



“If you really want to stay, you will do whatever it takes.”

**DIALOGUE WITH REFUGEES
FROM UKRAINE IN
THE NORDIC COUNTRIES**

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1. INTRODUCTION

Since the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, UNHCR and its partners in Europe have collected primary data about the profiles, intentions and perspectives of refugees from Ukraine. UNHCR has published these data in three reports, “*Lives on Hold: Profiles and Intentions of Refugees from Ukraine*” ([July 2022](#)) and “*Lives on Hold: Intentions and Perspectives of Refugees from Ukraine*” [#2 \(September 2022\)](#) and [#3 \(February 2023\)](#) as well as two Regional Protection Analyses of Refugees from Ukraine [#1 \(October 2022\)](#) and [#2 \(April 2023\)](#). These reports offer in-depth analyses of the factors and drivers behind decisions that refugees from Ukraine residing in host countries across Europe and beyond make. It ensures the centrality of their voices in discussions about their future, with the goal of informing advocacy, programming and decision-making of host Governments and stakeholders.

Dialogue with refugees helps facilitate participation, build trust and sharing of feedback. Participation can help refugees reduce feelings of powerlessness, cope with trauma and build self-esteem as well as self-confidence. Participation also forms the foundation for evidence-based decisions and action planning that draws on the insights, knowledge, capacities, skills and resources of refugees.

In the Nordic region, UNHCR initiated a dialogue with refugees from Ukraine as part of its initial assessment of the response to the Ukraine refugee situation carried out from March to June 2022. To further understand their intentions, concerns and capacities, UNHCR wished to continue the dialogue in a more structured manner. Building on existing surveys and other participatory assessments in the region, UNHCR therefore explored the collaboration of partners to carry out a series of structured Focus Groups Discussions (FGDs) with different profiles of refugees from Ukraine in the Nordic countries.

In order to gain a full overview of how the Temporary Protection Directive and national protection schemes have been implemented in the Nordic countries, this report should be read in conjunction with the Nordic Council of Ministers report “*Implementation of temporary protection for refugees from Ukraine – A systematic review of the Nordic countries*” of 7 December 2022.¹ For a comparative country-by-country overview of implementation of temporary protection for refugees from Ukraine in the Nordics, refer to the table in Annex 2 which has been extracted from the Nordic Council of Ministers report.

¹ The Nordic Council of Ministers, Anna Berlina, [Implementation of temporary protection for refugees from Ukraine – A systematic review of the Nordic countries](#), 7 December 2022.

2. METHODOLOGY

The selected partners involved in carrying out the FGDs on behalf of UNHCR were the **Danish Refugee Council** in Denmark, the **Finnish Refugee Council** in Finland and **Svenska med baby** in Sweden. FGDs with participants in Denmark, Finland and Sweden were based on the location of the selected partners and ease of access to refugees from Ukraine in each host country.

The FGDs focused on two phases following arrival in the host country: (i) the initial reception phase and (ii) the early integration phase following placement in a municipality. The distinction between these two phases was made in order to identify the evolution of participants' experiences with regard to the below mentioned themes from point of arrival to the early phase of integration in the host country.

The four selected themes explored during the FGDs included:

- 1 **Access to services and support.** Services and support include access to housing, education, childcare, healthcare (including psychosocial support), employment, daily allowance/financial assistance, language courses and provision of information. Specific attention was paid to persons with specific needs.
- 2 **Sustaining a daily living.** This includes source of funding and income, such as employment, savings, sale of assets in Ukraine, irregular and regular forms of employment, labour market inclusion and engaging in high-risk work, for example survival sex, prostitution, child labour, exploitation in the workplace.
- 3 **Capacities and coping mechanisms.** This includes self-established community support, psychosocial and other forms of support and coping mechanisms.
- 4 **Intentions to leave or stay in the host country.** This includes potential of permanent residence in the host country and factors influencing the decision-making process to leave or stay in the country and/or return to Ukraine.

