Guri Tyldum

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Onward Migration and Non-Mobility Among Ukrainian Refugees in Europe

This policy brief addresses onward migration in Europe among Ukrainian refugees, and describes the mechanisms that make large groups of refugees remain in their initial country of protection, despite incentives for moving on to countries that offer better economic support and more rights.

Substantial differences in rights and support for refugees on temporary protection (TP).
European countries provide different levels of rights and support for refugees under temporary protection (TP). Our fieldwork sites were selected to shed light on how different welfare regimes shape strategies and aspirations for onward migration among refugees on TP:

- Germany and Norway, offer benefits similar to those offered refugees with formal refugee status, including access to social welfare, housing, healthcare, free language training, and integration programs.

- Sweden and the Netherlands give rights similar to asylum seekers; financial assistance below lowest rates of social assistance for residents, and no rights to language courses or integration programmes (but some courses are provided by NGOs.)

- Poland and Italy give rights similar to labour migrants; registered refugees get a one-time financial support upon arrival, but is expected to support themselves after a few months, leaving it up to civil society actors to assist those in need of housing, language training and other support.

Most of the Ukrainian refugees in Europe arrived in the months following the full-scale invasion.[1] At this point national governments had not yet decided what rights to offer refugees on TP, and the refugees in this first (but also largest) wave, chose their first country of protection without knowing what kind of rights they would be offered. For the ones who have arrived in later waves, this information appear to have shaped desitination countyr preferences for some, as countries that offer more extensive rights for refugees from Ukraine (including Norway and Germany that we have visited for our fieldworks) have had higher arrival numbers relative to population size than countries that are more restrictive on economic assistance and other rights.

The policy brief summarizes key findings from the article "Aspirations for Stability and Long-Term Solutions: Understanding Onward Migration and Non-Mobility Among Refugees from Ukraine in Europe", which is currently in the review for future publication.

The article draws on more than 90 qualitative interviews with Ukrainian refugees in 6 European countries: Germany, Netherlands, Poland, Sweden, Norway and Italy. Respondents have been recruited through networks, social media and different types of institutions, with an aim to maximise variation in socio-economic and educational background, age and marital status.

[1] According to Eurostat data, more than two third of decisions of temporary protection in Europe was made in the first 10 months after the full-scale invasion. It is however, unclear how many of these protection holders are still in Europe.

However, analysis of stock data, and qualitative sources indicate that once refugees have settled in one European country there appears to be little onward migration within Europe.

Some want to stay, others talk of return, but few consider onward migration

When asked about plans for onward migration, most of our respondents, across all six countries insisted that if they were to move again, it would be to go back to Ukraine. However, few saw return to Ukraine as likely in the near future. Some had made a definitive decision not to return, others express a desire to stay in Europe but were uncertain if they would be able to when the war ends. Others expressed aspirations to return at some point, but not until Ukraine was economically and politically stable, and most importantly – until they could be certain they would be safe from a future invasion from Russia. It was widely agreed that this could take some time. As they realize that they may stay in for some time – the choice of country of protection becomes more important. Still most remain in their first country of protection. There are however some groups that are more mobile than others:

- **The Young and Restless:** Some young individuals with prior international experience and no family responsibilities have used their refugee status to travel, rather than seeking stability. Some settle in one place after some time, as they realize that rapid return will be unlikely.

- **Labor Migrants:** Some ukrainians talk of themselves as labour migrants rather than refugees, and evaluate destinations based on short term employment opportunities rather than long term preferences for where to stay. Similar to other labour migrants in the Schengen area, this groups can be relatively mobile as they go where seasonal or short term labour opportunities are.

- **Those Seeking Long-Term Solutions:** Some refugees actively research European policies and move to countries offering better pathways for long-term residency, education, or career opportunities. However, this strategy is rare in our data – those who have, or plan to move on this basis appear to be a highly selected group with higher education, more international experience and more economic resources than other refugees.

When the refugees themselves talk about moving or staying, most point to other factors than access to economic support and rights as determinants for where they want to live. A crucial role is given to a desire for stability, reaping investment costs after initial attempts to integrate, and family considerations. Our analysis of qualitative interviews identifies three key mechanisms that limit onward migration in this refugee population.

Prioritizing stability over potential opportunities

When asked why they did not move on to a country that offer better opportunities and rights, many told us they could not go through the stress, insecurity and instability of changing country of residence one more time. The first weeks and months abroad often brought huge uncertainties, difficulties and feelings of powerlessness; our respondents talk about the first years after being forced to leave their homes as exhausting. After they decided to leave, many lost control of key aspects of their life, as either volunteers or host country institutions made decisions about where they should stay, what housing to stay in and – in Germany and Norway – what integration arrangements they and their family members could take part in. This lack of control is presented as a key reason for not wanting to go through the process of seeking protection again.

