Comparative summary report on digital skills and competencies with recommendations

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This report gives a general overview of digital skills of migrants and refugees, and digitalised services designed for migrants across EU countries. As case studies, this report specifically focuses on comparative results of a meta-analysis of digital skills and competences of Ukrainian war refugees who arrived in Poland, Czech Republic, and Israel after the war in Ukraine started. Information provided in this report is based on desk research about digital skills of migrants, challenges related to digitalisation and digitalised integration services across different EU countries. Concerning case countries (Poland, Czech Republic, and Israel), reports and academic papers relevant to migrants' digital skills published by governmental institutions and research centres were mapped. In addition, the websites of ministries, local authorities including municipalities, and NGOs were examined. Finally, recommendations were created based on desk research findings and main comparative findings of case country reports (Poland, Czech Republic, and Israel).

KEY FINDINGS

01.

The potential of digital services for integration has been proven to grow with the COVID-19 crisis across EU countries. However, there is a risk to increase inequalities if digitalisation is not utilised inclusively and made accessible to all.

02.

Due to inadequate infrastructure, linguistic barriers, insufficient electronic identification methods, or lack of digital skills to utilize these services, migrants frequently encounter difficulties in accessing digital courses and services across EU countries.

03.

Western, Northern, and Mediterranean countries, such as France, Portugal, Sweden, Denmark, and Malta, generally have a higher level of online services available for migrants compared to Eastern and Central European countries, such as Slovakia, Romania, Hungary, and Bulgaria. This trend existed before the COVID-19 pandemic and has not significantly changed as a result of it.

04.

Various initiatives have been implemented in different countries to provide information and assistance to Ukrainian war refugees, such as the creation of a governmental website in Ukrainian language in Poland, which can be accessed through all government websites, and the development of several migrant-focused informational websites in the Czech Republic after the outbreak of Russian aggression, offering comprehensive information about life in the country. In Israel, there is a wide range of information on the internet aimed at Ukrainian war refugees, but this abundance may pose a challenge for those who are unfamiliar with Israeli bureaucracy.

05.

The level of support and assistance provided to Ukrainian war refuges varies significantly across different countries and regions. In Israel, municipalities play a crucial role in offering information and services to Ukrainian war refuges through both online and in-person means. However, in the Czech Republic, the information provided to Ukrainian war refuges is limited in most regions, except for the Capital City of Prague and the South Moravian Region. Additionally, municipalities do not typically aim to provide information to Ukrainian war refuges.

06.

Access to digital skills and services for Ukrainian war refuges varies across different countries. Many highly educated and working-age Ukrainian war refuges in Israel possess digital skills and competencies, though the digital gap may be more pronounced among elderly migrants. In the Czech Republic, there are limited activities aimed at enhancing the digital competencies of Ukrainian war refuges, which are typically small in scale and project based. In Poland, some digital services are available only in Polish and can only be accessed by individuals with a Polish registration number, so they are available to Ukrainian war refuges.

INTRODUCTION

Paths of entrance and basic socio-demographic information on migrants

Immigration to the EU

The history of migration to Europe goes back to the post World-War II era when North-Western Europe was economically booming and faced labour shortages. During the 1960s and 1970s, Western Europe, especially Germany, the United Kingdom and France attracted millions of workers from North Africa, Turkey, and Southern Europe to fill in the vacancies in low-skilled jobs (Hnasen, 2004). This guest worker scheme was later adopted in Belgium, Austria, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Denmark, and Sweden. According to labour migration agreements between countries, guest workers were expected to return home after completing their duties, and therefore, governments offered limited rights and services to them (Boyle et al., 1988). Due to gains both in sending and receiving countries, international migration was generally viewed positively in this period (Van Mol and De Valk, 2016).

At the end of 1970s, there was a substantial increase in the number of foreign workers in North-Western European countries. The process of decolonisation coincided with the guest worker boom and led to significant migration flows from former colonies to Europe (Van Mol and De Valk, 2016). In the 1980s, several countries in Europe faced high levels of unemployment due to the oil crisis, which led to the adoption of restrictive immigration policies.