Between 15 November 2022 and 1 December 2022, UNHCR's partners conducted FGDs with a total of 90 refugees from Ukraine. Interviews were carried out with refugees in the initial arrival/reception phase and with those in the early integration phase who had already been settled in various municipalities.² A diverse and inclusive approach was adopted in the selection of participants across different age, gender and diversity groups. Partners obtained each participant's consent to their participation in the FGDs.

The results presented in this report must be interpreted taking into account the methodology and within the context in which the project was intended, namely to provide a snapshot of a small number of refugees from Ukraine in Denmark, Finland and Sweden, focusing on qualitative rather than quantitative data. To the extent possible, the findings will distinguish between participants' experiences in the initial reception phase and the early integration phase. The selection of participants for the FGDs followed a non-probability approach and cannot necessarily be extrapolated to the population of refugees from Ukraine as a whole. The results reflect refugees' situation and intentions at the time of information collection, which may subsequently change depending on a wide range of factors.

While certain data has been anonymized, the participants' viewpoints and stories are reflected in the report.

The FGD moderators in Denmark and Finland were Danish and Finnish respectively, who used Ukrainian and/or Russian speakers for translation. Moderators in Sweden were Ukrainian speakers.

² Initial reception phase: Duration of stay ranges from a few days to three months. Early integration phase: Duration of stay ranges from seven to nine months.

3. FINDINGS OF THE FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS IN DENMARK, FINLAND AND SWEDEN

3.1 Access to services and support in the host country

Participants across all three countries unanimously expressed that they had received a warm reception by the host population and volunteers. Extensive gratitude was expressed towards the Red Cross, the Salvation Army and other organisations, as well as the generosity of private individuals and families who had opened their homes and donated clothes, food, toys and other items.

Access to information

Access to information was a key challenge for participants in all three countries, despite information on asylum procedures and other services made available for Ukrainians in Denmark, Sweden and Finland on the respective migration service websites in Ukrainian, Russian, English and/or the local language. Participants tried to overcome challenges in accessing information by asking staff or volunteers at the asylum reception centers, the municipalities, friends and family, other Ukrainians, organisations, or browsing social media and applications such as Facebook and Telegram.



IN DENMARK the vast majority of Ukrainians were quickly granted residence permits under the Danish Special Act for Ukrainians. Only a few applied for or were channeled to the regular asylum procedures when they did not qualify for residence permits under the Special Act. Some participants in the initial reception phase who lived in an asylum center in a rural area did not appear aware of the existence of the information websites, because they suggested to set up a webpage with information about the rules, rights and conditions at the asylum centers in Denmark and in the asylum phase. There was a sentiment of uncertainty about the rules and procedures regarding the asylum process or the reception center, with some participants expressing a fear of being expelled from the center if they asked too many or the wrong questions. Some participants expressed that every time they asked a question at the center, they were told to wait for the Danish Immigration Service's decision on their residence permit and that the municipality could answer their questions after they have moved. Some had received conflicting information from the municipality about the right to work while waiting for their decision. The participants interviewed at the asylum center included those granted residency under the Special Act and those channeled through the regular asylum procedures. It is therefore worth noting that participants who were in the regular asylum procedures had experienced the longest waiting times and expressed the most concerns.

“ It was a very positive experience, and we were received in a good way. The Danes are friendly and welcoming, and everyone I meet in the municipality, the street and in the hospitals are very friendly.”

FGD participant, elderly Ukrainian woman in Denmark

“ Thanks to the humanitarian help and receiving the pension from Ukraine, I can live quite normally here.”

FGD participant in Finland

“ If it weren't for [Swedish] people, I don't know where I would be. On the street, naked, barefoot, hungry.”

FGD participant in Sweden

In contrast to the above experiences in the initial reception phase, the evolution of information needs was clear for participants in the early integration phase at a temporary housing center for Ukrainians in one of the bigger cities. There, they expressed challenges in accessing more practical information to help them navigate their daily lives, such as how to book an appointment with a doctor. Interestingly, participants in the early integration phase in one of the bigger cities in Denmark were not only very well informed, but they also received help twice a week from volunteers at the Danish Refugee Council, the municipality, and a Ukrainian organisation, with practical matters such as booking appointments to see a doctor, reading and understanding letters sent by the municipality, and assistance with the NemID.³



IN SWEDEN, participants in both phases expressed fears in approaching the Swedish Migration Agency when asking questions and seeking information. They also shared their frustration over the lack of choice and participation in decisions at the reception centers that concerned them. Still, some positive experiences were noted about the kindness of staff at the agency's office in one of the bigger cities in Sweden.



