

Ukrainians' best path to US runs through Mexico

by [Jeff Brumley](#) in the [May 18, 2022](#) issue



Ukrainian refugees were offered meals, clothes, and shelter in Kraków, Poland, on March 20. (Photo by Silar/Creative Commons)

A small but determined group of Ukrainian asylum seekers has discovered that the quickest route to safety in the United States currently runs through Mexico, immigrant rights advocates say.

A diplomatic arrangement predating Russia's invasion of Ukraine enables Mexico to fast-track Ukrainian passport holders into the country and to the American border, where the majority are gaining entry into the US within three to four days, said Danilo Zak, policy and advocacy manager for the National Immigration Forum.

Ukrainians using that route are being granted humanitarian parole in the US, which exempts them from deportation for a year and allows them to seek authorization to

find employment, he explained.

It's a highly attractive option for Ukrainians who have family or other connections in the US and who can afford the airfare from Europe and hotel or other accommodations in Mexico while their cases are processed. So far, nearly 10,000 Ukrainians have appeared at America's southern border. "They fly into Mexico City, take a bus to Tijuana, and apply for asylum at the border," Zak explained.

The Biden administration pledged in March to admit 100,000 Ukrainian refugees but did so without announcing a timeline or process for their entrance into the US. Traditional avenues of seeking refuge, including obtaining American tourist visas or seeking asylum directly from Europe, can take up to a decade to complete, Zak said.

"If I were recommending a path to Ukrainians right now, it would probably be that one [through Mexico] because the majority of them are getting in and all these other pathways are so backlogged and sluggish," he added.

The 9,600-plus Ukrainians processed at the border since February represent a drop in the bucket of people displaced since just a few weeks before Russia's February 24 invasion. According to the United Nations, more than 4.7 million Ukrainians have escaped the country in that time, mostly to neighboring countries including Poland, Romania, and Hungary. Others have made it to longer-term safety in more distant European countries.

But it has been slow going for those seeking asylum in the US through official programs, with only 12 being allowed in during March, Zak said. "So, it makes sense to come through Mexico. One way to potentially address [the slow official process] is to create some expedited refugee pathway or a special parole program to fly them in."

CNN reported in April that the White House plans a new parole program for Ukrainians focused on family reunification, a process similar to that used for Afghan refugees. But scheduling uncertainties around the proposal make the path through Mexico an even more attractive approach. Also unclear is if those being admitted from Mexico will count toward the 100,000 the administration has pledged to help.

What is clear is that Ukrainians are having a much smoother and more predictable experience at the southern border than many immigrants from Latin America, Haiti, and the Middle East. Zak noted that Europeans have yet to be deported under Title

42, the soon-to-end Trump-era health code policy used to expel hundreds of thousands of asylum-seeking migrants from other countries.

The parole status being granted to Ukrainians also sets them apart from many other asylum seekers, Zak said. “Letting them in through ports of entry others can’t use and granting them a year without concern for deportation certainly does raise some concerns about disparate treatment.”

The Ukraine-to-Mexico asylum route exposes the need for meaningful immigration reform, Migration Policy Institute analyst Julia Gelatt said in a CBS News report.

“The fact that Ukrainians are traveling to Mexico and trying their luck at the US-Mexico border as the fastest option just shows how slow and clogged up our immigration system is,” she said. “We don’t really have a rapid response part of our immigration system that can create pathways for people in an emergency situation.”—Baptist News Global