Promoting Digital Inclusion of Migrants and Refugees in the EU

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Key Findings

● Digital services have the potential to facilitate the integration of migrants, but there is a risk of increasing inequalities if digitalisation is not made accessible to all.

● Migrants across EU countries face difficulties in accessing digital services due to inadequate infrastructure, a lack of digital skills, linguistic barriers, and insufficient electronic identification methods.

● Western, Northern, and Mediterranean countries generally have a higher level of online services available for migrants compared to Eastern and Central European countries, but Eastern and Central European countries made significant progress in developing online services during the COVID-19 pandemic and then after the influx of war refugees from Ukraine.

● Initiatives such as online information channels and e-government services have been implemented in different countries to provide information and assistance to Ukrainian war refugees, but the level of support and access to digital skills and services vary across different countries and regions.

● The majority of Ukrainian war refugees across Poland, Czech Republic, and Israel possess equipment to access the internet, and use different means of communication to stay in touch with relatives in their home countries.

Introduction

As a result of 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](#), implemented as a special measure to offer prompt and provisional protection in case of a sudden or imminent mass influx of displaced non-EU individuals who cannot return to their home country. The UNHCR[1] 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.

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[1]UNHCR Data Portal. (2023). Ukrainian Situation. Accessed https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/ukraine

Technology has become a crucial means for migrants and refugees to navigate their journeys and establish themselves in their new countries, as they often face difficulties in accessing traditional services and opportunities due to language, cultural, and economic barriers. Fortunately for migrants, the COVID-19 pandemic has significantly accelerated this technological shift, which is resulting in deep digitalisation of various aspects of life. This increased digitalisation has also created digital divides, deepening existing inequalities.

Based on the findings of a comparative report[2] on the digital skills of migrants and refugees, this policy brief outlines migrants' use of technologies and digitalised services designed for migrants across EU countries. In addition, based on a series of interviews conducted with Ukrainian war refugees in Poland, Czech Republic and Israel, this brief presents comparative results[3] of a meta-analysis of the digital skills of Ukrainian war refugees. Finally, it presents specific recommendations to European institutions and governments on how to improve the digital skills of migrants and promote digital inclusion.

Migrants' use of technologies

The potential of digital services for integration has been proven with the COVID-19 crisis: in response to social distancing protocols, numerous EU Member States had to modify their integration programmes and move their language and integration courses to digital platforms. This transition also revealed, though, that migrants often come across obstacles in securing access to digital courses and services, due to insufficient infrastructure, linguistic barriers, inadequacy of electronic identification means, or a lack of digital competencies to use these services.

According to the UNHCR's global assessment[4], 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.

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[2] Comparative Report on Digital Skills and Competencies of Migrants across EU countries
https://iss.fsv.cuni.cz/sites/default/files/uploads/files/AC%20MINTE%20Report%203.pdf
[3] Comparative Report on Digital Spaces of Migrants in Poland, Czech Republic, and Israel
https://iss.fsv.cuni.cz/sites/default/files/uploads/files/AC%20MINTE%20Report%206.pdf
[4] UNHCR. (2016). Connecting refugees. How Internet and mobile connectivity can improve refugee well-being and transform humanitarian action.

Most adult Ukrainian war refugees in the EU are women with higher-than-average educational levels compared to other refugee groups and the Ukrainian general population, and they therefore possess digital competencies[5]. This enables them to access various online information sources. However, the population surveyed in Israel and Poland is heterogeneous in terms of age, family situation, and education, which can affect digital skills and virtual engagement. Among highly educated and working-age Ukrainian war refugees in Israel and Poland, digital skills are widespread, while the digital gap is slightly more pronounced among elderly migrants, primarily concerning the use of social network applications.

Digitalised services for migrants

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 with Eastern and Central European countries, such as Slovakia, Romania, Hungary, and Bulgaria. However, an increasing number of countries – including Central European countries – have started providing online services and are using digital technologies to facilitate the labour market integration of Ukrainian war refugees. These tools also aim to prevent skill mismatches[6], which is particularly relevant for Ukrainian war refugees who are expected to have higher levels of qualifications and digital literacy. For example, Poland launched their Praca w Polsce ("Work in Poland") portal to support Ukrainians with finding employment relevant to their qualifications. Portugal has also developed a specific platform collecting profiles of Ukrainians and available job opportunities with a range of support services. In addition, the Czech Republic has developed several migrant-focused informational websites 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 unfamiliar with Israeli bureaucracy.

Current EU policies and initiatives addressing digital skills and inclusion of migrants

The European Union has commitments to promoting digital inclusion for all citizens, regardless of their background. To that end, it has launched several policies and initiatives. For example, New Skills Agenda for Europe is a comprehensive plan for improving the quality and relevance of skills in Europe. One of its key priorities is to close the digital skills gap, reap all the benefits of the digital transition and invest in digitalisation for all people, regardless of racial and ethnic origin, gender, religion, disability, or age. As a digitalised service, the EU Skills Profile Tool for Third Country Nationals (TCNs) enables

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[5] OECD. (2023). What we know about the skills and early labour market outcomes of refugees from Ukraine
[6] OECD. (2023). What we know about the skills and early labour market outcomes of refugees from Ukraine

TCNs to document and map their skills and qualifications, in order to explore options for skills assessment, upskilling and employment. Moreover, the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund working programme for 2023, 2024 and 2025 includes a focus on promoting digital skills and inclusion, recognising the importance of digital technologies in promoting social and economic integration.

As an EU agency involved in education, training and labour market systems, the European Training Foundation established the Ukrainian Resource Hub to facilitate access for Ukrainian war refugees in the EU to education, training, and jobs, and to help EU organisations and companies to understand Ukraine's education and training system and qualifications. Through the EU Talent Pool Pilot, those fleeing the war in Ukraine can create a CV and show their skills to more than 4,000 validated and registered employers, as well as to members and partners of the European Employment Service.

Recommendations

- Governments should base their digital services and policies on rigorous assessment of needs and existing policy gaps, based on evidence.
- Governments should provide support for digital skills training for migrants and refugees, especially to disadvantaged groups such as low-skilled and aging migrants, and subsidise the purchase of internet connections, smartphones, and laptops.
- Governments should provide e-government services and information websites in migrants' languages, with different language versions visible on the websites.
- Digitalisation should be promoted in a culturally sensitive, inclusive manner, ensuring that recently arrived migrants and other vulnerable groups have access to digital services.
- Governments and civil society should collaborate to bridge information gaps, promote digital skills and improve the integration of migrants and refugees.
- The EU should provide funding and support for initiatives that help the digital inclusion of migrants and refugees.
- Member States should make full use of EU funds to improve their digital inclusion strategies and fill the digital gaps among migrants and refugees.
- The EU should give guidance to Member States and take measures to actively promote the digital inclusion of migrants and refugees across all EU countries.