IN FINLAND, participants expressed similar challenges navigating the web of information. In fact, a similar suggestion was made as in Denmark about creating a "Wikipedia" page where refugees could add information themselves and act as content administrators. Some participants in Finland felt lost searching for information, while others perceived the availability of information about services to be very well-organized. Participants who arrived in Finland early on after the invasion in February 2022, perceived that those who arrived later on, after the summer, were better informed.

“ In the [Swedish] Migration Agency (...) there is no freedom of choice. Everything is decided for you, there is no right to be included in decision-making.”

“ People are afraid to approach the Migration Agency, because there is only one answer: Go to Kiruna.”

“ Very nice people work at the Migration Service ... The gods work there.”

“ The Migration Agency looks at us as residents of Ukraine, not as people who need help.”

FGD participants in Sweden

“ I feel lost when it comes to searching for information about available services for Ukrainian refugees. I receive lots of information at the Help Center for Ukrainians.”

“ There is a very well-organized information board in our center where I can always find all the most relevant and useful information about various services.”

“ People who came here after the summer are better informed than we were when we came.”

“ It's a shame there's no more info desk at the airport and port.”

FGD participants in Finland

³ The [NemID in Denmark](#) is a common secure login system for Danish internet banks, government websites and private companies.

Access to language learning

Access to information is inextricably linked to the language barrier, which was noted as a recurring challenge across the board in all three countries, more so for the adult participants who described Danish, Finnish and Swedish as difficult languages to learn quickly. Children appeared to be able to pick up the languages much faster, depending on whether they were placed in classes with only Ukrainian children or with children who spoke Danish, Finnish or Swedish.



IN SWEDEN, participants mentioned they only have access to short-term language classes and that they do not have access to formal Swedish classes for immigrants (*Svenska För Invandrare*, SFI).⁴ They feel the continuity of language learning is one of the key aspects to successfully and quickly learning the language. Those who did not speak English felt they were at a further disadvantage. According to a participant, one principal at a school believed the children should be able to speak Swedish after three months.



IN FINLAND, parents of young children faced other multi-layered challenges impacting their ability to integrate and contribute to society in the host country. Finnish municipalities are required by law to provide Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) for children who have temporary protection status, if their parents are employed. Parents who do not speak Finnish and/or English face challenges accessing the labour market. An unemployed parent is unable to benefit from ECEC and is thus left with little choice other than to remain home with their child(ren), thereby barring them from attending language courses. Children excluded from ECEC end up missing out on key support, social interaction with other children and the ability to pick up the language faster. The Finnish example demonstrates the importance of considering the interoperability of an entire reception and support structure in the management of displaced populations, with due consideration to the “do no harm”-principle.



IN DENMARK, early integration participants found the integration segments of the courses arranged by the municipality unhelpful and would rather spend more time learning Danish. One participant in one of the bigger cities expressed discontent that the duration of Danish language courses had been decreased from nine to six hours per week.

⁴ It is possible that information about language courses that are available beyond *Svenska För Invandrare* (SFI) does not reach all refugees who are interested in them. The Government of Sweden has included a [proposal in its 2023 Spring Budget that municipalities should be able to offer adult education in SFI for people granted protection under the Temporary Protection Directive](#). The Government has proposed that municipalities should receive SEK 100 million in state grants for this purpose. The Swedish Parliament is expected to vote on the budget in June 2023.

