on digital spaces of migrants

Czech Republic

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MINTE

This report identifies successful tools for communication with migrants and existing communication gaps. It assesses migrants' digital competencies and commonly used methods of online communication and information provision. Further, it points to efficient ways of communicating with migrants. The report focuses on forced migrants from Ukraine who arrived in the Czech Republic after the war in Ukraine began on 24 February 2022. The analysis is based on data obtained from 22 semi-structured interviews conducted with Ukrainian migrants in the Czech Republic. In addition, the final recommendations take into account insights gained from Report 1, which examined and mapped the information sources and communication channels available to Ukrainian migrants in the Czech Republic.

KEY FINDINGS

01.

Most Ukrainian refugees are well educated, of working age, and have the digital competencies necessary to access various online information sources.

02.

IMost Ukrainian refugees use electronic devices (mainly smartphones) on a daily basis to obtain information about all aspects of life in the Czech Republic and about the situation in Ukraine, as well as about entertainment.

03.

The most commonly used social network among our interviewees is Telegram. The most common channels they use to communicate with friends and relatives in Ukraine are Telegram and Viber. Various Telegram and Facebook channels serve as information sources about life in the CR.

04.

Czech institutions provide information related to residence and life in the Czech Republic for Ukrainians through their web pages (See the Report on Digital Space I.), but Ukrainian respondents express limited trust in information provided by institutions via their web pages.

05.

The respondents primarily trust information obtained through social networks (Telegram, Facebook, and Viber channels/groups) which they have subsequently verified in relation to other people's personal experience (directly, or through social networks).

INTRODUCTION

Before 24 February 2022, Ukrainians already constituted the largest migrant group in the Czech Republic (some 200,000 Ukrainians were resident in the country in 2021). Since then, the country has granted Temporary Protection to over 483.000 Ukrainian refugees (as of 31 January 2023) and has received the highest number of Ukrainian migrants per capita. A more detailed description of the migrant population in the Czech Republic and migrants' legal status, with a focus on displaced Ukrainians, can be found in Report I.

METHODOLOGY

The interviews that form the basis of this report were conducted with 22 interviewees who arrived in the Czech Republic on or after 24 February 2022 and who had been living in the Czech Republic for at least 3 months at the time of the interview. Since the interviewees belong to a vulnerable group, approval was obtained from the ethics committee at the Faculty of Social Sciences, Charles University, prior to the interviews taking place. The sample was constructed with (a) snowball techniques and (b) advertising through social media (mainly Facebook groups). The interviews were conducted in Ukrainian by Ukrainian interviewers between December 2022 and January 2023. 12 respondents were living in Prague, three in Brno and the remaining seven respondents in smaller towns. The interviewees included 18 women and 4 men. Their ages ranged from 18 to 66 years, with an average age of 37. Five respondents were students, two were on parental leave, nine were employed and six were unemployed. A summary of the interviewees' demographic data is provided in Appendix 1 of this Report. The interview structure can be found in Appendix 2. All the interviews were thematically coded and analysed (Braun and Clarke 2006).

FINDINGS

Digital competencies of Ukrainian migrants

All the interviewees had access to the internet, a smartphone, a computer, and an internet connection in Ukraine. The respondents who fled weeks or months after the war broke out often mentioned that they had limited internet connections or lacked electricity due to the war. All the interviewees have access to a smartphone with an internet connection and internet access in the Czech Republic. Many also have a computer; tablets are used to a lesser extent. Respondents often mentioned Czech mobile phone service providers as a source of internet connectivity. Czech mobile operators gave Ukrainian refugees free prepaid sim cards valid for one month and subsequently offered them discounted tariffs with a substantial data allowance.

The interviewees vastly appreciated this provision. The use of Ukrainian mobile phone operators for internet access was very rare.

All respondents possessed the digital skills necessary for them to use electronic devices. Smartphones in particular have become a central part of their everyday lives. Respondents use their smartphones for entertainment, to find information, to monitor the news, and to communicate with others throughout the day (often at length). Naturally, they make greater use of computers for work and study.

