

INITIAL FINDINGS:

Practices of Labour Market Integration of Ukrainians in (Upper) Austria

OVERVIEW:

Integrating refugees into European labour markets has long been a hotly debated topic in policy and practice. Due to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, a new group of individuals seeking refuge, primarily in European Union countries, is at the forefront of such discussions. At the same time, the unprecedented implementation of the temporary protection directive allows for immediate access to the labour market for these newcomers. In our project, we address the integration of Ukrainians into the labour market in Austria, with a focus on the Upper Austrian region. We analyse the practices implemented by support organisations, the challenges for integration of the newcomers compared to other refugees and how they overcome the various pressures put on them. We identify a pragmatic approach to integration that relies heavily on employment. At the same time, we see that support organisations rely on this approach due to political pressure that fosters the displaced individuals' self-reliance and 'usefulness'. This is correlated with the receiving country's political landscape, where refugee integration issues are frequently used for political gains.

RESEARCH APPROACH

In order to address the questions of the labour market integration of displaced persons from Ukraine, we opted for a qualitative approach via semi-structured expert interviews in a first step. We purposefully sampled experts who actively participate in the field of refugee integration. The interviewees are representatives from NGOs, governmental support organisations and civil society initiatives. A second step will be focusing on interviewing the displaced persons in the region.

FINDINGS

Our analysis shows that discussions regarding integration touch upon various topics, which are well-known barriers to refugee integration, such as housing, financial issues, language acquisition, recognition of qualifications, underemployment, mobility frictions and psychological issues due to trauma are present in their cases as well. Beyond that we found that some of these barriers are more amplified for those that came recently from Ukraine, including childcare and issues concerning the recognition of qualification as well as housing and financial issues. The fact that most displaced individuals are women affects their labour market integration as well as how they are viewed in society. While the policy side propagates the strong labour market focus of integration measures, support organisations grapple with various challenges affecting quick integration at work. Still, displaced individuals are experiencing a differentiated treatment compared to other refugees and enact their own agency much more vehemently than those who arrived seeking refuge in the period 2015/2016. Detailed findings are presented on the next page.

KEY FINDINGS:

- **LABOUR MARKET ACCESS IS HEAVILY FOSTERED**
 - **DISPLACEMENT FROM UKRAINE IS GENDERED**
 - **DISPLACED INDIVIDUALS ARE ENACTING THEIR AGENCY**
 - **HIGH EXPECTATIONS FOR SELF-RELIANCE AND USEFULNESS**
- “PRAGMATIC INTEGRATION” IS APPLIED**

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"LABOUR MARKET ACCESS IS HEAVILY FOSTERED."

- **Integration of Ukrainians is overwhelmingly focused on labour market integration**, and various actors are active in organising support for employment for Ukrainians. This is in sharp contrast to the integration efforts of earlier cohorts, where often the emphasis was put on civic integration. In general, Ukrainian citizens fleeing the war are granted immediate permission to live and work in the European Union under the Temporary Protection Directive, setting them apart from other refugees who are subject to more restrictive immigration policies.
- **Support organisations adapt to the situation that Ukrainian refugees have access to the labour market** and thus strongly support Ukrainians in finding jobs.
- The interview partners emphasised the **risk of underemployment**:
 - o Employers are very vocal in expressing the need to fill open positions – especially in the hospitality or care sector.
 - o Lack of German skills and challenges to recognise one's qualifications are risks for underemployment.
 - o The support set-up is geared towards quick labour market integration – resulting in two groups:
 - those with savings and higher education → focus on German courses and finding adequate jobs
 - those with hardly any savings and/or insufficient job education → find a job as fast as possible

"DISPLACEMENT FROM UKRAINE IS GENDERED."

- **The majority of refugees from Ukraine are women** – which is a significant difference from earlier cohorts of refugees. In many cases, based on existing stereotypes, those women are more welcome by the receiving society (e.g housing).
- There is a **lack of available full-day childcare facilities** in Upper Austria, which hinders women from entering the labour market – **reducing their "job readiness"**, especially concerning full-time jobs. This is particularly evident in the countryside and is worsened by the fact that there is a lack of family support (such as grandparents) that would take on family duties. Additionally, Ukrainian women are used to full-time childcare opportunities in their home country.
- Overall, the gendered dimension of displacement might seem to contribute to an 'easier' integration at first glance due to, i.e. acceptance by the public. **Still, the propagated quick labour market access is difficult for these women.**

"DISPLACED INDIVIDUALS ARE ENACTING THEIR AGENCY."

- Most interview partners noted that newcomers from Ukraine are **acting and positioning themselves 'differently'** compared to, i.e. asylum seekers that arrived in 2015/2016.
- In addition, the newcomers **are well organised**, and various networks and Ukrainian associations have been developed in the past few months in the region.
- It is unclear how the newcomers will deal with the **paradoxical situation** in the labour market.
 - o On the one hand: → there is pressure to be employed as soon as possible.
 - o On the other hand: → there is uncertainty about the longevity of their presence in Austria.
- Rather than going back, it was frequently mentioned that these refugees might bring their families to Austria in the long term so that further immigration might happen, after the war ended.

"HIGH EXPECTATIONS FOR SELF-RELIANCE AND USEFULNESS"

- Ukrainians face pressure from 3 sides: **Politics, Businesses**, as well as **Civil Society**.
 - o The treatment of Ukrainian newcomers is **characterised by pragmatism and tolerance from the political side**. Given the labour market shortage in Austria, the approach is that Ukrainians can fill certain labour market needs.
 - o The interviewees unanimously **describe companies' positive perception** towards employing Ukrainian refugees, especially given the existing labour shortage. Typical sectors include industrial companies as well as tourism and hospitality.
 - o In general, it was described that the Austrian civil society displayed a high level of supportiveness and cooperation, similar to 2015/16. **Private housing** was named the most vital civil society support, made available for Ukrainians.