



Transitioning out of temporary protection in Belgium: the challenges ahead

Report policy event 21 April 2026

Temporary protection is set to end on 4 March 2027, with no clarity on whether or not there will be a last one-year extension. As this date is nearing, the lack of information on alternative statuses, as well as the absence of any national plan on the transition out of TP, are becoming more alarming with each day passing. Clarity is needed for displaced Ukrainians as well as for all actors involved at the local, regional, federal and European level. In the absence of any immediate action, over 70.000 Ukrainians currently residing in Belgium face a serious risk of losing their rights and perspective from one day to another, rendering them unable to prepare for a future after temporary protection. Seeking to draw political attention to the urgency of this matter, Caritas International, Vluchtelingenwerk Vlaanderen, Orbit and Ukrainian Voices organised an event for policy makers, administrations and organisations working on temporary protection, to share information, ideas and insights on the future for Ukrainian refugees residing in Belgium. This report sets out the **key take aways** from the policy event.

The state of play: the current situation in Ukraine, the intentions of displaced people in Europe and the EU's policy recommendations

Keynote by Maryna Yaroshevych (Deputy head of Foreign Policy Council, Ukrainian Prism)

In her opening remarks, Maryna Yaroshevych emphasised the human dimension of the EU's policy regarding Ukraine. Over the past four years, Russia has repeatedly exploited harsh winter conditions in Ukraine to the fullest. Nevertheless, Ukraine has emerged from what she described as the **'winter of resilience'**. She confronted the audience with the hard reality of having only two or three hours of electricity per day, during which people must cook, wash and carry out all other essential tasks. This illustrates that the war is not confined to the frontline but is also present in Ukrainians' homes.

These conditions highlight that solidarity is not a subscription one can cancel when the cost increases; it must be sustained until the light at the end of the tunnel appears. This observation underscores **the need for a policy of dignity**: rather than focusing on programs that encourage people to leave, we should prioritise supporting those who stay.

Furthermore, she urged the establishment of non-discriminatory stay protocols for the duration of the conflict. She highlighted that because Ukrainian families are typically multi-generational, applying conditional criteria — such as employment or university enrollment status — triggers the involuntary return of non-qualifying family members to a war zone. To prevent this, she argues

that "preconditions" based on age, origin, or economic utility should be suspended while the threat to safety persists.

Overall, Maryna Yaroshevych denounced the absurdity of the idea of returning Ukrainians to "wait in the lobby" until Ukraine is granted EU membership to then once again be regarded as worthy European citizens. The current policy – or lack thereof – represents a "failure of logic" with substantial humanitarian implications. She concluded with a warning that **a 'switch-off' scenario must be prevented** at all costs, as it could leave tens of thousands of people in a state of uncertainty and disillusionment.

Panel 1: Transitioning out of temporary protection

*The first panel was moderated by **Olena Zavorina** (Vluchtelingenwerk Vlaanderen) and featured participants **Jeroen Maes** (Director Division Economic Migration, Brussel Economie en Werkgelegenheid), **Erik Klaver** (Acting Program Director, DG Oekraïense Ontheemden Nederland) and **Filipe van Huylbroeck** (Legal Expert Migration Law, Vlaams Agentschap Integratie en Inburgering).*

The first panel sought to answer questions on **the alternative options for residence, as well as the conditions and obstacles** that these options can potentially bring.

Several options exist for changing one's status in Belgium, including work permits (single permits), self-employed permits, student visas, asylum procedures and various forms of regularization. At the same time, each case is assessed individually and the **requirements are often difficult to meet**.

Single permits are already accessible to those under TP and can offer a more stable status in the future. Nonetheless, in Brussels there have been very few applications to date (78), mainly from highly skilled workers. Reasons for this include high income requirements and the complexity of the procedures. Moreover, the **differing conditions in each region** form a major obstacle. In Flanders, for example, access to so-called "bottleneck professions" is more restricted than in Brussels. It was emphasized that people should not hesitate to check whether they meet the conditions, as obtaining a single permit takes several months.

