

ANALYZING POST-2026 SCENARIOS FOR UKRAINIAN REFUGEES IN THE EU: IMPLICATIONS OF TEMPORARY PROTECTION DIRECTIVE EXPIRATION

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Abstract: This paper examines the critical question of what will happen to approximately 4.2 million Ukrainian refugees in the European Union (EU) after the

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Temporary Protection Directive (TPD) expiration. Using scenario analysis, we explore three potential policy outcomes: reactivation or extension of the TPD, implementation of accelerated asylum procedures, or no special EU action.

Our methodology involves a comprehensive review of EU policies, academic literature, and recent Ukrainian refugee intentions and integration data. We analyze the pros and cons of each scenario, considering both humanitarian and political factors.

Key findings indicate that while the EU has extended protection until 2026, this decision does not resolve long-term issues. Each scenario presents unique challenges, including resource constraints, legal complexities, and potential geopolitical ramifications. The study concludes that the EU must balance humanitarian obligations, economic realities, and political considerations.

This research contributes to the ongoing discourse on refugee protection in the EU and provides a framework for understanding potential policy directions in response to protracted displacement situations.

Key words: temporary protection; temporary resident permit; permanent resident permit; refugees; asylum seekers; beneficiary of international protection; beneficiary of subsidiary protection

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INTRODUCTION

What about 4.2 million Ukrainians temporarily protected in the EU?

The ongoing conflict in Ukraine has triggered one of the largest refugee movements in recent European history, prompting the European Union to activate the Temporary Protection Directive to provide immediate shelter and rights to displaced Ukrainians. As the expiration date of the directive approaches set for March 4, 2026, critical questions arise regarding the future of approximately 4.2 million Ukrainian refugees currently residing in EU member states. This paper seeks to explore the post 2026 landscape through scenario analysis, evaluating potential policy responses and their implications. By examining the legal, humanitarian, and geopolitical dimension of the issue, the study aims to provide a comprehensive framework for understanding the EU's strategic options and the broader consequences of prolonged displacement.

According to EU regulations, the Temporary Protection Directive (TPD) granting special protection to Ukrainian refugees, the statement explains that the term "refugees" is used in a very broad sense, encompassing other categories of displaced persons or those who have fled the country. To indicate that this expanded understanding cannot easily be applied in a legal context, the authors used quotation marks: "refugees", the text explains that the term "refugees" comes from the 1951 Geneva Convention. It means people looking for a home, such as asylum seekers or those who now have international protection, will expire on March 4, 2026. At that point, Ukrainians holding Temporary Resident Permits will lose their legal status in the EU, as stipulated in Article 6 of the TPD.

This provision stipulates that temporary protection cannot be extended indefinitely, and unless alternative legal mechanisms are introduced beneficiaries will no longer be entitled to remain in the EU under the same conditions.

This impending expiration raises critical questions about the future status of approximately 4.2 million Ukrainians currently protected under this directive (Luyten, 2023).

This paper addresses the primary question: What will the Council of the EU decide regarding the 4.2 million Ukrainians under temporary protection already dispersed throughout the EU?

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Three logical possibilities emerge:

1. The Council will issue a new decision to reactivate Directive 2001/55, and the EU will allocate additional funds to support the 4.2 million Ukrainians residing in the EU or extend the current application of the 2001/55 EU Directive.

2. The Council will decide to accelerate asylum procedures for Ukrainian refugees, facilitating their access to international or subsidiary protection status and providing support during the asylum process when their right to work is suspended.

3. The Council will take no special action, and the current EU asylum policy will be applied, potentially resulting in the voluntary or involuntary return of individuals to their home country.

This paper analyzes the pros and cons of each scenario, considering two dimensions structurally oriented toward Ukrainian protection for as long as necessary.

It is important to note that on June 24, 2024, the Council announced in a press release that the protection would be extended until March 4, 2026 (Council of the European Union, 2023).

