



## Fleeing Russia's War of Aggression in Transnational Europe

### Reception of Displaced Ukrainians in Sweden

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Russia's war in Ukraine has forced millions of people to flee. Of those who have sought refuge in Sweden and other EU countries, the vast majority have been received under the framework of the Temporary Protection Directive (Directive 2001/55/EC), which is valid for three years from 2022 to 2025 and was extended until 2026 in June 2024. This Policy Brief summarizes the results of a study focusing on the opportunities and challenges Ukrainians have faced during their first year in Sweden, with key areas including housing, employment and self-sufficiency, healthcare, and education. The study, supported by the Centre for European Research at the University of Gothenburg, gives a voice to 15 women who have been residing in western and southern Sweden since March 2022. Their experiences provide insight into the lives of thousands of other displaced Ukrainians covered by the temporary protection, but are also unique in their own way. The study was conducted by two researchers from the Department of Sociology and Work Science at the University of Gothenburg, Oksana Shmulyar Gréen and Svitlana Odynets.

## Introduction

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has now lasted for over two years, displacing millions of war-affected people. In March 2024, Eurostat estimated the number of displaced Ukrainians in EU- and EEA countries to be 4.2 million, with Germany, Poland, and the Czech Republic being the largest host countries. Within Ukraine, there are approximately 3.7 million internally displaced persons according to UNHCR (2024).<sup>1</sup> At the start of the invasion, the number of those seeking protection outside Ukraine was significantly higher, but about 4.5 million of them have returned (IOM, 2023b).

In May 2024, the Swedish Migration Agency reported that 34,000 people from Ukraine had their temporary protection extended, with a total of 39,000 registered in the reception system in Sweden (Swedish Migration Agency, 2024a). This compares to the approximately 59,000 who had received temporary residence permits by the end of 2022 (Swedish Migration Agency, 2022; 2023). The majority of displaced Ukrainians<sup>2</sup> with temporary residence permits are covered by the European Union's Temporary Protection Directive (Directive 2001/55/EC), also known as the TPD (Karageorgiou and Stoyanova, 2022; Mantu et al., 2023).

The temporary protection for displaced Ukrainians who arrived in Sweden and other EU countries was initially valid until March 4, 2023, and was subsequently extended until March 4, 2024. The protection was further extended until March 4, 2025. As the war continues with no end in sight, several EU actors have expressed the need to explore so-called "post-2025 solutions" to the TPD, where a possible further extension of protection is discussed (Luyten, 2024). In June 2024, the European Commission decided on yet another extension of the TPD, this time until March 2026 (European Commission, 2024).

Recently, the Swedish government also submitted a bill to the Council on Legislation, "Improved Living Conditions for Foreigners with Temporary

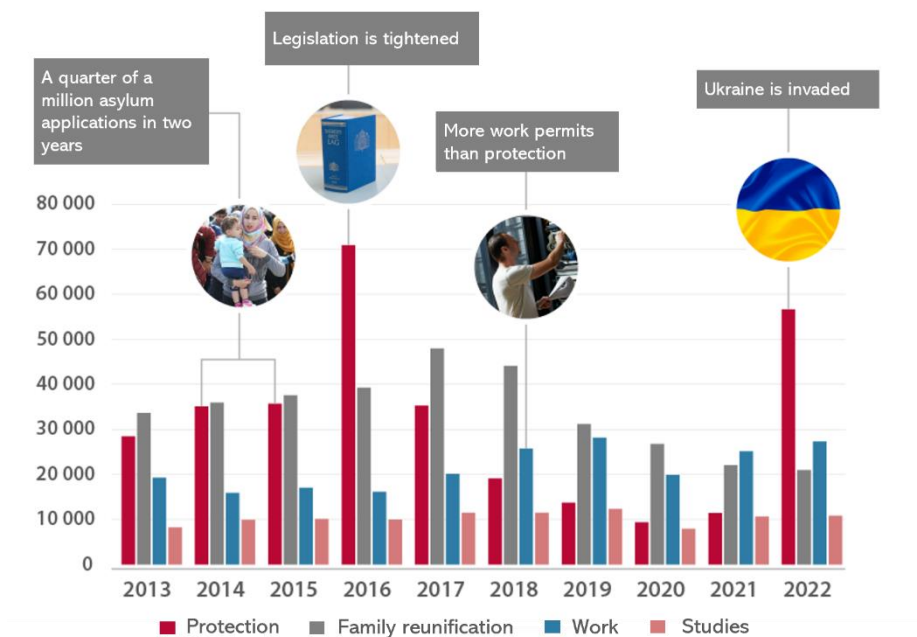
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<sup>1</sup> The statistics on the number of people from Ukraine seeking protection in Sweden and across the EU are continuously evolving. Various national authorities and international organizations tend to conduct their own calculations, which are reported on a monthly basis. As a result, the figures may vary slightly. Therefore, the statistics presented in this Delmi Policy Brief should be seen more as estimates, based on a specific source and pertaining to a particular month.

<sup>2</sup> Those covered by the Directive in Sweden have so far included both Ukrainian citizens and nationals of other countries who had residence permits in Ukraine before the outbreak of the war. Those granted protection status can enjoy a range of fundamental rights under the Directive (see Karageorgiou and Stoyanova, 2022: 6-7).

