

Ukrainians in Finland: Refugee reception, family well-being, and work life integration

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Due to the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Finland received a record number of refugees. Even so, Finland has been relatively well equipped in providing the necessary services and support for the refugees. However, as the situation in Ukraine remains precarious, many are not able to return. Therefore, long-term integration requires increased attention.

This article is based on a study conducted by E2 Research.¹ The findings are based on the analysis of 26 semi-structured interviews conducted in 2022 with Ukrainians living in Finland and 16 interviews with Finnish professionals working in reception of Ukrainian refugees. The interviewees include Ukrainians receiving temporary protection and Ukrainians who have arrived in Finland prior to the war. We focus on the interviewees' personal experiences and viewpoints as regards the following issues: (1) The functioning of reception services; (2) needs of refugee families, and (3) integration into labour markets. We conclude by highlighting necessities for long term integration.

Generally, in the 2000s, a few thousand people have applied for asylum in Finland every year, with the exception of 2015, when more than 32,000 people, mostly Iraqis, applied for asylum in Finland. Nevertheless, between February 2022 and April 2023, more than 50,000 Ukrainians arrived in Finland (amounting to roughly one percent of the country's population) and received temporary protection in accordance with the EU Council Directive (2001/55/EC). For many, Finland was a familiar country because many Ukrainians had previously worked in the country as seasonal workers. Most Ukrainians were accommodated in reception centers. However, compared to previous years, a larger share was housed in private accommodations. Finland has extensive welfare services, and asylum seekers are entitled to, among other things, reception allowance and essential social and health services.

Reception Services

Many volunteers and the third sector organizations participated in the reception of Ukrainians in Finland. The reception centers maintained by the state, and partly by civil society, have taken care of social and health services and language teaching among others. During the first months of the war, the reception services were congested, and their capacity had to be rapidly increased. According to the interviewed professionals, spring 2022 was a particularly busy time in the services. However, the situation has improved during the year, and at the time of writing, in spring 2023, the services operated relatively well.

In Finland, asylum seekers and persons who have applied for or been granted temporary protection are entitled to a reception allowance. The interviewed Ukrainian refugees have experienced that the allowance enables securing basic necessities. As one of them describes: "In

my opinion, reception allowance is enough. I mean that the situation in Ukraine is very difficult and people have limited income, so it is a privilege to have some kind of allowance.”

The interviewed Ukrainian refugees are relatively satisfied with the reception services in Finland. Despite that, there are gaps in the service system. According to the interviewed professionals, Ukrainian refugees’ diversity of sexuality and gender is not necessarily recognized in reception services. Reception center personnel have varying knowledge and skills to encounter sexual and gender minorities. Currently, minority refugees have fears concerning both other refugees’ and employees’ attitudes towards them. This points to the need to educate reception center personnel further about sexual and gender diversity.

Furthermore, some of the Ukrainian refugees have cumulated needs which challenge the service system in Finland. Refugees in a vulnerable position, such as the sick, elderly and disabled, have considerable service needs. Scarcity of resources in health and social care makes it especially difficult to respond to them. As one professional states: “Currently in Finland, the situation in the care of the elderly is poor, and there are no places for anyone.”

On the other hand, service needs of Ukrainian refugees do not always reach the authorities. The interviewed professionals assess that part of the Ukrainians do not get adequate help. Lack of a common language, Ukrainians’ low trust in authorities and Ukrainians’ mobility from one locality to another complicates access to assistance. The services are not always successful in reaching Ukrainian refugees who reside in private accommodation. Furthermore, not all Ukrainians have sufficient knowledge about the services intended for them.

One year after submitting the application for temporary protection, i.e., from March 2023 onwards, Ukrainians have had the opportunity to apply to transfer from the reception centers to municipalities in different parts of Finland. After transitioning to municipalities, Ukrainians would have the same rights and obligations as permanent residents in Finland – for example, children’s compulsory schooling and rights to local employment, social and health services.

Family Well-Being

In addition to the operations and actions of official reception services, Ukrainian refugees have felt supported by the Finnish people. One interviewee concluded: “Everybody in town greeted us and asked us about the situation and what they could offer to Ukrainians. It was heartwarming.” This has not always been the case with other immigrant or refugee groups in Finland. It can be assumed that this support carries into family well-being and overall experience of Finland, and it has been a crucial factor, considering that most families arrived in Finland without fathers, who stayed to fight the invaders.

Additionally, there are unaccompanied Ukrainian minors who entered the country without parents or a guardian and are staying with relatives. These situations connote the concept of vulnerability as we know that children in these conditions, although resilient, are in precarious situations and are, according to professionals, missing their parents who have stayed in Ukraine. On the other hand, the professionals stated that some youth may have felt their treatment as paternalistic, based on perceived cultural differences as to when someone is considered an adult. Furthermore, the interviewed reception professionals mentioned the worry they felt for the

parents and guardians due to the lack of familial safety nets for families, the feeling amplified by substance abuse problems some of the professionals had witnessed.

Unsurprisingly, families with children are in a better place when children have access to proper educational opportunities. Similarly, extracurricular activities, such as different types of hobbies, whether organized by municipalities or organizations, or as simple self-organized recreation, offer solace during the time of displacement for children as well as adults (although many adults do not have time for hobbies due to care duties). Some professionals suggested that newly established friendships, both at school and in hobbies, have eased the transition and overall situation of children and advanced their adjustment into the new society.