This decision, made despite existing EU norms, was based on humanitarian and geopolitical considerations (Dadush & Weil, 2022). However, this extension does not fully resolve the long-term issues facing Ukrainian refugees in the EU.

Scenario 1: Reactivation or Extension of the Temporary Protection Directive (TPD)

1.1 Humanitarian Considerations for Reactivating the Temporary Protection Directive

1.1.1 Advantages: Humanitarian and Geopolitical Factors

The primary arguments supporting this scenario are rooted in humanitarian principles and current EU geopolitical concerns. These imperatives necessitate a swift and comprehensive solution from the EU.

The humanitarian rationale is deeply embedded in contemporary EU culture, values, and legislation, which prioritize the sanctity of human life. European communities are ethically bound to protect vulnerable populations, including:

- Children (unaccompanied minors, those with special needs, unborn children, and those who are wounded or psychologically traumatized),
- Sick and wounded individuals,
- Elderly and disabled persons,
- Mothers with children.

From a geopolitical standpoint, the continuation of protection for Ukrainian refugees also serves broader strategic interest. The EU's response to the war in Ukraine has been a defining moment in its foreign policy, demonstrating solidarity with neighboring country under siege. Maintaining protection for displaced Ukrainians reinforces the EU's stance against aggression and supports regional stability. It also helps prevent secondary migration crises that could arise if millions of refugees were suddenly left without legal status or support.

In this context, extending the TPD or implementing a similar mechanism would not only fulfill the EU's humanitarian obligations but also strengthen its geopolitical posture, ensuring consistency in its values and actions on the international stage. This protection is considered a moral obligation, unconditional and independent of historical events, interests, or mutual expectations.

1.1.2 Challenges: Resource Constraints and Procedural Complexities

The arguments against extending humanitarian protection through TPD reactivation or extension primarily stem from the EU's limited capacity to protect Ukrainian refugees according to established EU standards.

The European Commission reports that the costs of supporting Ukraine have reached almost €118.3 billion (Delegation of the European Union to Ukraine, 2024). This financial burden is

increasingly difficult to manage, especially in the context of broader economic pressures facing the EU.

Key limitations include:

1. Economic constraints: The EU is experiencing slowed economic growth, impacted by:
 - Green Policy Implementation: the transition to climate neutrality requires massive investments in infrastructure, energy transformation and regulatory enforcement,
 - Increased pressure for research and development investment: to remain competitive globally, the EU must allocate substantial resources to innovation, digital transformation and technological sovereignty,
 - Resource blockages due to commercial and asymmetric conflict: commercial disruption and asymmetric conflict have strained supply chains and access to critical raw materials
 - Self-defense expenditures: rising defense budgets across member states, prompted by geopolitical instability, divert funds from social and humanitarian programs,
 - Aging population effects on national budgets: an aging population is placing additional stress on national healthcare systems and pension schemes, reducing fiscal flexibility for refugee support

2. Procedural challenges:

- Lack of a normative framework for decisions contradicting specific temporary provisions. Once it expires, there is no harmonized EU-level legal instrument to guide decisions that may contradict its provisions—such as mass regularization or blanket asylum processing.

Therefore we can say that:

- The European Policy Centre (SIEPS) warns that without a clear transition plan, beneficiaries may fall into legal limbo, facing inconsistent treatment across Member States (Ciğer, 2023);
- The ICMPD notes that national laws vary widely, and the absence of a unified EU framework risks fragmentation and legal uncertainty (ICMPD, International Centre for Migration Policy Development, 2023);
- ERCE's policy paper emphasizes the need for a structured exit strategy to avoid ad hoc decisions that could undermine legal coherence (European Council ON Refugees and Exiles (ECRE), 2024).
- Time constraints for creating new frameworks (typically requiring over a year). Developing and implementing new EU-wide legal instruments or national-level solutions, such as long term residency pathways, requires extensive legislative coordination, stakeholder consultation and administrative preparation.