Protection" (Government, 2024, Ju2024/00480), aimed at improving conditions for displaced Ukrainians and others under temporary protection. The proposed legal changes, which are expected to come into force on November 1, 2024, could improve the integration opportunities for many displaced Ukrainians under temporary protection in Sweden. At the same time, as discussed below, these legal changes also risk deepening the vulnerability of certain groups of displaced persons.

Figure 1. Number of Granted Residence Permits by Case Category 2013–2022



Source Figure from the Swedish Migration Agency, "[Migrationsverket svarar: Vilka är det som kommer till Sverige – och varför? – Migrationsverket](#)" Swedish Migration Agency [translated from Swedish], 2023-10-20.

**In this context, this Policy Brief summarizes the findings and conclusions of a study that describes and analyses the reception of Ukrainians who have fled Russia's war of aggression to Sweden. The focus is on the opportunities and challenges they face in securing housing, employment, and livelihood, healthcare, and education (including for accompanying children). The study specifically examines how the reception has been influenced by the legal**

framework of the TPD and its amendments, as well as the individual experiences of integration and social anchoring in Sweden. Ultimately, the study aims to generate new knowledge about the scope for action that arises between the application of the TPD and the Ukrainians' own strategies, resources, and agency, which together shape their everyday lives in exile.

## Research Questions and Theoretical Concepts

The following research questions have guided our investigation:

1. How do the participants in the study experience their reception in Sweden within the framework of the TPD regarding access to housing, the labour market, healthcare, and education (including for accompanying children)?
2. What other resources have the participants been able to mobilize to achieve meaningful inclusion in Swedish society?
3. What opportunities and challenges did they encounter during their first year in Sweden?
4. How does the specific life situation affect the participants' future plans regarding return, relocation to another country, or long-term settlement in Sweden?

The specific questions the study seeks to answer must be set in a broader context. One way to study the reception of those granted temporary protection in Sweden is by using theoretical concepts such as "**protracted displacement**" and "**active waiting**" (Brun, 2015), as well as "**social anchoring**" (Grzymala-Kazłowska, 2021).

**Protracted displacement** involves great uncertainty both in the present and future, where people feel trapped in an unwanted present while waiting for an uncertain future (Brun, 2015, p. 19). Protracted displacement often involves waiting, but according to Brun (2015), it is an active rather than passive waiting that displaced people live with. In Sweden, temporary protection for displaced Ukrainians has been extended one year at a time, and the protracted displacement has now lasted for over two years. During this time, they are expected to seek employment, learn a new language, arrange permanent housing, attend to their own needs, and care for accompanying children. At the same time, many have both financial and caregiving responsibilities for family members who remained in Ukraine. In addition to bearing responsibility and concern for their transnational families - family members

spread across several countries – many displaced Ukrainians have lost their jobs and homes in their homeland and have indefinitely paused various life projects that began before the war broke out, such as home renovations, moving, new jobs, marriage, and so on.

**Active waiting** builds on hope and agency among the displaced, which helps them create new opportunities in an uncertain everyday life. To understand and explain how the Ukrainian participants in the study build this hope, we use the concept of **social anchoring**. According to Grzymala-Kazłowska (2021), this concept enables the connection of identity, security, and integration processes. When migration regimes in different EU countries are based on temporary protection mechanisms that entail long waiting and uncertainty among those fleeing, displaced people mobilize various resources to actively create meaningful reference points, or anchors, to manage these uncertain living conditions. These anchors may include meaningful employment, such as involvement in supporting the Ukrainian army, work, or language learning in Sweden. Through these anchors, displaced people can recreate socio-psychological stability and hope for the future.

## Method and the Profile of the Participants

The study's design is qualitative and does not claim to be generalizable. However, the participants' experiences and opinions about their reception in Sweden have been compared and contextualized against the background of other studies and reports where Sweden is included as an empirical case (e.g., Danielsen et al., 2023; Hernes and Danielsen, 2024; IOM, 2023a; UNHCR, 2023, 2024) and through continuous monitoring of the TPD and its changes since 2022 (Berlina, 2022; Karageorgiou and Stoyanova, 2022; Mantu et al., 2023; Government, 2024; European Commission, 2024).

In the study, we meet 15 women who came to Sweden between March and August 2022.<sup>3</sup> Fifteen qualitative, individual interviews (1.5 – 3 hours) were

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<sup>3</sup> During the period when the study was conducted, the majority of those seeking protection in Sweden were women. Additionally, the Ukrainian government has enacted a law that prohibits men of military age (between 18 and 60 years) from leaving the country. Several estimates of the number of people receiving temporary protection within the EU show that about 21 percent of them are adult men (Luyeten, 2024: 2). This includes male protection seekers who have been able to leave Ukraine due to various exemptions in the regulations, such as fathers of more than three minor children or fathers of children with special needs. Additionally, several male protection seekers were working in another EU country at the outbreak of the war and later joined their families who were in Sweden or other EU countries.

conducted between April and June 2023.<sup>4,5</sup> The interviews were recorded and transcribed by the researchers themselves. The participants were recruited through educational courses for Ukrainians in western and southern Sweden, designated accommodations, and the Swedish Migration Agency's transit accommodations for Ukrainians in these regions, as well as through personal networks. The interviews were mainly conducted in Ukrainian, but in some cases, Russian was used, depending on the participants' language choice.

