as well. As of early May, a total of 3,821 children were evacuated accompanied by facility staff¹⁶. However, there were cases when minors crossed the border on their own, which put them at even a higher risk.

The issues that people usually face while crossing the border may disproportionately impact the vulnerable groups affecting their physical and mental health and eventually exposing them to

unlawful actions of unscrupulous individuals. According to a country-wide opinion poll, most travellers had to cope with queues and long waiting times (63%), physical discomfort caused by the lack of proper infrastructure, including deficient lavatories and weather shelters (33%), and complex bureaucratic procedures (32%)¹⁷. During the first month of the all-out war, long queues and waiting times were the most acute problems faced by families with children in particular, researchers say¹⁸.

Accordingly, it was necessary to identify people from vulnerable groups and reduce their waiting time at the border as much as possible to help them out. The SBGS reported that women with sick children, disabled persons, and the elderly were given the priority at one of the most congested checkpoints in Yahodyn¹⁹. Likewise, the Ministry of Social Policy claimed that disabled persons (group 1) together with those accompanying them were allowed to skip the queue at the state border²⁰. Given that no regulation is available on the subject, it seems like such decisions were made by border officers on a case-by-case basis.

It was also important to cater to the basic needs of vulnerable individuals crossing the border. Special camps were deployed near border crossing points to provide travellers with access to food, clothing, water, shelter, and medical care. As a rule, they were set up under the auspices of territorial communities, humanitarian organizations, volunteers, or coordination centres of relevant military-civilian administrations²¹.

¹⁴ Public opinion of Ukrainians regarding problem faced when crossing the state border of Ukraine (in Ukrainian).

¹⁵ Council of Europe. Guidance Note on addressing the risks of trafficking in human beings related to the war in Ukraine and the ensuing humanitarian crisis.

¹⁶ “We are fighting with an army of rapists and marauders” – interview of the Deputy Minister of Internal Affairs Kateryna Pavlichenko (in Ukrainian).

¹⁷ Public opinion of Ukrainians regarding problem faced when crossing the state border of Ukraine (in Ukrainian).

¹⁸ Charity foundation “Voices of children” and Kharkiv Institute for Social Research. Children and the War in Ukraine, p.17.

¹⁹ State Border Guard Service of Ukraine. Humanitarian corridor arranged near the “Krakivets” checkpoint (in Ukrainian).

²⁰ Travel abroad. Who can leave Ukraine first (in Ukrainian).

²¹ “Yahodyn” during war time: how international border crossing point functions (in Ukrainian).



3.

International humanitarian and human rights organizations have **been raising the concern that the massive displacement of people during the war creates breeding ground for human trafficking and exploitation**. The Ukrainian ombudswoman underscored that women, children, and disabled persons are the ones most at risk²².

A number of cases have been getting wide media coverage; human rights defenders also work to collect the information²³. However, aggregated data or at least estimations are scarce. The Deputy Minister for Internal Affairs reported on one of the such flagrant cases: the police stopped an attempt to unlawfully transport 43 children from a care home in Kirovohradska Oblast to the United States, while their pretended official destination was in Lithuania. The police opened a criminal investigation against the perpetrators for human trafficking²⁴.

To prevent potential perils, the Ministry of Social Policy also issued a special guide for girls and women who are fleeing the country and launched cooperation with the SBGS and military-civilian administrations to hand them out at the checkpoints²⁵.

Assisted by international projects, SBGS also distributed leaflets warning about human trafficking threats and their prevention, as well as on the temporary protection that Ukrainians may seek in the EU countries.

The challenges brought about by the acute congestion of the border, the vulnerability of certain groups of travellers, and the growing number of cases of human trafficking and exploitation need to be addressed by coordinated efforts of IBM actors. As the situation at the state boundaries and in the regulatory field is changing really fast, timely and coordinated communication between relevant authorities becomes paramount as well.

The above challenges were already mentioned in the 2025 IBM Strategy; however it is the full-scale war that brought them into the very spotlight. Overcoming them would thus require further development of the integrated border management in Ukraine, in particular by deepening the cooperation on the IBM Strategy implementation, and by engaging stakeholders who were previously left outside.

Published in the framework of “Multicomponent Civic Support for IBM-related Reforms” project implemented by Europe without Barriers think tank within the framework of the project “Multicomponent Civic Support for IBM-related Reforms”, implemented by the International Center for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD), and funded by the European Union.

Any expressed opinion belongs to authors and does not necessarily reflect the position of the EU or ICMPD.



²² Ombudsman calls upon European countries to act in order not to let Ukrainian citizens be involved into the situation of human trafficking (in Ukrainian).

²³ How Ukrainian female refugees become victims of sex trafficking (in Ukrainian).

²⁴ “We are fighting with an army of rapists and marauders” – interview of the Deputy Minister of Internal Affairs Kateryna Pavlichenko (in Ukrainian).

²⁵ Ministry of Social Policy warns about risk of becoming a victim of human trafficking (in Ukrainian).