However, the following elements must be taken into account:

- According to the European Parliament Research Service, legislative process at the EU level typically span 12-14 months, making it unlikely that a new framework will be ready by March 2026 (Luyten, 2024),

The ICMPD discussion paper highlights that even national level adjustments, amending residency laws, require significant lead time and political consensus (ICMPD, International Centre for Migration Policy Development, 2023)

- Potential adverse effects on EU stability (e.g., rise of extremist forces, internal divisions). Historical precedent, the 2015 migration crisis saw a surge in populist and nationalist rhetoric across Europe, linked to perceived policy failures
- Increased exposure to asylum seeker influxes potentially weaponized by EU adversaries. Geopolitical actors may exploit refugee flows to destabilize the EU, as seen in past cases involving Belarus and Turkey.

3. Legal considerations:

The TPD stipulates that temporary protection shall end when:

- a) The maximum duration is reached, or
- b) The Council decides by qualified majority, based on a Commission proposal (Ciğer, 2023)

c) Post-protection period, general laws on protection and aliens in Member States apply (Luyten, 2023), including return provisions Articles 17-23 TPD.

4. Geopolitical risks:

- Potential extension of the war to Europe. The ongoing war continues to pose a direct threat to European security. If hostilities escalate or spill over into neighboring EU countries, particularly those bordering Ukraine such as Poland, Slovakia, Hungary and Romania, the EU could face a broader military and humanitarian crisis. In this case NATO has increased its eastern flank presence, signaling concern over potential spillover effects

- Risk of the conflict in Ukraine degenerating into a nuclear or global war. The war in Ukraine has involved nuclear rhetoric and strategic ambiguity from Russia, raising fears of escalation beyond conventional warfare. A failure to manage flows and humanitarian obligations could exacerbate tensions between the EU and Russia, especially if perceived as hostile or provocative.

- Setting a precedent that could lead to expectations of breaking EU rules to solve particular problems in other contexts. The activation and repeated extension of the TDP, while necessary, represents a deviation from standard EU asylum procedure. If the EU continues to bypass established legal frameworks to address crises, it may set a precedent that undermines rule-based governance.

5. Public perception:

The large number of Ukrainian refugees (4.2 million) may be perceived by some EU citizens as a long-term material burden and a potential source of civil insecurity.

Despite these challenges, on June 24, 2024, the Council announced an extension of protection until March 4, 2026. However, this extension does not fully resolve the long-term issues facing Ukrainian refugees in the EU.

Geopolitical Factors in Reactivating or Extending the TPD

1.2.1 Geopolitical Advantages

Reactivating or extending the TPD offers several geopolitical advantages:

- Global positioning: It affirms the EU's role as a major global player, demonstrating its commitment to international law and support for Ukraine against aggression.
- Solidarity and determination: It encourages Ukrainians fighting for their liberty by showing the EU's readiness to support them, even at a significant cost. This demonstrates the EU and Free World's determination to uphold democratic and humanitarian values.
- Strategic messaging: It counters the potential expansionist ambitions of Russia and BRICS+12 countries, showcasing the strength of unconditional human solidarity.
- Symbolic opposition: It symbolically opposes the use of violence as leverage to change the global order in favor of authoritarian rules.
- Brand maintenance: It upholds the EU's reputation as a leading global promoter of humanitarian causes and the primary donor for humanitarian reasons.

1.2.2 Geopolitical Challenges

Despite these advantages, there are significant geopolitical challenges to consider:

- Conflict escalation: There's a need to balance support for Ukraine with avoiding the extension of the war into broader Europe.
- Nuclear deterrence: Preventing the degeneration of the conflict in Ukraine into a nuclear or global war remains a critical concern.
- Precedent-setting: There's a risk of spreading expectations and claims across the world to break EU rules to solve particular problems.

- Resource allocation: The need for reactivation is related to 4.2 million Ukrainian refugees, which presents significant logistical and resource challenges (see Figure 1 below for demographic breakdown)
- Public perception: There's a risk that segments of EU citizens may perceive the continued protection as an ongoing material burden and a potential source of civil insecurity.