The women interviewed were between 19 and 57 years old, and most were over 30 years old. Seven were residing in western Sweden, and eight in Skåne. A third of the participants were married or had a partner, while the rest were divorced or single. Over half of the women had accompanying school-aged children, and a third had older children who remained in Ukraine or lived in other EU countries. Before fleeing to Sweden, the women lived in eight different regions of Ukraine: three in western Ukraine, four in southern, and four in eastern Ukraine, as well as four in the capital Kyiv. A third of the participants had experienced the war up close as early as 2014, when Russia annexed the Crimean Peninsula and occupied parts of Donbas. Some of the participants had therefore lived as internally displaced persons in Ukraine before fleeing to Sweden. Several of the participants had parents remaining in their homeland, some of whom lived under Russian occupation in eastern or southern Ukraine. Educationally, all but one of the participants had a university education from Ukraine in fields such as pedagogy, languages, journalism, design, management, psychology, economics, cybernetics, and physiotherapy. Likewise, all but one of the women in the study had been employed and had long work experience before the war broke out.

## Background and Previous Research

Research about Ukraine and the displaced Ukrainians residing in Sweden since 2022 is a slowly developing field. The increased interest in studying Ukraine has led to an awareness that its population, both historically and in the present, has had a high migration propensity (Fedyk and Kindler, 2016; Andersson and Wadensjö, 2022; Elinder et al., 2022). Due to limited economic

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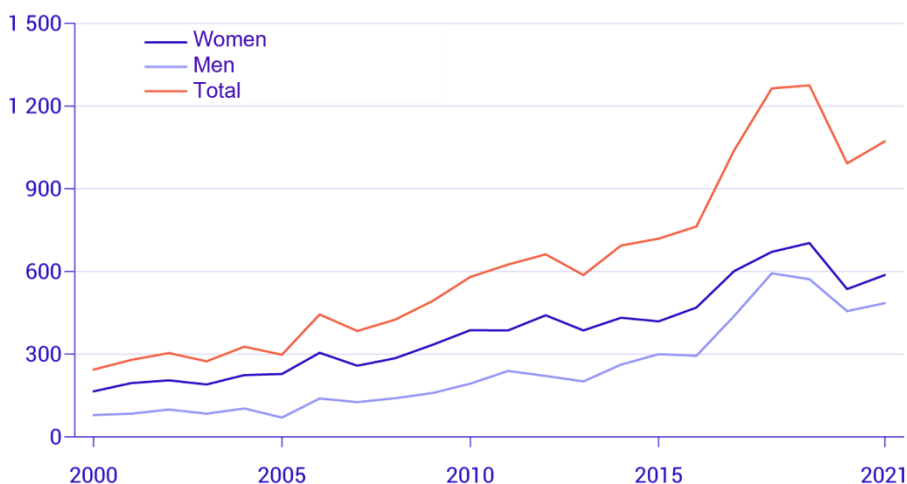
<sup>4</sup> Most of the interviews were conducted by Svitlana Odynets, some were conducted by both researchers, and a few were conducted by Oksana Shmulyar Gréen.

<sup>5</sup> The project has been approved by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority [Reference Number 2023-01083-01], and all participants were informed that their participation was voluntary and that they had the option to withdraw if they changed their minds.

growth and lower living standards in their homeland, several hundred thousand Ukrainians have sought both seasonal and long-term jobs within the EU, primarily in Poland, the Czech Republic, Italy, and Spain, since the late 1990s (Lapshyna, 2022).

After the liberalization of visa rules for Ukrainians within the EU in 2017, migration increased further, becoming a transnational phenomenon where millions of Ukrainians moved between Ukraine and various European countries for work (Zhyznomirska and Odynets, 2018; Odynets, 2021). In 2020, Ukraine became the second largest emigration country in Europe (McAuliffe and Triandafyllidou, 2022, p. 25). The number of Ukrainians in Sweden has also steadily increased since the 2000s. A majority of the approximately 12,000 Ukrainians who lived in Sweden before 2022 arrived after Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014. Most of these were women who came as family members, labour migrants, or students (SCB, 2022). Many of them belong to the so-called "Ukrainian diaspora," which individually and through several aid organizations participates in various support efforts for their compatriots who have come to Sweden over the past two years.

**Figure 2. Number of Immigrated Individuals Born in Ukraine by Gender and Total, 2000–2021**



Source: Register over the total population (RTB) 2000–2021, figure from Statistics Sweden, "[Liten grupp ukrainare i Sverige före kriget \(scb.se\)](https://www.scb.se/liten-grupp-ukrainare-i-sverige-fore-kriget), [translated from Swedish] 2022-06-17.