In the Netherlands, a transition period of three years is already being developed. The primary objective remains the reconstruction of Ukraine, accompanied by four policy goals: (1) providing protection as long as necessary, (2) promoting and supporting return, (3) minimizing pressure on services within the asylum chain, and (4) maximizing participation. This has led to an approach consisting of three components. First, a return program combined with reconstruction support, as people will be needed to rebuild Ukraine. Second, by encouraging people to move towards regular permits as much as possible, to reduce the pressure on social and asylum services. Finally, and most notably, the implementation of a three-year "**transition document**". Since all applicants for temporary protection in the Netherlands automatically applied for asylum, offering this document to Ukrainians who cancel their asylum request is intended to provide provisional legal certainty while preventing the overburdening of the asylum system.

Based on the reactions of the other panelists, the contrast with the absence of a coherent Belgian approach could hardly be greater. Existing mechanisms have not (yet) been adapted to the specific situations of Ukrainians.

Overall, it became clear that a **lack of clear and accessible information** remains one of the key challenges. It is important that employers, educational institutions and local authorities are involved in disseminating information about the available options. Nevertheless, achieving this goal **requires a clear and coherent policy framework**. Both panelists and other participants stressed the urgency of both policy decisions and information provisions, which should not be influenced by fear of secondary movements, as there are practical solutions to mitigate the effect of national measures on secondary movements.

Questions & concerns raised during the Q&A session

- Concerns were raised on administrative capacity to process residence permit applications, especially in a scenario where many people will request a status change at the same time.
- As the years draw on some people with temporary protection have built a life here and wish to obtain a more permanent residence status. The European legal tool of long-term residency could help with that. However, applying for long term residency is not possible while being under temporary protection status: one needs to apply while benefitting a non-excluded residence status, such as one on the basis of single permit or family reunification. The years spent under temporary protection do however legally count towards the 5 years needed to apply for this permanent status. This makes the issue of transitioning even more essential. Policy choices could be made here to both alleviate future pressure on the administrations and to ease the transition; all while avoiding discrimination with other third country nationals.
- The question remains on how information on alternative residence permits, their conditions, and sensibilization on the timing of residence applications, will be communicated to Ukrainians in a comprehensive and timely manner.

Panel 2: Return, reconstruction and regularisation

*The second panel was moderated by **Yevgenia Bondarenko** (Caritas International) and featured participants **Laetitia Van der Vennet** (Advocacy Officer Regularisation, PICUM), **Pierre Verbeeren** (former Ukraine Coordinator Brussel, DG Department of Social Action, CPAS Brussels) and **Laurens Dickx** (Reintegration Counsellor for Ukraine, Caritas International).*

The second panel sought to answer questions on the alternatives for those who are not eligible to transfer to other existing residence statuses. The possibility of return, the organization and conditions for return were examined as well as new residence pathways. Special attention was given to the needs of vulnerable groups and the importance of a transition period.

The panel opened with a discussion on the **state of affairs regarding (voluntarily) return** to Ukraine, a program in which Caritas International is a partner alongside Fedasil and the IOM. Currently, very few individuals are returning to Ukraine with reintegration support. There were only 11 cases in 2025. An important part of the problem lies in the **absence of specific measures** tailored to the Ukrainian context. Ukraine falls under the category of “visa-free countries”, which means that returnees receive only medical support. Caritas Ukraine has pointed out that this level of assistance is insufficient for individuals returning to a country in a state of full-scale war where they will be confronted with insecurity, destroyed housing, limited employment opportunities, and weakened local services. Return to Ukraine should at all times be *voluntary, informed, safe and dignified*, and counselling should be realistic and individualised.

Additionally, in the context of return and reconstruction planning, very few measures are currently in place for **people in vulnerable situations**. The same applies to **individuals who do not wish to return**. There is a growing awareness of these challenges among the Member States: recent research indicates that between 24 and 50 percent of young Ukrainians plan to stay in the host countries. Nevertheless, surveys conducted by the IOM show that many individuals would be prepared to return “if the conditions are right.” Return takes time. This consideration has been one of the reasons for the EU’s past decisions to extend TP. The coming months are expected to provide greater clarity regarding a possible prolongation of TP. Nevertheless, it is clear that some other Member States are currently further advanced in developing measures for these specific groups.

An unresolved concern remains what would happen if temporary protection ends without accessible transition measures: many Ukrainians could be pushed into irregular stay, with serious social and legal consequences, even leading to forced returns.