All respondents were active on social media and their use of social networks was extensive. All respondents used multiple social media networks. Different social media networks were used to communicate with family (often in Ukraine), to communicate with Czechs, for entertainment (e.g. TikTok for the younger generation), to obtain information, and to search for jobs.

The overwhelming majority of respondents communicated on social media in Ukrainian (or Russian) only. Several respondents mentioned that they also had some knowledge of English and a few of them had a basic knowledge of Czech, but these languages were most often used in face-to-face communication.

Differences in digital competencies among Ukrainian migrant groups

The education level among forced migrants from Ukraine in the Czech Republic, and among the interviewees in our study, is high: most of them have an academic degree, a professional qualification, or are studying. Most Ukrainian migrants, like the interviewees in our study, are of working age (average age 37), thus the digital gap in the sample is not significant. The respondents' age influenced the type of social media they used (older migrants made greater use of Facebook, while younger migrants mentioned TikTok both as a source of entertainment and sometimes as a source of relevant information). Use of social networking sites and other sources of information was naturally closely linked to the respondents' life situations. A significant proportion of our respondents had also formed social ties with people from the Czech Republic after their arrival. This contact was highly valued, even when not maintained in the longer term:

There is an administrator here, I guess I think she is an administrator. She manages everything related to us and concerning the hotel, and she is ready to help, despite the fact that more than six months have passed, you can always turn to her, and she will take you where you need to go, give advice, or make a call for you. (CR_ R_11)

Considerable attention should be paid to the Ukrainian migrants' limited trust in the Czech institutions and the information they provide. Respondents occasionally mentioned information from official websites (for example, the Ministry of Interio´s website nasiukrajinci.cz), but they valued information shared in various informal communication channels significantly more. They only considered information reliable after someone had confirmed it based on personal experience:

I knew about it from several sources at once, but the most reliable for me was from the person who was there directly, from an acquaintance of mine. (CR_ R_14)

How do Ukrainian migrants access information?

This issue of trust affects how Ukrainians in the Czech Republic obtain information related to various aspects of their lives here. For Ukrainians who come with some knowledge of the Czech Republic, the labour market situation and low unemployment in the country seem to be the most important information. This information was mostly received from somebody who was already living in the Czech Republic. Links to other people with personal experience of living in the Czech Republic were highly valued by our respondents. These personal connections, if any, also played a role in their (at least initial) settlement in the country.

Soon after arrival, refugees were usually received at one of the Regional Centres for Help and Assistance to Ukraine (KACPU for short). The main task of these centres is to provide initial assistance: issuing visas, arranging temporary accommodation for those in need, processing health insurance documents, providing information on available support, and sometimes assisting with registration at the labour office. In these centres, Ukrainian refugees also often received Czech SIM cards, instructions for opening a bank account, etc. KACPU also provided respondents with contacts to various NGOs or volunteers. This contact was extremely valued and used in critical situations.

In Ostrava, yes, in Černá louka, KACPU center is the name, the center of assistance to Ukrainians. And many services were concentrated there, including firefighters, immigrant police, insurance companies. And the employment office, which provided consultations, and translators. (CR_ R_22)

Information regarding education (for children or students) was almost always obtained via social media. Respondents with children often mentioned that their children are obliged to attend primary school in the Czech Republic. Many respondents believed the widespread rumour that if they fail to send their children to school their residence permits will not be renewed or they will lose their entitlement to social benefits (whereas, in reality, they would only receive a formal warning).

IThe most pressing issue in relation to children was preschool childcare. In the Czech Republic, state preschool care is mostly provided from the age of 3 years and its availability varies. Private preschool care for younger children is usually very costly. Many Ukrainian women with small children looked for information about preschools on the internet, through friends, and by visiting individual preschools in person.

Most often, Ukrainians were concerned about jobs and job offers because their jobs were often insecure and short-term. Many social media publish a wide spectrum of job-related ads from individuals or firms. Those are not unique to Facebook but are also very common in Telegram or Viber. Mostly, these ads are placed by recruitment agencies; offers of services or home-produced goods are also common. They are very lightly moderated, if at all, and at the first glance may seem like spam channels. The vast majority of Ukrainian respondents used these social media channels to look for jobs.