1.3 Critical Analysis of Reactivation or Extension of the TPD

- While reactivation or extension (Ciğer, 2023) of the TPD provides a solution, it remains temporary. Without ensuring stability and safety in Ukraine, any temporary measure could be considered only partially humanitarian. It maintains the exposure of Ukrainians to fears of voluntary or forced return to an insecure state.
- The decision to extend protection until March 4, 2026, while addressing immediate concerns, does not fully resolve the long-term issues facing Ukrainian refugees in the EU. It essentially postpones the need for a more permanent solution, leaving the fundamental question of the long-term status of Ukrainian refugees open.



Figure 1. Ukrainian refugees' situation
(Source: Directorate-General for Migration and Home Affairs, 2024)

- This scenario, while demonstrating strong humanitarian commitment and geopolitical resolve, also highlights the complex interplay between immediate humanitarian needs, long-term integration challenges, and broader geopolitical considerations that the EU must navigate.

Scenario 2: EU Decision to Facilitate and Accelerate Asylum Procedures for Ukrainians Under Temporary Protection

Here is a summary of the decision and mechanism to facilitate and accelerate asylum / protection procedures for Ukrainians under temporary protection in the EU: at the start of Russia's aggression against Ukraine, the EU had identified a total of around €17 billion in funds earmarked for cohesion and post-pandemic recovery that Member States could reallocate to support refugees from Ukraine in addressing urgent needs such as housing, education, health and childcare. This included around €7 billion in unspent cohesion policy funds from the 2014-2020 period and around €10 billion in pre-allocated funds for post-pandemic recovery under the Recovery Assistance for Cohesion and Territories of Europe (European Commission, 2023).

2.1 Humanitarian Considerations for Expediting Asylum Procedures

2.1.1 Advantages of Accelerated Asylum Procedures

In the event of continued conflict in Ukraine, traumatized refugees may be reluctant to return immediately after the war's conclusion. Field research indicates evolving intentions among

Ukrainian refugees. Initially, studies in Norway showed that approximately 80% of refugees intended to return (Hernes, Aasland, Deineko, & Handa Myere, 2024).

However, after nearly three years of displacement, a UNHCR survey in 2024 reveals a significant shift: the proportion of refugees planning to return to Ukraine has decreased to 65%, while those undecided about returning has increased from 18% to 24%, and those reporting no intention to return has risen from 5% to 11%.

A specific study (Adema, Cevat, Giesing, & Poutvaara, 2024) on the effect of conflict on refugees' return and integration suggests a high rate of intention to return to Ukraine, though not necessarily to their original localities if destroyed. This underscores the need for a long-term, more protective solution, such as granting temporarily protected Ukrainians access to accelerated asylum procedures.

Implementing such a solution offers several advantages:

- It provides certainty for the protected individuals.
- It is potentially less costly for the EU compared to extending temporary protection indefinitely.
- It allows the EU to implement procedures that mitigate potential abuses and security risks.

2.1.2 Challenges in Implementing Accelerated Asylum Procedures

The EU activated the Directive 2001/55/EC on Temporary Protection in response to the mass influx of displaced persons from Ukraine following the Russian invasion and under this mechanism:

- A mass influx situation is declared by the Council of the European Union, EU Member States, and protection is granted collectively, without each person having to apply for asylum individually,
- It guarantees rights such as residence, access to labour market, housing, medical assistance, social welfare, education for children,
- In the case of Ukrainians, the decision was adopted on 4 March 2022

Thus, rather than each Ukrainian fleeing the war needing to lodge a full asylum application in each Member State, they benefit from this accelerated/collective protection mechanism.

Several obstacles impede the implementation of accelerated asylum procedures:

- Absence of established norms and procedures for collectively applied accelerated processes.
- Difficulty in achieving EU Council consensus, as exemplified by Hungary's reluctance (Hungarian Helsinki Committee, 2024) to support protection extension.
- Insufficient time to analyze potential adverse effects on the EU in both the short and long terms.

