We need a new airlift immediately

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Europe has not yet understood that Ukrainian refugees are part of Putin's plan of attack. What an answer to the millions of refugees could look like.

Knowing the numbers is one thing. Understanding their importance is something else entirely. Many in Europe still find it difficult to understand their significance: what it means to experience the big refugee catastrophe in Europe since the end of the Second World War. And how to respond accordingly. Unfortunately, we don't have much time to get used to the new reality. We must, immediately, act and in think in proportion to the scale of the task.

Since the beginning of Vladimir Putin's attack on Ukraine on 24 February, around 150,000 people – mainly women and children – have fled from Ukraine to the European Union and Moldova every day. That's 1 million people a week. During the equally historic refugee movement in 2015, one million people crossed the Aegean from Turkey in 12 months.

If things continue as they are going, another 2 million Ukrainians will flee to the EU by the end of March. The practical question is: how can the rest of Europe respond?

Poland, Moldova, Hungary cannot be expected to take all these people in. In Warsaw (population before this crisis: 1.8 million) there are already 300,000 refugees, in Poland 1.7 million. Europe's poorest country, Moldova, is now hosting 100,000 more refugees than wealthy Austria took in during the whole 2015 crisis.

Two million people, mainly women and children, will be looking for accommodation and reception in the coming weeks. Where, and how, will they find them? Germans and Austrians only need to take a quick glance at a map of European rail connections to see that almost all these people will come to Berlin and Vienna. Unless, that is, Europe (and North America) manages to distribute them beforehand, at least in part, by other means.

This would look like something like this: 1 million people, before setting out for Austria or Germany, board planes (or buses) in the next two weeks and are taken directly to the rest of Europe: to Spain, Portugal, Ireland, or Sweden, but also to the UK, perhaps even Canada.

Is that realistic? If Spain and Portugal together were to agree to take in 160,000 by the end of March, and France and the UK each did the same then yes, it is possible. But this would mean: 1,500 flights with 300 people on board by the end of March to those four countries alone. In In Sweden, the government has already understood the seriousness of the situation and is talking about taking in up to 200,000 people. The rest of Europe is yet to fully open its eyes.

Even if the immediate, Europe-wide refugee policy mobilization were to succeed, Germany and Austria would have to prepare themselves to take in more than a million people between them. But they wouldn’t be alone.
The logistics of such an airlift for refugees from Ukraine would be an enormous, but not insurmountable, challenge. It doesn't matter whether they end up being Lufthansa or Easyjet planes. In each country, a similar mobilization to that seen in Poland and Germany would be required, with appeals to civil society and cities to take people in, supplemented by temporary accommodation in empty halls, hotels, state reception centers. To work, Ukrainian women would have to see and trust that it would be in their interest to fly to Lisbon and Dublin directly. This requires a level of collective organization the like of which has not been seen in Europe for decades.

Thankfully, the legal basis for this already exists. With the entry into force of the EU Temporary Protection Directive, all those who flee to us have the right to be admitted anywhere in the EU. This makes things much simpler and is a big departure from previous refugee policy, where governments have prohibited cities from taking in refugees on their own initiative. If all major cities in the EU announced today that they each want to take in more than two percent of their population, they could begin immediately. All that would be need is to bring the people directly to them.

The biggest challenge is not legal, or even logistical, it is political. Which institution could, within days, coordinate this historic effort across all those whose help would be needed for for a successful Refugee Airlift 2022? Who will phone the Spanish Prime Minister and explain that it will not be enough to take in 20,000 people in the next few months, but that Spain needs to evacuate 120,000 in a fortnight? Who will convince the government in London, where the EU’s Temporary Protection Directive does not apply, to join in anyway and immediately? Who will communicate quickly in the many languages of Europe what this is ultimately all about: a humanitarian endeavor that would not only help millions of people but at the same time thwart Putin’s cynical political calculations at the dawn of this new, not so cold war? For not everyone has clearly understood: the Russian President hopes that the millions of Ukrainians fleeing his bombs will soon destabilize European societies and splinter its unity.

That is why a small, flexible and, above all, political structure, preferably appointed by the EU and the G7, is needed immediately, headed by able, well-connected communicators - former heads of government, or ministers keen to help. France’s Emmanuel Macron and Chancellor Olaf Scholz, who fortunately currently chair the EU and G7, should appoint this team this week, perhaps based in Berlin, the epicenter of this crisis. Wanted: a mixture of Lucius Clay, the American general of the Berlin Airlift, and Ernst Reuter, the then west Berlin mayor, both protagonists of the first major political and humanitarian test in the last Cold War.

Such a coordination team does not need formal power, as it should not compete with existing institutions, from the European Commission to international organisations, but cooperate with them. This is only possible through persuasion and focus on a common task. Success requires three things:

1. A public list on which all major commitments to the reception of refugees by cities, countries and regions are recorded every day for all over the world: a balance sheet of solidarity.
2. Direct access to governments and large public and private transport companies to (roughly) coordinate the commitments so that gaps are filled.
3. A team of filmmakers and communication experts to document, share and so reinforce this mobilisation across Europe in real time. Because the most important ingredient for success is the empathy of millions. Empathy thrives on attention and gripping, emotional stories told in a way that encourages and inspires others.
This was achieved in 1948, when in a unique operation, beleaguered West Berliners were supplied by 170,000 flights at the cost of dozens of Allied pilots’ lives. It was a powerful political response that changed Europe's policy to this day. It gave rise soon after to the institutions of today's West: NATO, the Council of Europe, European integration. Stalin's blackmail failed, and the Cold War began as a battle of values.

Today, Putin's cynical goal of blackmailing the EU through brutal warfare, as in Syria and Chechnya, must also fail. Putin's calculation is as ruthless as it is transparent: by expelling civilians in Ukraine, he hopes not just to demoralize Ukrainians and force them to surrender but also to make the EU give up and betray Ukraine.

An Airlift 2022, a Macron-Scholz plan to implement the most generous reception policy of refugees worldwide in decades, would be the perfect response. It's about helping people, bolstering the authority West as a community of values, and responding to inhuman cynicism with humanity. And doing so immediately. It is about helping people to restore the West as a community of values and to respond to inhuman cynicism with humanity. And doing so immediately.