These restrictive migration policies resulted in an increase in the number of settling migrants from non-EU countries who had come under labour recruitment schemes, which led to family unifications (Van Mol and De Valk, 2016). Efforts to avoid family migration met little success since family reunification is a fundamental right for migrant workers (Castes et al., 2014).

In the 1990s, the fall of the Iron Curtain led to the migration of people from Eastern Europe to Western Europe, as they sought better economic opportunities and political freedom. The top five countries of origin during this period were the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (836,000), Romania (400,000), Turkey (356,000), Iraq (211,000), and Afghanistan (155,000) (Castes et al., 2014). The EU also began to implement common immigration policies, such as the Schengen Agreement, which abolished border controls between member states.

The Rising Number of Refugees in Europe: Policies, Statistics and Trends

In the 2000s, the number of refugees fleeing from conflict, persecution, and hardships particularly countries from Africa, Asia and the Middle East increased considerably. The EU responded by implementing common policies to manage migration, such as the Common European Asylum System (European Commission, 2016) which sets out common standards and co-operation to ensure that asylum seekers are treated equally in an open and fair system in all EU Member States. The influx of refugees fleeing from Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq across the Mediterranean Sea to reach Europe reached its highest levels in 2015.

According to Eurostat statistics, on 1 January 2021, the share of foreign-born population in the EU was %8.4 of all EU inhabitants. Among the non-EU citizens residing in the EU with a valid residence permit at the end of 2021, most were holding permits issued for family or work reasons. Based on data from UNHCR at the end of 2021, the share of refugees in the EU was 0.6% compared to its total population (UNHCR, 2021). In 2021, 183,600 people seeking asylum were under 18 years old – nearly 13% of them (23,300) were unaccompanied children. Most of the unaccompanied children came from Afghanistan, Syria, and Bangladesh (Eurostat, 2021).

Finally, since Russia's military aggression in Ukraine in February 2022, Europe has received the largest number of people fleeing war since World War II. For the first time, the Council triggered the Temporary Protection Directive, which was implemented as a special measure to offer prompt and provisional protection in case of a sudden or imminent mass influx of non-EU displaced individuals who cannot go back to their home country (European Union, 2001). The UNHCR records 8,108,448 refugees from Ukraine across Europe as of 7 March 2023. 4,890,639 refugees have registered for temporary protection in Europe (UNHCR Data Portal, 2023).

Immigration to Poland, Czech Republic, and Israel

Poland was historically a country that saw significant emigration until the early 2000s, but since then, it has become a destination for migrants. As of December 2021, there were 875,090 registered foreigners in the Polish social insurance system, with Ukrainians being the largest group (ZUS, 2022). Foreign migrants residing in Poland can be divided into EU and non-EU migrants, with the latter requiring visas and permits to stay and work. However, citizens of certain former USSR (the United Socialist Soviet Republic) countries, including Ukraine, have a special legal status and can fill gaps in the labour market. With the outbreak of war in Ukraine, the number of Ukrainians in Poland increased dramatically, with estimates reaching 3.2 million in April 2022, including 1.5 million who arrived before the war. As of January 2023, 971,271 Ukrainians were registered with the Polish temporary protection scheme (UNHCR, 2023). This allows them access to the labour market, housing, medical assistance, education, and the national healthcare system for 18 months, as per a special act in Poland.