The statement warns of major risks facing the European Union: the rise of the far right, internal political crises, pressure from migrant flows, and the exploitation of asylum procedures by adversaries. It also notes public fatigue regarding refugees and the risk of psychological trauma for Ukrainians lacking long-term protection.

- Lack of qualified personnel to manage these procedures and limited resources for training and compensation.

2.2 Geopolitical Implications of Expedited Asylum Procedures

2.2.1 Geopolitical Advantages

Facilitating accelerated asylum procedures for Ukrainians offers two primary geopolitical benefits: (1) it maintains the morale of the Ukrainian resistance by assuring the safety of refugees' family members; (2) it counters Russian hybrid warfare narratives suggesting the abandonment of Ukrainians by Western allies.

Key decisions relevant to Ukrainians

- On 4 March 2022 the Council adopted the implementing decision activating temporary protection for persons fleeing Ukraine.
- On 25 June 2024 the Council extended temporary protection until 4 March 2026
- On 13 June 2025 the Council agreed to extend it further until 4 March 2027
- On 16 September 2025 the Council adopted a recommendation about the transition out of temporary protection, including guidance on switching to other residence statuses, voluntary return, setting up “Unity Hubs”.

2.2.2 Geopolitical Challenges

The implementation of accelerated asylum procedures faces two main geopolitical challenges: (1) the perception among some EU citizens is that the 4.2 million Ukrainian refugees represent a significant economic burden and a potential source of civil unrest & (2) concerns about setting a precedent that could encourage irregular migration from other regions, potentially straining EU resources and social cohesion.

2.3 Critical Analysis

From a humanitarian perspective, accelerated asylum procedures based on current EU norms may not provide adequate protection for all temporarily protected Ukrainians, as some may face return under existing rules. Geopolitically, while these procedures may address immediate concerns, they leave unresolved issues such as war reparations and the long-term integration (EUR-Lex, 2003) of refugees in urban areas, potentially exacerbating existing social challenges in EU metropolises.

What this means for asylum / protection procedures (facilitation & acceleration), based on pact of Migration and Asylum, Asylum Procedure Regulation and The Border Procedures:

- Since the mechanism is collective and non individual asylum applications, it avoids the bottleneck in national asylum systems which would otherwise have to process large numbers of individual applications;
- The rights of beneficiaries are harmonised across Member States (minimum standards) which helps clarity and predictability for both displaced persons and host states;
- The extensions of validity of the mechanism (to March 2026, now March 2027) give legal certainty to beneficiaries and host states, reducing the urgency and legal limbo of asylum processing;
- The transition recommendation introduces pathways for those under temporary protection to move to other statuses (longer term residence) or voluntary return, thereby creating clearer legal possibilities and reducing overload on asylum systems;

Limitations & considerations

- The mechanism is temporary protection, not permanent refugee status. The expectation is that once conditions allow, return may be possible or other statuses may apply;
- Although asylum (individual protection) is sidestepped for these persons, national laws still apply for implementing rights, and benefits may vary somewhat between Member States.
- Because this is a mechanism triggered by a mass influx for an emergency situation, it is not the same as standard asylum process some beneficiary rights may differ from full refugee status under the 1951 Refugee Convention.
- For individuals who arrive later, or fall outside the defined categories, national asylum systems may still apply rather than temporary protection.

The decision by the EU to apply temporary protection for Ukrainians fleeing the war facilitates and accelerates asylum /protection procedures by replacing individual asylum applications with a unified collective mechanism. It ensures that displaced Ukrainians can access residence, work, social and educational rights quickly and uniformly across EU states, relieving pressure on national asylum systems and avoiding lengthy individual assessments.