Furthermore, **Belgium’s federal institutional structure presents additional challenges**. In addition to the federal level, responsibilities are divided across three regional frameworks and 565 municipalities. As a result, it is often unclear to Ukrainians which level of authority is responsible for which matters. The contrast between the situation in 2022 and today could hardly be greater. In 2022, a strong civil mobilisation in support of Ukrainians led to swift and decisive policy responses. Today, however, this momentum appears to have diminished. Municipalities are best placed to provide such clarity; however, in the absence of a clear national plan, they are forced to continue improvising on a case-by-case basis.

A local, **community-based approach** is needed. However, this remains impossible without evidence-based data. This is a concern shared by all panellists: the **lack of reliable data and forecasts**. Will Belgium be capable of managing such a large group of people should protection suddenly cease? In comparison with the Dutch proposal for an exit strategy (see previous panel), this constitutes a particularly serious concern in the light of the potential cessation of TP next year. Under the current circumstances, organisations would largely be left to manage the situation on their own.

In the absence of decisive government action, **civil society** could play an important role at both the national and European level. Without concrete proposals from civil society, there is a risk that solidarity will gradually diminish. In addition, NGOs could strengthen cross-border cooperation and act as a bridge between Member States – for example, by inviting the program director

responsible for the Dutch exit strategy to share expertise in Belgium. At the national level, NGOs remain among the main actors in the social integration of migrants. While policymakers aim to prevent people from becoming undocumented, they often remain disconnected from the realities on the ground. Civil society therefore plays a crucial **bridging role** between the political level and those directly affected.

Questions & concerns raised during the Q& A session

- Once TP ends, much of the support necessary for integration and access to employment may disappear. From a reintegration perspective, placing people in precarious situations constitutes the least favorable starting point. There are no guarantees yet for support for vulnerable groups after a (sudden) ending of TP.
- Social benefits vary across Member States. Under TP, these benefits are relatively similar, however, **governments are clearly scaling back this support**. In this context, the question of a future residence status becomes particularly important. Poland was cited as an example of good practice. It introduced an “omnibus-permit” for all individuals who had received TP before a specified date, thereby providing legal clarity. However, no social benefits were attached to this permit, which remains highly problematic. In the absence of a European-level proposal outlining what an appropriate future permit should entail, it will likely fall to national policymakers to design such permits, potentially excluding access to social support.

Closing remarks

By Julie Lejeune (Director ECRE)

In her closing remarks, Julie Lejeune gave an overview of the messages given throughout the morning and shared ECRE’s proposals and concerns. For reference, see:

- **TRANSITIONING TO WHAT? Legal statuses available after temporary protection for people displaced from Ukraine - Working papers**¹
- **Policy Brief No. 2 | Forecasting refugee return to Ukraine amid ongoing war and uncertainty**²

¹ European Council on Refugees and Exiles, in cooperation with the Brussels school of governance, February 2026, available in English [here](#).

² UNHCR, 2 February 2026, available in English [here](#).

Key takeaways

- ➔ There is a need for a proactive, rather than reactive national approach to transition measures. A passive strategy that leaves people in the dark is counterproductive and benefits neither the displaced persons themselves nor Belgian society. An outwards look to other member states, including the Netherlands, show that other member states have taken steps towards transition, contrasting heavily with the absolute lack of measures in Belgium.
- ➔ Information on alternative residence permits should be provided in a clear and timely manner to prevent the overburdening of administrations, panick-reactions & fragmentation of information and the spreading of misinformation. A further delay may negatively impact possibilities to transfer to another status or may create gaps in the period of legal stay.
- ➔ Data-driven knowledge with a clear view on the different types of persons under TP and their intentions, can help in the creation of effective policy measures.
- ➔ Specific measures should be provided for vulnerable groups, focussed on human dignity rather than unrealistic expectations of self-reliance.
- ➔ When assessing the possibility to return, we must consider not only the security situation, but also whether people can return in a sustainable manner (considering housing, access to healthcare, their specific vulnerabilities, etc.).
- ➔ A realistic transition period for voluntary return will have to be provided to prevent risk of irregular stay and a sudden “switch-off”.
- ➔ Civil society can play an important role as a bridge between the political level and those affected.