

Social impact of migration: Addressing the challenges of receiving and integrating Ukrainian refugees

Introduction

This report focuses on the challenges that the EU Member States and Norway face when receiving and integrating refugees who fled Ukraine after Russia's invasion in February 2022. It investigates labour market integration by exploring the barriers to it and examines access to and experiences with public services that are crucial for societal inclusion. The main aim of this report is to explore how different areas of integration are interconnected: housing arrangements, health status (including mental health), and access to childcare, education and social assistance can all have strong impacts on employment prospects and societal integration, and in turn having a job can lead to greater social inclusion. This report considers not only the support measures in place to encourage labour market integration but also how the Member States and Norway facilitate access to key public services.

The report uses information collected by Eurofound from the Member States and Norway and covers developments up to mid-2023.

Policy context

In the wake of the mass inflow of refugees from Ukraine, the EU activated its Temporary Protection Directive, granting immediate temporary protection to Ukrainian displaced people; 4.2 million were under temporary protection in the EU in September 2023. This inflow is different in many respects from that of the asylum seekers who arrived in the EU in 2015. For example, it is mainly women and children who have arrived; most of the adults have high levels of education; the refugees speak mainly Ukrainian or Russian, which are similar to several host country languages; and a large Ukrainian diaspora already lives in Europe. Nevertheless, the refugees' arrival posed new challenges, especially in countries with less experience of receiving refugees.

With the Temporary Protection Directive, the EU provides a harmonised legal framework helping to ensure access to employment and key public services. The application of the directive has been extended for another year, to March 2025. To facilitate the implementation of the directive, the EU plays an active role in coordination, providing recommendations, guidelines on certain areas, opportunities to exchange good practices and financial support. With these tools, the EU helps in various areas covered by this report. The Member States have also individually made substantial efforts; by mid-2023, they had made use of EU funding of €17 billion. In addition, to reduce the uncertainty caused by the war and to improve its prospects, Ukraine has been granted EU candidate status.

Key findings

- Ukrainian refugees' integration into the labour market seems generally to have been successful, as their employment rate is high, especially compared with other refugee groups. The rate ranges from more than 10% to well above 40% in some countries (even reaching 50% or higher). This rate of employment seems likely to continue to increase.
- As in the case of other refugee groups, however, several barriers impede labour market integration (the language barrier, lack of information, lack of a social network). Lack of availability of accessible childcare, reflected in low enrolment rates (ranging between 42% and 71%), is another important obstacle, especially considering the predominance of women with children among Ukrainian refugees.
- Many innovative measures have been introduced to remedy these problems (e.g. lifting some restrictions that limit access to childcare; easing strict language requirements in certain occupations; simplifying and speeding up processes for the recognition of qualifications; tailor-made language courses).

- Labour shortages seem to be an important driver for employers to recruit Ukrainian refugees; initiatives by employer organisations and individual employers/companies help engage refugees. Public employment services also play an active role in reaching out to employers to provide jobs for refugees.
- While many are working, most Ukrainians have so far been unable to find stable employment: temporary or occasional jobs still prevail, and Ukrainian refugees are overqualified for most of these jobs. The income earned by many refugees is therefore unstable, leading to reliance on social assistance.
- Mainstream provision of benefits and services has not necessarily been adjusted to refugees' special needs; for example, readiness to accept a job as an eligibility condition for benefits may not be appropriate where refugees are not adequately prepared for labour market access. In addition, due to a lack of tailored measures, displaced people may lose entitlements to things that they still need even after getting a job (owing to an unstable income or housing situation).
- The Ukrainian refugee population has outstanding needs across the host Member States and Norway; these include integration into local communities (e.g. through children's extracurricular activities) and access to vital services (e.g. transport). These needs are met only to a certain extent by public services, and non-governmental organisations are responding actively to them. This, however, may not guarantee sufficient coverage and continuity.
- In most Member States, public services are experiencing long-term challenges, resulting in unstable housing arrangements (due partly to pre-existing housing problems), unavailability of childcare facilities, a lack of capacity in schools and difficulties in accessing healthcare.

Policy pointers

- The unprecedented large inflow of Ukrainian refugees amplified countries' pre-existing problems with their public services. Many initiatives are planned to address these challenges, but they may not help Ukrainian refugees, who need specific and targeted support. Long-term and affordable housing solutions are required to provide stability, ensure continuity in the education of children and young people, facilitate refugees' integration into local school systems and local communities, and improve prospects for more stable employment among adults.
- More systematic efforts are needed to coordinate general social provision and adapt support measures in response to the prevalent and emerging needs of Ukrainian refugees. There is scope for improved coordination across public services. Some Member States have begun establishing dedicated posts or agencies for this purpose, but so far these are limited in scope and capacity.
- Current initiatives are often short-term and scattered due to the unstable funding of the non-governmental organisations that launched them. International organisations have helped, especially in countries that have little experience of (and funding for) receiving refugees. The question is, however, how sustainable this is and to what extent governments (and local authorities) can continue this work and integrate it into their systems. In terms of funding, some replanning of EU funds, with careful consideration of the efficiency and effectiveness with which they are spent, may be needed.
- In assessing the appropriateness of general social protection measures for the purpose of effectively integrating the Ukrainian refugee population, their adequacy and links to housing measures must be considered so that the issue of unstable income is addressed (e.g. through minimum income schemes providing access to appropriate public services). The consistency and adequacy of income support should be monitored to identify any need to adjust and update support measures when a refugee's situation changes (for instance, because they are no longer entitled to certain types of support once they obtain employment).

Further information

The report *Social impact of migration: Addressing the challenges of receiving and integrating Ukrainian refugees* is available at <https://eurofound.link/ef23030>

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