The same sentiment was also carried by many Ukrainians. As one parent mentioned: “My son started school immediately, so he is busy with studies and his new friends. I think this was a great help [in adjustment].” Additionally, families with children in Finnish schools may potentially increase the degree of attachment to local communities or Finland in general. The same dynamic applies to language. Our study shows that Ukrainian children that go to Finnish schools are learning the local language (Finnish or Swedish depending on the location) faster than the adults, increasing the chances of children’s integration.

Coping Through Employment

As a refugee, employment is not usually easy to find. Regardless of this general dynamic, many Ukrainians have been able to join the labor force and get jobs in Finland. This is due to several factors. Importantly, the EU Temporary Protection Directive, triggered now for the first time, allowed people to join the labor market without delay. With any previous incoming refugee groups or population, the temporary protection status has not been available. Secondly, through our research, we found that willingness to work, both as a coping mechanism and to demonstrate independence, was essential, as emphasized by one Ukrainian interviewee: “I miss my family so much, but my work keeps me busy and not think about everything.” As with going to school, finding employment may also be beneficial for the purpose of integration into Finnish society.

Regardless of several successes, there are barriers to finding employment. The Finnish labor market often requires local language skills, networks (social capital), and a high level of competence. In our research, additionally, recognition of foreign qualifications was a hindrance especially to refugees with higher education in finding work corresponding to their education. As one reception service professional explained: “Language is probably the biggest obstacle. Then the next is whether you are allowed to work in the fields of education or healthcare...because in Finland those criteria are very strict.”

Although we found that language, in some cases, might not be an issue to the performed job – it seems that unwillingness of some employers to hire non-Finnish speakers, probably due to a mistrust towards non-Finnish job seekers (of which there is evidence from earlier studies), is a bigger hinderance. Additionally, there are indications of labour exploitation in different industries, which have been highlighted by trade unions and the media.

Additionally, what makes this situation increasingly unique as compared to other refugee populations, is that Ukrainians have been a part of the Finnish agricultural system since approximately the 2010s, when they started finding jobs as seasonal workers. Out of the 16,500 seasonal work permits in 2021, more than 15,000 were granted for Ukrainians. Against this backdrop, when the invasion began, many farmers in Finland and workers in Ukraine were in

contact with each other out of worry for safety. These frequent communications led to previous seasonal workers (with gendered demography changes due to the war), their families (including children), and others escaping the country and making their way to Finnish farms before governmental responses were in place. Often, they were housed and the ones who were able, employed by the farms if seasonal work was available.

Some of those who arrived already had valid seasonal work permits and did not seek temporary protection status although it would have allowed them to stay for longer and work in different places. It seems that at least a part of them were content with staying for the season and then returning home, using the earned funds for rebuilding efforts or to support the military. Either way, work was often seen as a coping mechanism to overcome stress and trauma. As one interviewee elaborated: “I have psychological trauma because of the things we saw during the Russian occupation. It is still hard to get over. People around me and the work without a doubt affect me positively, but I need time to heal.”

What the Future May Hold

Overall, Finland has succeeded well in servicing and accommodating the Ukrainian refugees. The Finnish welfare state services’ quality is on a high level in comparison with many other refugee-receiving countries. A well-functioning co-operation between the state and municipalities and third-sector organisations has been crucial in the reception of refugees.

Individual citizens have made important contributions by, for example, offering cost-free accommodation to Ukrainian refugees. The Ukrainian minority who has resided in Finland already prior to the war and Ukrainian voluntary organisations have functioned as an important source of support and information sharing in the Ukrainian language to the refugees.

The situation has been aided by a positive attitude towards refugees from Ukraine. Furthermore, the 2015 “refugee crisis” when over 32,000 refugees from Middle East applied for asylum in Finland has functioned as a lesson when it comes to the co-operation between the state and the third sector in receiving refugees. The temporary protection that refugees from Ukraine are entitled to, has saved the refugees and authorities resources, as the refugees do not have to prove that they are persecuted (as in the case for asylum seekers).

Due to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Ukrainians quickly became, one of the largest ethnic minorities in Finland. A large share of the Ukrainians will stay a long time, and even permanently in Finland. The wish to return to Ukraine is widespread among the refugees. However, due to the destruction caused by the Russian army in Ukraine, many refugees do not have homes to return to. As one of our interviewees put it: “Yes, I want to stay [in Finland] because I have a daughter. Due to the war, I see no future for her in Ukraine”. Many –if not most– of the refugees probably have traumas related to the war, requiring long-term attention, including personnel with Ukrainian language skills, from the Finnish social services.

Despite the capacity of the Finnish society to offer protection for the refugees, many challenges remain. The long-term challenges are related to those migrants in general face, such as learning new language skills, finding friends and meaningful social relations, and finding jobs –especially other than low-wage jobs. Some of the Ukrainians have already found work, however, barriers remain, as explained earlier. The lack of workforce in many sectors, and the welcoming attitude towards Ukrainians, however, facilitate employment.

Special attention needs to be put on protecting the working conditions of the Ukrainians to prevent exploitative practices in the labour market, of which there are some signs. More Ukrainian language skills are needed at all levels in the Finnish society. In addition, it is important that there are sufficient Finnish and Swedish language teaching resources available for the Ukrainians (Finland is officially a bilingual country). Finland must prepare for the influx of Ukrainian refugees to the responsibility of municipalities; social services, schools, among others need to be ready for the change. Some of the Ukrainians interviewed for this study underlined their wish to go on with their lives as soon as possible and not to be categorised as refugees, but as individuals who are full members of society, something the transfer to municipalities may accelerate.

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