

Ireland: Mary Lou McDonald: Ukrainian refugees not working in 'critical' jobs should not automatically be allowed to stay

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Ukrainian refugees who are not working in 'critical' jobs should not automatically be allowed to remain in Ireland beyond March 2025, Sinn Féin leader Mary Lou McDonald has said.

An EU-wide Temporary Protection Order for Ukrainians expires in 16 months, at which point Ms McDonald believes 'you have to differentiate between who wishes to go home and those who wish to stay'.

In a hardening of party policy, the Sinn Féin leader said it was a 'mistake' to afford special status to [Ukrainians](#). She said that those without key jobs should be made to apply for asylum – and called for deportations to be expedited.

In a wide-ranging interview with the Irish Daily Mail, [Ms McDonald](#) accused the Government of pitting refugees against people who are already living here for scarce resources in health and housing.

Asked if the Government should introduce a bespoke arrangement to allow Ukrainians to remain in Ireland when the EU's protection order expires in March 2025, she said: 'The other option is where they're fulfilling critical skills and where they're carrying out that necessary functions in the economy.'

She continued: 'I think there are ways that they can be facilitated with work permits and work visas. If they're not, well, then you have to differentiate between who wish to go home and those who wish to stay.'

'If they're not catered for in that way, well then they go into the standard [international protection] system.'

More than 100,000 [Ukrainian refugees](#) have arrived in Ireland since the Russian invasion. Ms McDonald said that a shortage of housing is the primary issue that has been raised with her.

She said: 'I'm very struck by the fact that lots of people that I talked to, who are good people, reasonable people, who want to do the right thing and want their Government to do the right thing, are very concerned about housing, they're very concerned.'

'They say, well, I'm on a housing list, or my daughter or my grandchild can't get accommodated.'

So how is this going to work, when more people are coming to the country? There's a real sense that

the Government doesn't have a plan. And I think that has caused angst and concern for some people.'

The [Department of Integration](#) has not used social or affordable housing to accommodate Ukrainian refugees, who are instead housed in hotels or pledged accommodation from the public.

Nor has social or affordable housing been used for international protection applicants, who are accommodated in temporary settings.

Around 75,000 Ukrainians are in State-provided accommodation, while the remaining 25,000 have sourced housing either through the private sector or with family who were already living here.

Asked if she believed the Government had created a battle for resources, Ms McDonald replied: 'I think so.'

The Sinn Féin leader said there 'has been a real problem' with access to medical care and, in some cases, school places as a result of immigration levels.

Ukrainian refugees have an entitlement to medical cards as part of their EU-wide special status.

But in a Dáil debate on the Government's response to the Ukraine crisis in March 2022, Ms McDonald stated her belief that the State should extend the same support to 'all refugees and to everyone seeking international protection in our country'.

In the same debate, several of her party's TDs welcomed the special status afforded to Ukrainian refugees. The Government has repeatedly defended the decision to grant special status to Ukrainians, given their geographical location.

Last week, the Cabinet agreed to cut welfare entitlements to new arrivals from Ukraine from €220, the same amount afforded to jobseekers, to €38.80, the amount provided to international protection applicants.

It also agreed to limit State-provided accommodation for Ukrainians to 90 days.

The move is aimed at reducing Ireland's attractiveness as a destination for Ukrainian refugees and to stem the numbers coming here.

Ms Mc Donald criticised Integration Minister Roderic O'Gorman for what she described as 'the absence of proper conversations with communities' in advance of asylum seekers moving into their locality.

'Nobody's looking for a veto [on international protection accommodation in their area], but I think communities appreciate and deserve a conversation when new people are coming to the community, around the story of the people coming, the families coming, the individuals coming, but also assurances around the resources that people need,' she said.

In relation to those seeking asylum here, Ms McDonald said there is a 'rules-based system' and that this needs to be 'efficient', and not have people 'left waiting... because nobody wins in those circumstances'.

Asked if this meant she would like to see deportations expedited, she said 'yes'. 'When an adjudication is made, well then it has to be fulfilled... Where somebody doesn't qualify, well then the

rules have to kick in.

And yes, they have to leave the State,' she said.

A Department of Justice discussion paper in 2022 said most Irish deportation orders were never carried out.

Ms McDonald rejected assertions that her party's voter base has a greater anti-immigration outlook than others.

She said: 'I would not accept, nor do I think it should be said, that people... who vote for Sinn Féin are somehow hostile to any group of vulnerable people.'

Craig Hughes

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