It´s a lot of Facebook groups, like Jobs for Ukrainians. Jobs Brno (…) We are reading legal official job offers that are given here. We can´t find a job in the Czech Republic directly. We only have to find it through, it´s called agency here. (CR_ R_18)

Only a few respondents (usually those with higher qualifications) used LinkedIn social media network as a tool for finding a job.

Most respondents found accommodation through KACPU, NGOs, or personal contacts. If the accommodation was inadequate (e.g. a small hostel room for a whole family), they tried looking for accommodation via Facebook or searching advertisements on common real estate servers (typically bezrealitky.cz). However, they were rarely successful.

Only a minimum of respondents watched television; many of them did not have one. TV was occasionally mentioned as a means of learning Czech (e.g. watching cartoons with children). Respondents usually followed news about the situation in Ukraine via a wide variety of channels (often including Facebook and Telegram). Being a member of several such channels enabled them to rapidly keep abreast of important new information.

Communication with friends, employers, and schools

The respondents' most common tools for communicating with friends in Ukraine are Telegram and Viber, sometimes also Facebook to a lesser degree. A rather interesting finding is that although WhatsApp is known and used by the respondents, they use this primarily in the Czech Republic and when communicating with Czechs.

Only two respondents worked remotely for employers in Ukraine. This correlates with findings that only about 8% of economically active Ukrainians have continued to work with their Ukrainian employer (PAQ 2022). Some respondents mentioned that their children are continuing their Ukraine-based studies (sometimes in addition to attending Czech school, sometimes attending Ukrainian high school remotely). Current issues were unstable internet connections due to issues with electricity in Ukraine. Nevertheless, the possibility of maintaining a job in Ukraine created an important sense of belonging.

Local administration and NGOs

Municipalities were not among the respondents' primary sources of information and were rarely mentioned as a significant source of information. However, municipalities themselves have reported that Ukrainian migrants contact them with questions related mainly to schools, housing, documents, accommodation, and health care (Augur consulting 2022). KACPU (reception centres) play an important information role, especially during the settling- in period. NGOs also play a major role in information provision. Many respondents do not distinguish between NGOs, volunteers, and helpful officials. It remains the case, however, that personal contacts are most often used to verify information obtained on the internet.

RECOMMENDATIONS

01.
Several Ukrainians have had repeated contact with the labour authorities. The labour offices' potential as a source of useful information is not currently used efficiently and should be developed. For example, cooperation with counselling organizations or local Ukrainian associations should be considered.

02. Ukrainian migrants are interested in information, but their strategies for locating and verifying information differ from those common in the Czech Republic. More research on the functioning of Telegram, Viber, and Facebook could shed light on the function and role of moderators of groups and pages on these networks, the transmission of information, and the dynamics of confirming the truthfulness of the information.

03.
There is no information on digital knowledge among specific groups of refugees (e.g. the elderly) in the Czech Republic. Although the majority of Ukrainian refugees are educated and have smartphones and internet access, there is a need to find out how specific refugee groups obtain information and to eliminate any digital gap.

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ATTACHMENTS

Appendix 1. Table of interviewees with demographic information
Appendix 2. Interview structure in English and other languages used in the interviews
Appendix 3. Consent form in English used in the interviews

Appendix 1. Table of interviewees with demographic information

number of interviews	age - respondent	gender	occupation	living - area	data of the interview
1.	21	f	student	Praha	31.10.2022
2.	19	f	student	Praha	02.11.2022
3.	18	f	student	Praha	03.11.2022
4.	18	m	student	Praha	03.11.2022
5.	19	f	student	Praha	08.11.2022
6.	59	f	work	Praha	08.11.2022
7.	52	f	work	Praha	08.11.2022
8.	66	m	work	Praha	09.11.2022
9.	39	f	work	Praha	11.11.2022
10.	38	f	maternity leave	Lažánky	14.11.2022
11.	39	f	work	Děčín	17.11.2022
12.	35	f	work	Praha	18.11.2022
13.	26	f	maternity leave	Hradec Králové	19.11.2022
14.	37	f	unemployed	Mariánské Lázně	24.11.2022
15.	36	f	unemployed	Praha	22.11.2022
16.	38	f	work	Praha	24.11.2022
17.	32	f	unemployed	Brno	02.12.2022
18.	37	f	unemployed	Brno	02.12.2022
19.	47	f	unemployed	Rudná u Prahy	02.12.2022
20.	40	m	work	Prostějov	03.12.2022
21.	39	f	unemployed	Havířov	03.12.2022
22.	58	m	work	Havířov	04.12.2022

