



Transnational and local connections in the integration of Ukrainian refugee families

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Summary

This brief draws on an interview study that sought to identify and understand the local and transnational social networks of Ukrainian refugee families in Estonia in the autumn of 2023. The aim of the interviews was to gain insights into how migrant families navigate and utilize their social networks in decision-making regarding integration pathways and future plans. The study seeks to gain insights into the nature and strength of transnational and local connections, including friendships, associations, and interactions with local authorities, as well as the structure and dynamics of these networks.

The analysis suggests that the integration decisions of Ukrainian families may be influenced by their connections to Ukrainians in Ukraine and other countries. However, it also indicates that these connections can be fragile, cut-off or unstable for various practical and/or political reasons. On the other hand, meaningful connections with the local population are highly valued, but often challenging to establish. Consequently, many individuals primarily maintain close ties with their families or other Ukrainian refugees in similar circumstances, both in Estonia and other countries. While the refugees included in this study have made some progress in integrating economically and socially in Estonia, their long-term plans, by the time of the interviews, were still affected by feelings of insecurity and indecisiveness, regardless of the number or strength of their local or transnational connections.

Main points

- The scope of the Ukrainian refugee families' transnational and local network has a significant impact on their coping mechanisms. The findings suggest that larger networks of at least some family members may include more close connections, which could potentially improve their everyday lives in terms of practical issues and social needs.
- With the exception of participants who were elderly people and older teenagers, connections to Ukrainians in Ukraine and other countries were not as significant by the end of 2023 as the new local ties with both Estonians and Ukrainians in Estonia. Young people stood out with their online communities, which provided them with a way to stay connected to Ukraine on a daily basis. For the elderly participants, making phone calls on a regular basis to stay in touch with their relatives and friends in Ukraine was a distinctive aspect of their experience.
- Other aspects of positive integration highlighted by participants are the ease and speed of digital “e-bureaucracy” in Estonia, which they often compare to the bureaucracy in Ukraine and even other countries where they have transnational contacts.
- The topic of future living places and countries is one that is approached with sensitivity, and the idea of returning to Ukraine is viewed with a mix of cautious optimism and pessimism. A number of participants originated from regions that had been occupied by Russian military making the prospect of returning seem implausible. This was not only due to the fact that the towns in question were not under Ukrainian legislation, their homes might have been destroyed and casualties among the people they knew, but also because of social considerations. Some of their former contacts had been cooperating with the occupants, which made the idea of returning seem even less viable.

Transnationalism, integration and Ukrainian refugees in Estonia

In research on migration, transnationalism serves as an umbrella term, to illuminate and deepening our understanding of the connections and activities developed between individuals, groups, or governments that are based in two or more countries. Transnationalism encourages a comprehensive approach to analyzing migration and integration. It challenges the assumptions that have been widely used earlier in forming migration policy, specifically the ideas of assimilation as the outcome of integration (Mügge, 2016). Transnational ties encompass a wide range of social, economic, and cultural connections that migrants maintain across borders. It is important for scholars, policymakers, and practitioners alike to gain a deeper understanding of the dynamics of these ties and their implications for migrant and refugee integration.

It is essential to recognize that transnationalism often requires resources, including economic, cultural, and even time investments, which may also imply a degree of integration in the host country as the migrants' focus is elsewhere (Mügge, 2016). Previously researchers argued that transnationalism impedes the local integration of individuals. Later research challenged this assumption and found that transnationalism can even be positive for integration (Bouras, 2015; Kuire et al., 2016; Erdal, 2020), suggesting that individuals may define their identity and economic space of action based on multiple locations and cultures accessible locally and digitally, including across borders (Duff, 2015). However, it should be acknowledged that the relationship between transnationalism and integration is complex and dependent on a number of individual and contextual factors. It is important to acknowledge that there is still much to be done in this field (Boccagni and Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2023).

Much of the existing work focuses on individuals rather than on the social ties of families or households (Lubbers et al., 2020). This study that this brief draws on sought to contribute to the existing body of knowledge by analyzing the social networks of each family member and the family as a unit. The majority of research on transnational social networks tends to focus on migrants who have long-standing ties with the host country and already well-established networks. However, this study focuses on a newly arrived group of refugees, namely Ukrainian refugees whose country of origin has been in a full-scale war since February 2022. What is specific about the Ukrainians in Estonia, is that they share strong historical connections to Estonia as both countries were part of the Soviet Union and since both countries share borders with Russia. Consequently, there has been a pre-existing Ukrainian community in Estonia both from the Soviet period and more recent, due to pre-2022 labor-related migration. For Estonia, Ukrainian refugees represent the first significant group of refugees that the country has ever had to accommodate. By the end of 2023, the number of Ukrainian refugee applications in Estonia had exceeded 40,000, which represents more than 3% of the country's local population (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2024). In the absence of a well-established refugee acceptance protocol, the process has been supported by volunteers and shaped by several ad hoc solutions. For instance, in autumn 2022 a Ukrainian school was established in Estonia that provide subjects both from Ukrainian and Estonian curriculum.

Methods and Findings

This study is based on data obtained from 11 interviews with Ukrainian refugee families conducted in November 2023. Each interview involved between one and five participants/family members and lasted between one and three hours. All interviews were conducted in Ukrainian with the assistance of a translator, and the refugee participants resided in both smaller and larger cities within Estonia.

During the interviews, each family member was asked to construct a social network map based on Bilecen (2016). The types of social ties represented by these contacts were discussed, as well as their importance for everyday life and social support. The arrival process and everyday life in Estonia were also addressed, with a focus on identifying potential improvements. Finally, the refugees were gently asked to elaborate on their future migration aspirations.