Sociological research on Ukrainians in Sweden before and after 2022 is still in its infancy. The few academic articles about Ukrainians in Sweden that have been published since 2022 are predominantly qualitative studies. Blomqvist Mickelsson (2023) found in an interview study with representatives from Swedish sports associations that displaced Ukrainians – primarily women and children – are considered more "willing to contribute to Swedish society" (p. 267), which according to the author, can "reinforce inequalities in refugee reception" (ibid.). In another interview study, Voytiv (2024) focuses on memory work and boundaries between the Ukrainian and Russian diasporas in Sweden between 2014 and 2022, where Russia is increasingly seen as a colonial power. In yet another study, Palmgren et al. (2023) analyse the role of Islamophobia in how Ukrainians were portrayed in Swedish alternative media as more similar to "real Swedes" (p. 1411). The only quantitative study so far, by Andersson and Wadensjö (2022), draws attention to migrants from Ukraine and Belarus who lived in Sweden before the Russian invasion in 2022 and shows that most are well-integrated into the Swedish labour market and society, which according to the authors, can contribute to a faster inclusion of new Ukrainians.

Although Swedish research on Ukrainians in Sweden is limited, there is a significantly larger number of international reports highlighting the topic. Many of these include Sweden as an example of a host country, with a particular focus on analysing the TPD from a policy implementation perspective (OECD, 2022; Parusel and Varfolomieieva, 2022; Hernes et al., 2023, a, b; UNHCR, 2023; Hernes and Danielsen, 2024). These reports are used to contextualize and in some cases validate the results of the qualitative study that forms the basis for this Policy Brief.

In a comparative study from 2022 on the implementation of temporary protection for displaced Ukrainians in the Nordic countries, Berlina (p. 28) notes that the governments in the Nordic region, especially in Sweden, have been "cautious about making long-term plans". Tyldum et al. (2023) further point to differences between the Swedish and Norwegian reception, where Norway seems to have more generous conditions up to 2023. Kjeøy and Tyldum's (2022) comparative report on the same theme examines the reception in Poland and Norway and concludes that, with the prolongation of the war, displaced Ukrainians in both countries are more inclined to stay rather than return to Ukraine. IOM's (2023a) overview with a particular focus on Sweden covers issues related to living conditions, intentions, needs, and



integration challenges for people from Ukraine, and in another report (IOM, 2023b), the sustainable reintegration of returning Ukrainians is studied. Save the Children deepens the analysis of the reception in Sweden in their report (Samzelius, 2024) by focusing on women who came to Sweden from Ukraine with their children. The report points out that displaced persons with parental responsibilities may experience particular difficulties and obstacles, with consequences also for accompanying children.

In summary, we can conclude that research on the reception of Ukrainians in Sweden and internationally is advancing. A clear pattern in these studies is that they often highlight the "seemingly better treatment" that Ukrainian displaced persons receive compared to other refugee groups (Blomqvist Mickelsson, 2024, p. 267, see also Babakova et al., 2022; Näre et al., 2022; De Coninck, 2023; Hernes, et al., 2023a, b).

It should be noted, however, that these studies apply the term "refugee" to all people displaced by war and conflict, without critically reflecting on its legal application. The protection under the TPD is a collective and time-limited protection (Karageorgiou and Stoyanova, 2022), which grants displaced persons limited rights. In contrast, asylum and refugee status can be legally and individually assessed, which in the long run enables permanent settlement and full integration in the host countries. To understand the conditions for those who have come under the TPD, it is therefore necessary to problematize the idea of the "real refugee" (Tchermalykh, 2024, see also Odynets, 2022).

## Result

### Reception in Sweden Within the Framework of the Temporary Protection Directive (TPD)

Most of the participants in the study (10 out of the 15 women interviewed) came to Sweden in early March 2022, just a few weeks after the full-scale invasion. They describe difficult decisions when leaving, such as who would accompany them and who had to stay behind (see also Deineko, 2022).

Several of the participants had originally intended to stay abroad for only a few weeks or months and first fled to nearby countries in the hope of a quick end to the war. When the fighting continued, the women in the study chose to travel on to Sweden, which – compared to other EU countries – is one of the less common destination countries for displaced Ukrainians.

The majority of those who fled from Ukraine crossed the border to neighbouring or nearby countries such as Poland, Romania, Moldova, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia, but also to Russia (see OECD 2022; UNHCR, 2024). Study participants arrived in Sweden predominantly via Poland, but also via Romania, Slovakia, and the Baltic countries. Many had relatives living or working in these countries and often travelled there themselves for work before the war (see Fedyk and Kindler, 2016). Others received help from Swedish volunteers who often had backgrounds in Poland, the Czech Republic, and other neighbouring countries to Ukraine. Many of these volunteers had travelled to the border between Poland and Ukraine with their own cars or with church organizations to help Ukrainians get to Sweden.

Under the TPD, displaced persons have the right to housing and assistance with temporary accommodation from the Swedish Migration Agency. Initially, those seeking protection could choose whether they wanted to register and receive help from the Swedish Migration Agency or stay with relatives or individual Swedish families. A few participants in the study had family members who had been living in Sweden before 2022, and during the first year of the war, these family members housed their displaced relatives. Others were placed in the Swedish Migration Agency's transit accommodations or with individual Swedish families who provided a room or entire accommodation at no extra cost or for a small fee. Some participants described choosing to travel to Sweden because they had been promised work and housing upon arrival. Particularly those who relied on volunteers chose to come to Sweden because they heard "it is a good country." Their general experience upon arrival was that "the Swedes are friendly," "honest," and "helpful."