Table 1: Interviewees with demographic information

Appendix 2. Interview structure in English and other languages used in the interviews

Introductory information

- Destination place (country, city)
- Place of origin (county, city)
- Age
- Sex
- Citizenship
- Education level
- Family status (married? Or children?)
- Languages (ability to speak and read)

I.   Migration experience

1) When did you leave your country?
2) It must have been a difficult decision. Was there some specific impulse that made you leave?
3) How did you decide where to go when you left Ukraine? Why did you choose the Czech Republic?
4) How did you come here?
5) Did you travel alone?
6) Is your family here?

II. Life in the Czech Republic

7) What did you know about the conditions for Ukrainian refugees in the Czech Republic before you came here?
8) How did you gather this information?
9) I guess that you had to arrange several things after your arrival….how was it? Where did you look for information? How did you get the information?
10) Permit of stay (information, assistance)
11) Accommodation (information, assistance)
12) Did you have to register with the employment office?
13) What was your job in Ukraine? Did you work in Ukraine?
14) How (if) did you find work (study) in the CR? (How was it? Who helped you?)
15) Did you need a doctor? (If so, how was it, how did you know where to go…)
16) Did you open a bank account in the CR? How did you manage to choose a bank? How was it? (Were they helpful there?)
17) If applicable - did you look for a school or kindergarten for your children? How did you look? Was it easy? Did you find it? Do your children attend school in Ukraine online?
18) Is there some information you miss? Which?
19) Is something regarding your stay in the CR that is troubling you?
20) Do you know where to turn to get help (e.g. regarding accommodation, job, labour office, etc.)?
21) Do you receive any help while you live here, which you have not mentioned yet? (What kind of assistance? Who provides it? How? How did you learn about it?)

III Digital skills/ information transmission

22) Which languages do you speak? Read?
23) Do you have a computer? Laptop? Tablet? Smartphone with internet access?
24) Did you have a computer, laptop, or smartphone with the internet before you left Ukraine?
25) Do you watch TV? Listen to the radio? (which – Czech, Ukrainian channels or English channels?)
26) When you need information about life in the Czech Republic, where do you look for it? (And are there any fora you follow regularly?)
   - Mainly some friends (Czechs, Ukrainians? and Ukrainians living longer in the CR?)
   - chat-bot
   - FB group,
   - news v Telegram, …
   - useful websites (governmental, NGOs…)
   - NGOs
   - Other (which?)

27) Do you follow some …. (mentioned FB group, news in Telegram, etc.) regularly? If so, which? For which reasons?
28) If you could think about it, where (from what sources) is the information most useful to you?

29) How do you communicate with your family? Friends? Those in Ukraine and those who are here?

30) Do you use any social media? If yes, which ones? Could you explain what you use it (mainly) for *(WhatsApp, FB, Instagram, Telegram, Twitter, Vkontakte, Odnoklassniki, LinkedIn, and TikTok)*

IV Future

31) I know that it is difficult to make any plans, but do you have some plans to stay here, return or move to some other place/country?
32) Would you like to add something that was important for your life in the Czech Republic and what has not been said yet?

V Concluding open questions

Appendix 3. Consent form in English and other languages used in the interviews

Thank you for your willingness to participate in our research. We plan to interview several Ukrainian migrants to get a better view of their life in the Czech Republic, what works out well, whether are there any obstacles, and what should or could be changed. These interviews are part of our broader research within a project called MINTE.

Oral consent form

The research is anonymous. We will never mention your name or other identifying information in our research, apart from general information such as age, and city of origin, which is used for categorization purposes. We will make some quotes from the interview in the subsequent reports of the results of the research, such as the article, but all information that could lead to your identification will be changed.

Your participation in the research is voluntary and you can withdraw from participation at any stage of the study. The interview will be recorded but only for the subsequent transcription of the text. Do you agree with recording and with participation in the research?