Some also point to the housing conditions in the initial phase of seeking protection as a reason for not starting the process of seeking protection afresh. They stayed in crowded dormitories with strangers, or in small low-quality rooms for families, frequent conflict between neighbours and a constant sense of insecurity, and do not want to expose themselves and their families to this again, unless

they have to. Some stayed in private homes in the first months. They talk about the discomfort of increasingly feeling that their host regretted taking them in but not having any other place to move to. This way the housing situation added to a feeling of powerlessness – of not being able to influence key decisions in their own life. When we met them, our respondents had often come a step away from the initial powerlessness that they had experienced in the first phase after arrival, and they did not want to take a step back. This appeared to be particularly important for families with children. Respondents with children often talked extensively about their concerns about their children in the initial period after leaving Ukraine. Some only started thinking actively about their own long term need and labour market prospects only after their children were settled and showing less signs of trauma and insecurity. At this point they realized it was too late to move to another country. The children were already integrated, and considering all they have gone through, they prioritize giving their children stability.

This decision to remain in first country of protection can also be understood as a fear of wasting previous investments in integration. The process of settling in and trying to integrate into a new country has often taken a lot of work. Some of the refugees have worked hard to find a place to live, a source of income, and trying to learn the language. Some have realised that if they had moved to another country in Europe, they could have received more assistance to find work, and maybe even free language training. However, if they were to move now, years of hard work would be wasted, and they would have to start from scratch. Among the refugees we have met, many do not have the stamina to it all over again.

Having the necessary resources to move on: money, self-confidence and psychological strength

Our respondents had often brought some savings with them when they left Ukraine, to cover expenses in the initial settling-in period. But in countries with little financial support, such as Italy, Sweden and the Netherlands, many had already spent their savings. Some had not yet found a job that enabled them to support themselves and regretted not going to another country, where they would get more support – not only economic support but also assistance to find a decent job. Several respondents told us they had barely enough money for food and were frequenting soup kitchens to make the small income they had last longer. Still they did not want to move to a country that offered better support - it felt like too large a risk to move to another country with no money. Some told us they couldn't even afford to cover the travel. Where they currently live, they have learned to live on limited resources - they know where the soup kitchens are and have found some form of accommodation that they have gotten used to – even if it is only very basic. They know that they would get both food and lodging if they were to go to some of the countries offering more support (they often mentioned Germany or Ireland), but they would not take the risk of going somewhere when they could not cover expenses for lodging and food for even a few days. Families with children and/or elderly relatives expressed a particularly strong risk aversion.

When they talk about their failure to learn the language and find a proper job, very few blame the system and the lack of access to assistance or language courses in their host country. A few respondents did argue that the reasons they had not learned the language was lack of proper language training and the need to work instead of attending language classes, but such complaints were largely presented by respondents with previous

language-learning experience and higher education. Most of our respondents blamed themselves for not learning the language. They all know Ukrainians who had been successful – who know the local language and has found good jobs even in countries with little support for refugees from Ukraine. They don't believe it would be easier in another country. And for some this feeling of failure – in combination with the stress and emotional turbulence of having lost their home – has led to exhaustion and other signs of depression, which further hinders them from moving on.

Country of destination is often chosen in a long-term perspective

Despite staying in a European country with limited rights and opportunities for refugees, many of our respondents in such countries were confident they had made the right choice when they compared themselves with friends and family in other European countries. They often expressed enthusiasm about their new country of residence – how friendly and relaxed the people are, the beauty of the scenery or the cityscapes, freedoms or rights. Some even expressed their satisfaction with aspects of these societies that they themselves were not able to enjoy – yet, such a as restaurants and cafes. Despite hardship, little governmental support and long working days, hardly any respondents said they regretted going to Italy. They picture themselves still living there in the future – and being able to enjoy the good life, like the locals do. The food, the climate, the beautiful cities – the friendliness of the people. Most were confident that they had made the best choice.

Conclusion

Many refugees from Ukraine choose to remain in their first safe country of protection, despite knowing that they would get more rights and opportunities if they move to another European country. This choice can appear puzzling at first glance. Understandings of refugees as cost-benefit maximising agents often shape policy discourses on refugee mobility in Europe. This is apparent for instance when the not to appear too attractive for refugees – is presented as an argument for cutting benefits.

We find that there are several mechanisms that contribute to make refugees prone to remain in the first country of protection, in spite of having much to gain economically from moving on to other destinations with more rights and opportunities. Some feel they have invested too much where they are and want to avoid the instability and powerlessness of seeking protection in a new country. Others lack the self-confidence, economic resources or mental fortitude needed to move on

The article we summarize in this policy brief demonstrates the importance of human and economic resources for refugees to move on. Even in a context of few legal restrictions, and where the refugees get legal residency and economic support on arrival – onward migration is first and foremost available to those with resources; language skills, good mental health, belief in their ability to succeed in a new place, and money to safeguard them in the initial phase. Secondly, it shows that perceived quality of life in the long run is more important than refugee rights in the first months after arrival, when these refugees choose country of protection.

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Guri Tyldum is a sociologist and research professor at Fafo, specializing in migration and refugee studies. Her work explores migration decision-making, refugee mobilities and integration, with a focus on evidence-based policy. She has also published on methodology development for hard-to-reach and elusive populations.