Like other Nordic countries, Sweden expanded its reception capacity by using new, non-public, service providers for housing, such as NGOs, churches, and hotels (IOM, 2023b; Hernes and Danielsen, 2024). However, the housing situation for most displaced persons changed from July 1, 2022, when the government transferred more responsibility for reception to the municipalities. The aim was to distribute displaced persons more evenly across the country and assign the primary responsibility for housing, work, and so on to individual municipalities. Already since 2020, the government has limited the possibilities for asylum seekers to settle in economically disadvantaged areas, with the risk of losing the right to daily allowances and

special grants. This also applies to Ukrainians with temporary protection (see Danielsen et al., 2023). Those who find housing on their own must pay rent themselves (Swedish Migration Agency, 2024b). For those who need financial support, the choice of housing was thus limited. By spring 2023, the majority of participants were therefore living in individual accommodations provided by the municipalities with subsidized rent, while the rest lived with relatives, in designated accommodations within the municipalities, or with Swedish families who received them upon arrival.

Those benefiting from temporary protection have the right to receive written information in a language they understand (Karageorgiou and Stoyanova, 2022), and the authorities in Sweden therefore have to provide information about reception in several languages, including Ukrainian, Russian, and English. This information is continuously updated. Several types of government services have also been digitized. However, since displaced persons from Ukraine have not had the right to Mobilt Bank-ID<sup>6</sup>, the use of these services required access to a Swedish mobile subscription or an e-service.

Most of the women in the study experienced contact with authorities such as the Swedish Migration Agency, the Swedish Tax Agency, and the Swedish Council for Higher Education as smooth and helpful. However, several felt that the Swedish Migration Agency did not listen to their needs when, for instance, changing housing.. Many participants pointed out that both government staff and school staff were often unaware that people under the TPD lacked personal numbers. They were therefore referred to e-services that required Mobilt BankID, resulting in misunderstandings and frustration.

What distinguishes Sweden from other Nordic countries is that displaced Ukrainians quickly found work. In May 2023, the employment rate among those granted protection in Sweden through the TPD was 56 percent (IOM 2023a:6). A follow-up study (IOM, 2024) indicates that employment among displaced Ukrainians continues to increase. At the same time, a recent survey shows that only about 28 percent of displaced Ukrainians in Finland were employed during 2023 (see Koptsyukh and Svyrenko, 2024:30), while the figure in Norway during the same period was as low as 18.8 percent (see

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<sup>6</sup> Mobilt BankID is digital identification solution used in Sweden which allows users to securely verify their identity, sign documents, and authorize transactions online via their mobile devices. It is widely used for accessing a variety of services, including banking and government services.

Hernes et al., 2023a:101). Among the participants in our study, fourteen out of fifteen had one or more jobs in Sweden just a year after their arrival. A few had obtained permanent employment, although with the limitation that it only applies as long as the TPD is in force. Participants worked as career counsellors, assistant teachers, coaches for children and young people from Ukraine, interpreters, or in international projects. A third worked in cleaning and other services, while some worked remotely for companies in Ukraine.

The relative success of Ukrainians on the Swedish labour market is remarkable, especially considering that, unlike in Norway and Finland, they have not had access to labour-supporting and integration-promoting measures within the framework of the introduction programme provided by the Swedish Public Employment Service (Hernes et al., 2023a, b; Tyldum et al., 2023; Hernes and Danielsen, 2024). The absence of state measures has, however, been partially compensated by voluntary initiatives from civil society and individual municipalities, which have worked to facilitate the education and integration of Ukrainians into Swedish society. All participants in our study had registered with the Swedish Public Employment Service, but most felt that the agency could not help them get a job. Some pointed out that the digital registration was complicated and that there were no physical offices to turn to. Several testified that they were expected to fill out reports on job searches monthly, which is a requirement imposed on refugees with refugee status participating in the introduction program, and not on displaced persons under temporary protection. Therefore, participants expressed that they received better help from their contacts and networks in finding a job than from the agency (see also IOM, 2023a; DN, 2024).

None of the participants had contact with the Swedish Social Insurance Agency, as all of them lacked the right to residence-based benefits. Even those who had work and paid taxes in Sweden could only receive healthcare according to the minimum level of the TPD, which includes "emergency medical care and necessary treatment of illnesses" (Karageorgiou and Stoyanova, 2022:7). Several participants were therefore discouraged after their first medical visit, especially those with serious illnesses that required multiple follow-up visits or further treatment that they could not afford themselves. Some even travelled back to Ukraine to receive the medical care they needed.