The Czech Republic also granted temporary protection to Ukrainian war refugees in March 2022, with a majority being women and children. As of January 2023, the Czech Republic has granted temporary protection to 483,310 Ukrainian war refugees. Most Ukrainian war refugees have obtained higher education, and over 40% are working in the Czech Republic, with many being employed below their qualifications (PAQ, 2022). In Israel, the Law of Return grants migrants with Jewish ancestry and their spouses the right to settle in Israel and acquire citizenship. In 2022, about 75,000 olim immigrated to Israel, with 15,037 being refugees from Ukraine. The number of Ukrainian olim increased significantly in March and April 2022, but stabilized at around one thousand per month for the remainder of the year. The government operation to bring Ukrainian olim to Israel is called "Home to Israel." In 2022, 39% of olim from Ukraine were men and 61% were women, with a median age of 35-44. Most had academic educations and professional occupations and settled across Israel. The Law of Entrance regulates the entry and stay of migrants not eligible under the Law of Return. After the war in Ukraine, a quota of 5,000 refugees was set for family reunification. In 2022, 72,944 Ukrainian nationals entered Israel, with more than half leaving. 14,528 refugees entered under the Law of Entrance, with no official demographic information provided.

Overall, Poland and the Czech Republic have granted temporary protection to a significant number of Ukrainian war refugees, while Israel has seen a notable increase in Ukrainian olim since the war in Ukraine began. The demographics of the refugees and olim suggest that many are highly educated and employed below their qualifications in their new countries of residence.

Migrants' Use of Technologies

Technologization has created a major shift in migration patterns. The impact of technology on migration trends has been widely recognized and considered a "new ecosystem in a migrant´s life" (Codagnone and Kluzer 2011; Fortunati et al.2013). The Internet is the most suitable technology for migrants, providing a space that mirrors the transnational, interactive, and decentralized nature of migration (Georgiou 2002). The use of technology by migrants has gained attention in the literature, with studies focusing on how migrants use digital media to communicate, such as blogs, wikis, social networking sites, webzines, Internet radio, and Internet TV (Collin et al., 2015).

When refugees began arriving in Europe in large numbers in 2015, the attention given by the political and media spheres to the refugee crisis in Europe has highlighted how mobile technology has become a crucial means for refugees to navigate their journeys and establish themselves in new European countries (GSM Association, 2017). According to the UNHCR´s (2016) global assessment, most refugees living in urban areas have access to 2G or 3G mobile coverage, with only seven percent lacking the necessary digital infrastructure for internet and mobile communication. However, for those in rural areas, the situation is much worse, with 20 percent residing in regions with no connectivity. The assessment also reveals that refugees often spend a significant portion of their disposable income on staying connected, as cost is the primary barrier to their access. On a global scale, refugees are 50 percent less likely to have an internet-enabled phone than the general population, and 29 percent of refugee households do not have a phone at all.

FINDINGS

The emergence of technological advancements offers fresh possibilities to modernize and simplify access to integration and other essential services. The digitalization of government systems at all tiers can enhance access to online public services. Nonetheless, if this technology is not utilized inclusively and made accessible to all, it may increase existing inequalities (Alam and Imran, 2015). The potential of digital services for integration has been proven with the COVID-19 crisis (McMullin, 2021). In response to social distancing protocols, numerous EU Member States had to modify their integration programs and move their language and integration courses to digital platforms. Nevertheless, this transition also revealed that migrants often confront obstacles in getting access to digital courses and services due to insufficient infrastructure, linguistic barriers, inadequacy of electronic identification means, or lack of digital competencies to utilize these services. In line with this, the EU Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion for the period 2021-2027, developed by the European Commission, also draws attention to several digitalisation challenges faced by migrants throughout Europe, such as limited access to the internet, language barriers, inadequate electronic identification, and insufficient digital competencies (European Commission, 2021).

People who are digitally disadvantaged often experience other forms of social and economic disadvantages. This means that individuals who could benefit the most from being socially connected, such as migrants, are more likely to be left behind (Settlement Council of Australia, 2020).

According to the analysis "Digitalising migrant integration services during the COVID-19 pandemic: adaptation, funding, and accessibility" published on European Website on Integration, as a result of the COVID-19 outbreak and subsequent limitations, existing services were either partially or fully digitalized, or entirely new digital services were established to assist migrants in all 27 EU member states. The research conducted by country coordinators in all EU Member States shows that several EU governments were already undergoing a digital transformation of their services, while some international organizations have already implemented online delivery for some time (EWSI, 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic compelled some smaller organizations and governments to initiate their shift to online service provision. However, some still lack the necessary resources for digitalization. For the most part, Western, Northern and Mediterranean countries such as France, Portugal, Sweden, Denmark, and Malta tend to have a higher level of online service provision for migrants than those in Eastern and Central Europe such as Slovakia, Romania, Hungary and Bulgaria. This was the case prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and was not found to have changed to any large extent as a result of it (EWSI, 2022).