Scenario 3: No Special EU Action for Ukrainians' Protection After TPD Expiration

3.1 Humanitarian Considerations in the Absence of Special EU Action

In the event of no special EU decision regarding Ukrainian refugees after the expiration of the Temporary Protection Directive (EUR-Lex, 2001); (EUR-Lex, 2022); (EUR-Lex, 2024), four potential pathways for continued protection emerge:

1. Granting Long-Term Resident Permits tacitly,
2. Encouraging host countries to implement their national protection mechanisms,
3. Facilitating voluntary return, where feasible,
4. Applying standard (non-accelerated) asylum procedures,
5. The EU's current roadmap indicates that rather than simply letting things lapse, there will be a coordinated exit / transition strategy,
6. This means that for those still under the TPD,
7. They will continue to enjoy their rights until at least March 2027 (per the extension) under the TPD,
8. They will be able to convert, subject to national law and eligibility, to other legal statuses in the host Member State,
9. Voluntary return programmes will be encouraged when the situation in Ukraine allows.

EU figures show more than 4.25 million people who have fled Ukraine benefit from the bloc's Temporary Protection Directive, a measure to help cope with mass arrivals of displaced persons that was activated after Russia's 2022 invasion. The Commission recommended measures to ensure Ukrainians can return home smoothly when the fighting ends that included organising voluntary return programmes and providing beneficiaries with information and support.

3.1.1 Advantages of Existing Protection Mechanisms

The existing protection mechanisms offer several humanitarian advantages:

1. Long-Term Resident Permits under Council Directive 2003/109
2. National protection measures in host countries
3. Standard asylum procedures

4. Safe return protocols

These options align with the EU's humanitarian principles and leverage existing legal frameworks and procedures. The EU's experience with similar situations, such as the ex-Yugoslavian civil wars, provides a precedent. Additionally, the lack of obvious additional costs makes these solutions more feasible.

3.1.2 Challenges of Existing Protection Mechanisms

While these protection methods face limited opposition due to their gradual implementation, there are some concerns:

1. The primary challenge is the potential derogation of Brussels' competencies, allowing EU member states to manage a complex issue at the national level.
2. Other protection methods, such as long-term resident permits, standard asylum procedures, and voluntary return, are generally accepted and raise fewer questions.

3.2 Geopolitical Implications of No Special EU Action

3.2.1 Geopolitical Advantages

The four existing protection pathways offer several geopolitical benefits:

1. They avoid potential drawbacks associated with scenarios 1 and 2.
2. They circumvent potential objections from BRICS+12 countries.
3. They align with the EU's humanitarian principles and existing legal frameworks.
4. They build on the EU's experience with similar situations.

5. They present a cost-effective solution.

3.2.2 Geopolitical Challenges

The main criticism of not introducing special provisions for Ukrainians is the implicit prioritization of EU convenience over addressing the specific needs of Ukrainian refugees. This approach may overlook the dual trauma experienced by Ukrainians - as victims of war and as individuals facing an uncertain future.

3.3 Critical Analysis of EU Abstention from Special Action

The decision not to implement special measures for Ukrainian refugees after the TPD expiration raises logical concerns. Responding to extraordinary circumstances with standard policies may seem counterintuitive, particularly when addressing the uncertain status of 4.2 million people. This approach may fail to adequately address the unique challenges posed by the Ukrainian refugee situation.

CONCLUSIONS

The extension of the Temporary Protection Directive (TPD) until March 4, 2026, represents a temporary solution to a complex and evolving challenge. This decision, while addressing immediate concerns, does not fully resolve the long-term issues facing the 4.2 million Ukrainian refugees in the EU.

As we look beyond this extension, several key points emerge:

1. Persistent uncertainty: The primary concern for formerly temporarily protected individuals - the uncertainty of their future - remains unresolved. The ongoing conflict in Ukraine and the worsening geopolitical context compound this uncertainty.
2. Evolving political landscape: The new EU Commission (2024-2028) will face a potentially less favorable environment for humanitarian priorities, necessitating careful navigation of competing interests and concerns.
3. Communication perspective: It's crucial to recognize that the three scenarios presented in this paper - reactivation of TPD, accelerated asylum procedures, and no special action - are framed from a communication perspective. These scenarios serve as analytical tools to understand and discuss potential policy directions rather than definitive predictions.
4. Implications for EU Member States: Each scenario carries significant implications for EU member states, including:
 - Resource allocation for continued support of Ukrainian refugees
 - Integration challenges in labor markets and social systems
 - Potential political tensions arising from extended refugee presence
 - Need for policy harmonization across the EU
5. Beyond 2026: While the current extension provides a temporary framework, the challenges associated with Ukrainian refugees will likely persist beyond 2026. The other two scenarios (accelerated asylum procedures or no special action) may become relevant in the future, depending on how the situation evolves.
6. Adaptive policymaking: The EU and its member states must remain flexible and prepared to adapt their approaches as circumstances change. This may involve elements from multiple scenarios or entirely new solutions not yet considered.
7. Continued analysis: The analytical framework presented in this paper, with its three logically available scenarios, proves sustainable for framing workable solutions. However, ongoing research and analysis will be crucial as the situation develops.

Following the analysis of the conflict in Ukraine, based on official, public, digital and non-digital documents and specialized literature, we will try to carry out a SWOT analysis that supports our points of view, as follows:

- Strengths:
 - Established Legal Precedent. The TPD has provided a unified legal framework for managing mass displacement, demonstrating the EU's capacity for coordinated humanitarian response,
 - Integration Progress, many Ukrainian refugees have already begun integrating into host societies, with access to education, healthcare, and employment, reducing long-term dependency,
 - Political willingness, the initial activation and extension of the TPD show that Member States can act collectively in time of crisis,
 - Data-Driven Policy Tools, The EU has gathered substantial data on refugee intentions and integration outcomes, which can inform future policy decisions,
- Weaknesses:
 - Lack of long-Term Legal Framework. The TPD is temporary by design and its expiration risks leaving millions in legal uncertainty without harmonized alternatives,
 - Procedural Delays. Creating new EU-wide frameworks typically takes over a year, making timely transition difficult,
 - Fragmented National Policies. Member States differ in their interpretation and implementation of refugee protection, leading to unequal treatment
 - Resource constraints, continued support for refugee strains public service, especially in frontline countries like Poland and Romania.
- Opportunities:
 - Policy Innovation. The expiration of the TPD offers a chance to design more sustainable, rights-based migration framework,
 - Strengthening EU Solidarity. Coordinated action post 2026 could reinforce trust and cooperation among Member States,
 - Global Leadership. The EU can set a precedent for humane refugee management in protracted crisis, influencing global norms,
 - Digital Integration Tools. Leveraging digital platforms for refugee registration, employment matching and education access can streamline integration.
- Threats:
 - Geopolitical Escalation. The war in Ukraine could intensify or spill into EU territory, triggering new waves of displacement,
 - Rise of Extremism. Poorly managed transitions may fuel anti-immigrant sentiment and empower far-right movements,
 - Legal Precedent Risks. Repeated use of emergency measures like the TPD may erode rule-based governance and encourage future exceptions,
 - Hybrid Threats. Adversaries may weaponize migration flows to destabilize the EU, as seen in past crises.

In conclusion, while the TPD extension provides a temporary reprieve, our analysis reveals that the fundamental challenges surrounding the long-term integration and status of Ukrainian refugees remain unresolved, potentially straining EU resources and political cohesion in the coming years.

The recent unsatisfactory outcome of the February 2025 U.S.-Ukraine discussions has brought urgency to Europe to enhance its strategic autonomy and defense capabilities. The analytical framework presented in this paper, with its three logically available scenarios, proves sustainable for framing workable solutions.

However, ongoing research is critical to assess the effectiveness of different integration strategies, model the potential economic and social impacts of long-term refugee presence, and develop more robust policy frameworks for future displacement crises. Further research should also focus on gathering and analyzing empirical data on the experiences and outcomes of Ukrainian refugees in different EU member states.

Navigating this complex issue will require the EU to forge a durable and equitable solution that balances its humanitarian obligations, geopolitical imperatives, and the socio-economic realities within member states, ensuring clear and consistent communication with all stakeholders to foster understanding and build consensus.

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