All participants had participated in one or more educational initiatives within municipalities in western and southern Sweden, organized by the

municipalities themselves or within projects funded by the European Social Fund (ESF). Since displaced persons from Ukraine lacked the right to Swedish for Immigrants (SFI) until the summer of 2023, several participants appreciated the Swedish and English courses offered by various study associations, churches, or individual Swedes. Other courses offered included writing resumes and job applications in Sweden. Particularly successful were specialized courses, such as a six-month training program for teaching assistants in a municipality in the Västra Götaland County, where several participants later got jobs in the education system. Further university studies in Sweden were, however, not possible for the participants, despite most having a university education from their homeland. Lack of knowledge of Swedish and insufficient knowledge of English was one reason, but above all, the very low daily allowance was a factor that forced many to prioritize work over studies.

Regarding accompanying children, seven participants had one or two children enrolled in Swedish schools within the regular education system. At the time of the study, schooling for children from Ukraine was not mandatory (see the Swedish National Agency for Education, 2022), which created uncertainty among school staff about how to follow up on the children's schooling and how to manage contact with parents. None of the children participated in Ukrainian online education, which is otherwise common among children and young people from Ukraine (see the Swedish National Agency for Education, 2022; Samzelius, 2024). According to their mothers, several children and young people had difficulty adapting to Swedish schools, primarily due to social and linguistic reasons. Younger children, however, found it easier to form social contacts and learn the language through play. Children of all ages enjoyed school more when there was extra linguistic and psychological support available, which is also highlighted in other research (Petäjänieniemi, et al., 2024). A supportive relationship with the school can also be an important anchor for parents trying to help their children cope with waiting and the uncertain future.

### Other Resources for Inclusion in Society

Despite uncertain living conditions during the protracted displacement, with long waiting and worry, several participants were able to use social anchors that gave their lives in Sweden meaning. For example, several women in the study had previous experiences of working abroad, which enabled them to use their knowledge to establish contacts with potential employers and find

ways forward under the new circumstances. In several cases, participants got their first jobs and thus one of their first social anchors in Sweden through small businesses run by other migrants or through networks with other Ukrainians who had managed to find employment.

The participants' active waiting and agency were expressed in their persistence in seeking different job opportunities despite not speaking Swedish. To gain a better understanding of Swedish society, they also actively sought new information and contacts in Sweden. They were also willing to accept help from others to achieve their goals. A few participants had savings to support themselves during their first months in Sweden, as they did not count on financial support from the Swedish state. In some cases, women could receive financial support from relatives in Ukraine, but as the war continued, it was instead the relatives in Ukraine, especially the elderly and unemployed, who needed their support.<sup>7</sup>

Among the participants in the study, there was a constant determination to learn new things, both professionally and for personal development. Several respondents expressed that they tried to participate in (preferably free) cultural activities and nature experiences to maintain their own well-being and to build hope during the protracted displacement. Despite the delayed decision on the right to SFI, several participants tried to learn Swedish on their own. YouTube videos or language cafés with individual volunteers in Sweden were very helpful, especially for those living in smaller towns without access to other language courses or for those who, for various reasons, prioritized work over language learning.

Our study clearly shows that support from volunteers, civil society, and the Ukrainian diaspora is an important lifeline for displaced Ukrainians, anchoring them and giving them hope for a better life in Sweden. This support includes not only language learning and social food and clothing stores, where economically marginalized individuals can shop at significantly reduced prices, but also social and psychological support that helps displaced persons and their children feel included and strengthened in their

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<sup>7</sup> The outbreak of the war has put Ukraine's social and economic conditions to the test. Previous differences in wages and living standards between Ukraine and EU countries have deepened even further. Considering that the minimum wage in Ukraine is 8,000 hryvnia gross (equivalent to approximately 2,000 SEK) and the minimum pension is 2,300 hryvnia (equivalent to 620 SEK) (Government Portal of Ukraine 2024), the remittances received from work in Sweden often provide significant assistance.

rights. Our results also show that this support can have a ripple effect, as those who have received support themselves choose to engage in helping others who need it.

## Opportunities and Challenges

The rights that displaced Ukrainians enjoy under the TPD have opened up a range of opportunities, which in turn has sparked a debate about whether Ukrainians are treated more favourably than other asylum seekers coming to Sweden (Näre et al., 2022; Blomqvist Mickelsson, 2024). Immediate access to work and housing guaranteed by the TPD are considered to be lacking for asylum seekers. However, it cannot be ignored that displaced Ukrainians who have received protection under the TPD live under temporary conditions for several years and, despite the basic rights, have faced – and still face – significant challenges.

One such challenge is that people with temporary protection status have not been able to register for a personal identity number and obtain a Mobilt BankID in Sweden, which has limited their access to banking services, contact with authorities, schools, healthcare, and more. For the participants in our study, this meant that such contacts instead had to be managed through personal visits, with help from others, and often with long waiting times as a result. The initial period in Sweden was therefore experienced as "a meat grinder" as one has to adapt to many new rules and norms, and rely on various authorities that, in turn, are often inadequately informed about what applies to people with temporary protection.

Another challenge is that, compared to other EU countries, the relatively low daily allowance in Sweden does not even cover the most basic needs (compared to Kjeøy and Tyldum, 2022; OECD, 2022; IOM, 2023a; Hernes et al, 2023a, b), which is particularly difficult for women with children (Samzelius, 2024:8). Many of our participants therefore preferred to find a job as quickly as possible to pay their rent independently and become less dependent on the low financial support or subsidized housing. However, few employers dare to hire Ukrainians permanently due to the temporality of their situation.