A recent OECD analysis shows that most countries have prioritized online communication channels, such as websites, to connect with the influx of Ukrainian refugees, who predominantly consist of digitally literate young women with access to digital devices (OECD, 2022). The same analysis finds that national online platforms have been developed by several OECD countries to coordinate support from individuals and civic societies for refugees from Ukraine. Implementing online systems to coordinate specific areas of support such as housing or employment has been effective in providing assistance to a significant number of refugees.

There are some exemplary practices using digital services to facilitate integration of migrants across EU countries. For example, the Swedish National Agency for Education has introduced a digital tool in five different languages to assess vocational training needs. This tool enables migrants to gain a better understanding of the skills required in Sweden, identify areas where they need further education, and find opportunities for quick integration into the Swedish job market. In Portugal, migrants can learn Portuguese for free through an online platform run by the country's High Commissioner for Migration. In response to the Covid-19 pandemic, the Estonian Refugee Council started delivering several of its services online, including counselling for people with a refugee background in their mother tongue.

When it comes to digital services to Ukrainian migrants, the Polish government communicates with migrants primarily through its website titled "Site for citizens of Ukraine", which includes information on how to obtain the Polish registration number, how to legalize their stay in Poland, how to receive financial assistance, and more. There are two government websites dedicated to Ukrainians, one of which is only available in Ukrainian, while the other is available in Polish, English, Russian, and Ukrainian. There are 16 voivodship offices where migrants can receive assistance, but the information provided on their websites varies greatly, with some only available in Polish, while others are available in multiple languages. In the Czech Republic, with the arrival of Ukrainian refugees, various government ministries, NGOs, and regional integration centres have responded by creating special sections on their websites in Ukrainian and updating their information regularly. In addition, a virtual marketplace called pomahejukrajine.cz has been created to provide resources related to the life of Ukrainians in the Czech Republic. NGOs have also used Facebook channels, YouTube, and Instagram to publish information, while state organizations have used Twitter and LinkedIn-type networks. on the other hand, the ministry of Aliyah and integration website in Israel is available in six languages, and services are mainly provided in Hebrew, English, and Russian. E-government services are widely available in Israel, but there is a need to ensure that migrants have basic digital competency to access them. Ukrainian migrants (olim and refugees) who arrived in Israel due to the war can access most Israeli information and governmental services online and in Russian but may find the abundance of information overwhelming.

RECOMMENDATIONS

01.

Migrants should be provided with support to invest in digital skills. Additionally, access to digital infrastructure could be facilitated by providing subsidies for the purchase of internet connections, smartphones, and laptops.

02.

Digitalisation should be promoted in a culturally sensitive and inclusive manner. it should be ensured that recently arrived migrants and other vulnerable migrant groups are able to reach digital services.

03.

The communication channels, both online and offline, need to adapt continuously to the evolving demographics and media consumption patterns of the recently arrived migrants.

04.

A comprehensive examination of migrants' digital competencies and use of e-government services should be conducted to identify digital gaps more thoroughly.

05.

E-government services and information websites for citizens in general should be provided in migrants´ languages and different language versions should be visible on the websites.

06.

Governments should provide training to (Ukrainian) migrants for efficient use of digital public services to improve digital skills and close digital gaps particularly for disadvantaged groups such as low-skilled migrants and aging migrants.

07.

Public institutions should assign staff to receive and answer correspondence in other languages than national languages to avoid emails in foreign languages being treated as spam.

08.

The effectiveness of providing information and services to migrants in physical locations through information fairs should be assessed and such methods should be adopted in cities where migrants live if proven successful.

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