The main findings from this study are:

- Not surprisingly, the interviewees' most significant social connections were with their immediate family members. This was regardless of whether their family members currently resided in Estonia, Ukraine, or other countries.
- It should be noted that not all participants had strong emotional attachments to Ukraine. Transnational social connections with Ukraine may be terminated for a number of reasons, including: (1) the destruction of hometowns or (2) hometowns that are currently under Russian occupation, (3) the death of important individuals, (4) the weakening of connections due to distance, or (5) the emergence of a pro-Russian stance among friends, family, or community members. The dissolution of ties to Ukraine is reflected in their increased interest in investing their time and social capital locally in Estonia.
- None of the participants expressed a desire to migrate to other countries, but rather had established their lives in Estonia often with a wish to return to Ukraine sometime in the unknown future. The primary integration-related aspiration among participants was to maintain or identify more meaningful and rewarding activities in Estonia in both their professional and social spheres.
- Earning a living gave participants a sense of purpose. The majority of respondents had jobs, although the tasks and benefits at work did not always reflect their skills or provide security. Some of the participants worked on temporary contracts through recruitment agencies and could lose their jobs if they became ill or injured. There was no system in place to help them recover and return to work, which added to the refugees' insecurities about managing their lives locally.
- While few Estonians speak Ukrainian, Russian proficiency is widespread. This has been beneficial for Russian speaking Ukrainian parents to organize everyday practicalities without learning the local Estonian language. However, pupils often perceive that their Russian language abilities are assumed even though their mother tongue is Ukrainian, which has sometimes resulted in conflicts and feelings of exclusion from communication and a barrier to create connections.
- Participants encounter difficulties in establishing local connections with Estonians, as their social network is predominantly with family members and other Ukrainian refugees. One of the primary unfulfilled aspirations among participants is the desire to engage in communication in the Estonian language. This lack of opportunity may potentially lead to social exclusion from learning the language and consequently preventing further integration.
- The participants in the study emphasized the constructive and appreciative relationships between local officials, social workers, and volunteers, despite the absence of formalized procedures for welcoming refugees in Estonia. Many of the initial Estonian contacts were established during these encounters, and numerous relationships evolved into informal friendships.
- Additionally, Estonian societal organization has been found welcoming and easy to adjust to due to the country's digital services (e-state) facilitate a homey and expedient bureaucratic process, rendering it more efficient than bureaucracy in Ukraine or what the participant had heard about other receiving countries.

Conclusions

The nature and strength of transnational and local connections among Ukrainian refugee families in Estonia are of central importance to their coping mechanisms and integration experiences. The study demonstrates that the extent of these networks has a considerable impact on both the social and practical aspects of their daily lives. The existence of extensive networks, particularly those comprising immediate family members, is of paramount importance in providing indispensable support. Nevertheless, the significance of transnational connections to Ukraine and other countries seems to be waning, already by the end of 2023, with the majority of refugees shifting their attention toward local ties in Estonia. According to the participants in the study, such transnational ties were terminated as a result of a number of factors, including the destruction of hometowns, the occupation of the region by Russian forces, the death of close contacts, or shifts in political allegiance among former friends.

Young participants maintain connections with Ukraine through online communities, while elderly individuals stay in touch through regular phone calls. For many, however, the local networks in Estonia are becoming increasingly significant. These networks frequently comprise other Ukrainian refugees, with comparatively fewer connections to Estonians due to linguistic barriers and social isolation. While Russian-speaking Estonians have been of assistance in meeting certain practical needs, the assumption that Ukrainians speak Russian has, on occasion, resulted in feelings of exclusion, particularly among schoolchildren.

Notwithstanding these challenges, participants observed that Estonian bureaucratic systems, particularly digital services (e-state), are efficient and facilitate more seamless integration than those in Ukraine and other countries. Furthermore, positive interactions with local authorities, including social workers, officials, and volunteers, have been identified as a crucial factor in the formation of informal friendships, which in turn facilitate the development of social integration.

Policy recommendations

Here are five policy recommendations based on what could be learned from the interviews with Ukrainian refugee families in Estonia. They are both good examples that have helped the participants but also recommendations based on the analysis of the problems the participants have faced.

1. **Support refugees in learning language and fit into society.** Besides better and adjusted language courses (a specific problem in Estonia was the lack of language teachers and therefore courses), this includes community projects that could bring locals and Ukrainian refugees together to foster mutual understanding especially while their transnational ties could be evading. These initiatives can help refugees connect with Estonians as well as Estonian Russians, which would help them integrate.
2. **Provide digital and bureaucratic assistance.** Many services exist in Estonia but can be difficult to understand for new users with different traditions and even needs. Use Estonia's digital infrastructure to help refugees with e-bureaucracy in Ukrainian and Russian. Development of new services can also be topical - if digital services include support for refugees' practical needs, they will benefit more from Estonia's e-governance system.
3. **Facilitate access to education and employment.** Offer relevant training programs, internships, or scholarships not only for children but also for grownups. These programs should help refugees fit into the Estonian society and economy as well as help keep options open to return to Ukraine in the future.
4. **Develop employment contracts that include social insurance and benefits for both refugees and employers.** It is reasonable for employers to consider refugees as temporary workers, but from the refugees' perspective, the temporary contracts without guarantees made them feel that they could never get sick, be insured, or take a reasonable number of vacation days without losing their jobs. Job security helps refugees feel welcome and begins to build local ties.
5. **Develop systems that provide mental health and emotional support.** Counseling and support groups can help refugees deal with grief, with their traumatic experiences and navigate the complexities of transnational ties.

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The recommendations in this Policy Brief is based on results from the research project INFLUX, with funds from NordForsk (ref.no 161678). Collaborators in INFLUX are shown in the bottom line.

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