Among those who nevertheless obtained permanent employment, many worked in low-skilled occupations with lower wages than they could have received as labour migrants. Most of the job opportunities offered to displaced Ukrainians are temporary and often based on hourly contracts where work opportunities might be sporadic. The income from these jobs is

rarely sufficient to sustain oneself without support from the Swedish Migration Agency and subsidized housing. Therefore, several participants felt compelled to have multiple part-time jobs simultaneously or seek additional sources of income to meet their daily expenses.

Wage dumping and discrimination on the labour market occur, and several participants had been deceived by their employers, including non-payment of wages or the work ending earlier than promised. The fact that they did not have the right to SFI and further studies in Swedish also made it more difficult for the participants to assert their rights as workers and establish social networks to improve their job prospects. Only those who had been able to learn Swedish where they lived or at their workplace could dedicate time to language learning. Other courses were usually held in larger cities or towns, requiring travel that participants had to pay for themselves, which was very straining on their already minimal finances. Several participants also pointed out that their contact with Swedish-speaking people was very limited – an experience they share with other groups of newly arrived refugees in Sweden (see, for example, Irastorza and Osanami Törngren, 2023). Furthermore, many testified that they could not practice Swedish at their workplace either, as most of their colleagues were also migrants (see also Hernes et al., 2023a).

Low proficiency in Swedish hinders the validation of education through the Swedish Council for Higher Education. Few of those who have started the validation process will be able to work in their professions in Sweden, especially those requiring certification, such as teachers, doctors, psychologists, or interpreters. Under the current circumstances, several participants experienced a loss of status in relation to their previous jobs and incomes as well as the social life they had in Ukraine. In Ukraine, they worked with much more qualified tasks, had stable housing, and a large circle of friends and family.

### Future prospects

During the study, the participants were able to extend their protection status once until March 2024, which should be taken into account when discussing future plans. Most expressed that the future seemed very uncertain, not only due to their situation in Sweden but also to the uncertain situation in Ukraine. Few dared to plan or dream of a future that extended more than 6–8 months ahead. Living under protracted displacement often means a lack of future



plans, which took a toll on the participants' mental and social health, and some expressed experiencing depression and exhaustion. All participants had some relatives remaining in Ukraine, primarily parents, adult children, and in some cases a spouse. At the time of the interviews however, only three participants had visited Ukraine after arriving in Sweden. One had returned permanently. The visits to Ukraine partly involved providing care for elderly family members, meeting other relatives, and checking on their homes (if they still existed). Several mentioned that they needed to see a doctor, take a driving test, or similar, which they could not afford or were not entitled to in Sweden (see also UNHCR, 2023).

At the time of the interview, the participants had two years left of protection under the TPD, and most expressed a desire to stay in Sweden at least as long as the directive applies. Later reports (e.g., IOM, 2024) show even more clearly that most displaced Ukrainians who have sought protection in Sweden strive for deeper social anchoring in society, including through language learning and active participation in the labour market. Above all, it is the children's education that anchors them in Sweden. The responsibility for supporting parents and older children in Ukraine is also a crucial factor, as income in Sweden is vital for the survival of the transnational family. Some participants in the study stated that they could consider moving to another country where they have relatives if they were forced to leave Sweden due to the TPD ending.

Some participants pointed out that despite the devastating consequences of the war, it has also opened up unexpected opportunities, such as financial independence, the opportunity to learn something new, and the chance to "start a life from scratch." In line with Brun's (2015) concept of "active waiting," the women in the study were willing to make significant efforts to build the conditions for "a real home in Sweden" for themselves and their children, even if it is temporary (see also UNHCR, 2023). However, some expressed that they do not want to return because they, and in some cases their children, "like Sweden" and besides safety, see opportunities for self-development and, in a few cases, a professional career.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

The findings presented in this Policy Brief should be interpreted within the context of the project's intention, namely to provide a snapshot based on the experiences of a small number of displaced Ukrainians in Sweden with a

focus on qualitative analysis. Supported by these findings and a series of comparative studies where Sweden's reception of displaced Ukrainians is studied as one of several empirical cases in the Nordic region (Danielsen, et al., 2023; Hernes, et al., 2023; IOM 2023b; UNHCR, 2023; Hernes and Danielsen, 2024), the following key conclusions are drawn:

- **Limited integration opportunities:** Sweden has a long experience of refugee reception and integration and is often considered generous and supportive in its reception (Irastorza and Osanami Törngren, 2023, p. 6). However, Sweden stood out in a less generous direction regarding the reception of displaced persons under the TPD during the first two years. Although displaced persons rated their interaction with Swedish authorities positively, they often felt excluded from decision-making processes affecting them. Their lives are characterized by significant economic and social insecurity due to low daily allowances, delayed and uneven access to SFI and further studies in Swedish, and limited access to healthcare, even for those who were employed and payed taxes in Sweden. Moreover, they had no clarity on how their right to stay in the country would change after the temporary protection ends –which will be in March 2026 as recently decided.
- **Rapid labour market integration:** Displaced Ukrainians have quickly entered the Swedish labour market (see IOM, 2023a), partly thanks to individual municipal initiatives and job fairs and some ESF projects specifically aimed at this group, and partly due to many displaced persons having higher education and, to some extent, previous experience of working abroad. However, the relative success in terms of labour market integration has come at the cost of temporary and short-term contracts, lower wages, loss of status, deskilling, and, in some cases, discrimination in the workplace. The lack of broader integration measures, which have been introduced in other Nordic countries (see Hernes, et al., 2023; Tyldum et al., 2023; UNHCR, 2023; Hernes and Danielsen, 2024), hinders displaced persons from building their lives independently. Moreover, they were dependent on others in contact with authorities, schools, and healthcare as they lacked both registration and Bank-ID in Sweden, which has changed as of July 2024 for those who lived in Sweden for at last two years.

- **The importance of civil society:** Civil society, engagement from the Ukrainian diaspora, and volunteer efforts have been crucial in supporting displaced persons with basic needs, language learning, and job matching. Displaced Ukrainians show initiative and a willingness to learn new things to improve their lives. As the war continues, the need for psychological support, which falls on civil society in the absence of regular healthcare, is growing.
- **Great uncertainty for the future:** The future seems uncertain for most displaced persons seeking protection in Sweden. Several expressed that they do not dare to return, especially those from eastern Ukraine. Our study and other research indicate that a larger proportion of those who came to Sweden want to stay in the country as long as possible. For those who have managed to establish themselves in Sweden with jobs, housing, and education for their children, it may be difficult to decide to return due to the uncertain situation in Ukraine, and in cases where the entire family is in Sweden, they express a desire to stay in the country for good, but with the hope of contributing to the rebuilding of Ukraine in the future.

The conclusions of this study are particularly relevant in light of the government's new legislative proposal (Government, 2024), which has been circulated for consultation and has received responses from 58 agencies. Based on these conclusions and considering the upcoming changes, the following measures should be promoted:

- **Registration and Mobilt BankID:** From July 2024, the government has opened up the possibility for displaced Ukrainians to register and obtain Mobilt BankID, as well as access to targeted assistance from the Swedish Public Employment Service, supporting integration efforts, higher daily allowances, and improved living conditions. These improvements only apply to those who have resided in Sweden for at least two years and intend to stay in the country for at least three years. The new legislation also introduces compulsory schooling for school-aged children. It should be noted that, while this legislative proposal is long-awaited, it risks creating groups with different rights, depending on the displaced persons' age, health, need for special support, employment situation, and the time when

they arrived in Sweden. The consequences of the legal change should therefore be studied further.

- **Possibility of permanent stay:** The government must work on long-term solutions for residence permits for displaced Ukrainians who, for various reasons, cannot return after March 2026. The temporary legislation, which has been extended to March 2026, poses several challenges and creates barriers to secure long-term integration among displaced persons in terms of the labour market, independent housing, and further education. Therefore, other types of residence permits (for work or studies) should be considered, which in turn provide a basis for residence rights.
- **Access to SFI and further education:** While awaiting the impact of the new legislation, SFI and further studies in Swedish should be made available to all who wish to learn the language through more coordinated efforts between different municipalities, regardless of where one lives in Sweden. Research is unanimous that language learning is a key to social integration and labour market establishment. Therefore, both adults and children, through inclusion in Swedish society, should be able to practice their Swedish skills not only through special language courses but also through work, studies, and leisure activities.
- **Targeted labour market measures:** The rapid labour market integration is beneficial for individual displaced persons, but also for society at large. To prevent entrapment in low-skilled jobs with low incomes, labour market measures should be targeted. Ensure that displaced persons with higher education and the intention to stay in Sweden for a longer period can validate their education and, with the help of the Employment Service, secure individualized further education and career choices. Displaced persons without previous established contact with the labour market should be able to receive further training in shortage occupations at a faster pace.
- **Support for civil society:** Given that civil society and the Ukrainian diaspora are crucial for those who fled the war to Sweden, necessary resources should continue to be directed to these actors in the future. They can create structure and support for both social and economic security for those seeking protection and still standing outside the Swedish welfare state. Being part of a strong civil society

in Sweden also creates conditions for personal engagement and local anchoring for displaced persons. At the same time, Ukrainians themselves should be considered a resource for Sweden, for example, to strengthen future relations with Ukraine and the rebuilding of the country. Therefore, the Ukrainian diaspora can play a significant role for displaced persons to maintain their identity and language.

- **Dialogue and flexibility:** Considering the uncertain future, it is reasonable for the government, municipalities, and various societal actors to work with both short- and long-term perspectives regarding displaced Ukrainians. As several studies point out (see UNHCR, 2023), continuous dialogue with displaced persons is required in these processes to create trust, participation, and feedback. It is important to maintain displaced persons' right to travel freely between different EU countries for 90 days, as well as their right to visit Ukraine. These visits to the homeland are necessary to maintain family contacts and eventually create a basis for possible return. Diverse and frequent relationships with those who have sought protection abroad are also significant for Ukraine's future rebuilding.

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