Access to the labour market

The language barrier consequently impacted the ability to access the labour market and employment in all three countries, more so for participants in the early integration phase than the initial reception phase. In general, participants expressed that employers were not keen on or interested in hiring anyone who does not speak the language, even after a completed internship facilitated by the job center. This should however be considered against participants' individual experiences and depending on their ability to secure employment. It may therefore not be a representative picture of the situation in the respective countries.⁵ In all three countries, those who were able to secure employment found jobs as cleaners or in construction, even though many held higher level professions in Ukraine. Participants felt these types of menial jobs did not enable them to practice the local language. Elderly Ukrainians found themselves excluded altogether from the job market, or if they did find work as a cleaner, it was physically demanding. There was a strong desire to be able to work in their own field in the host country. Some applied to educational programmes to acquire the necessary accreditation to work in their own field, such as in nursing or elderly care, but were not selected. Those who came to Denmark, Finland or Sweden with the expectation that they would easily find work were clearly disappointed.



IN FINLAND, particular concerns were raised by participants about the skepticism they faced by Finnish employers regarding their qualifications obtained in Ukraine. Participants in the initial reception phase in Finland shared experiences of labour exploitation and unpaid wages by certain construction companies. Some faced sexism.



IN DENMARK, job centers were perceived as unhelpful and inconsiderate of coordinating internship and employment opportunities to avoid clashing with the timing of language courses. Some of the women in the early integration phase in one of the bigger cities explained that they were warned against completing an internship at a supermarket because they will never be hired after the end of the internship. Their general experience is that when they have finished their internship after four weeks, they are asked if they can speak Danish. If they cannot speak the language, they are not hired. One woman in the early integration phase in a big city was told at a job interview that her children speak much better Danish than she did. They told her that when she reaches the same level of Danish as her children, she can come back. Another woman in the same city who attended a job fair, experienced several rejections every time she said she was from Ukraine. She was not asked about her Danish language skills. One woman living in a rural area in Denmark had been in the country for seven months and had lived in different centers. She experienced challenges getting a job, because information about her right to work before being granted a residence permit was not clear to staff at the municipality. She spent a lot of time and energy convincing the responsible social worker that she was allowed to work. By the time things fell into place, she was denied a residence permit under the Special Act for Ukrainians and was no longer allowed to work.

“ I was shocked by the skeptical attitude of the Finnish employers towards the qualification of Ukrainian specialists.”

“ It is very easy to get hired by fraud employers ...”

FGD participants in Finland

“ It's like a circle: The job center sends us to an internship because we are supposed to learn Danish at the workplace. But the internships we are sent to are cleaning jobs, where we can't use the Danish language.”

“ The job center does not coordinate with the language school, and that is frustrating, because how are we going to learn Danish then?”

FGD participant in Denmark

⁵ In Denmark, for instance, the [employment rate for Ukrainians is at 62 percent](#) for persons of working age (at 31 March 2023).



IN SWEDEN, participants who were relocated several times by the authorities or the municipality to different centers, housing and cities risked losing whatever work they managed to secure. The more remotely people lived from big cities, the more difficult it was to find work. The lack of a network in Sweden and information about local job sites and opportunities further put participants at a disadvantage. Participants expressed frustration about the types of jobs they were able to find, mostly in cleaning and construction. Similar sentiments were expressed as in Denmark about the employment center – that they are not helpful. Amidst the frustration shared, however, one positive experience came through about a young Ukrainian woman in Sweden, who was taken in by a family when she first arrived. After acquiring the necessary documents to demonstrate eligibility to work in Sweden, she landed her first job as a waitress, and was eventually recruited as an analyst by a large technology company, in her original field of work.

- “ We are registered at the employment center. Without language, they cannot help us. All we can do is work as cleaners.”
- “ One job shines for us, a cleaner or builder, but unofficial or black work, because education is needed for everything.”
- “ It is easier for men to get a job, because there is a demand for construction workers. Women are offered only cleaning jobs.”
- “ You have to look for a job yourself or through friends”

FGD participants in Sweden

Access to healthcare

Participants shared positive reviews of the healthcare system in all three countries, particularly for children who were able to benefit from immunization schedules and checkups free of charge, or who required ongoing treatment for chronic illnesses. The challenges emerged across the board when specialist care and prescription medication is required, with experiences of long waiting times for referrals to a specialist and unaffordable treatments at the expense of the individual. A need for psychosocial support and increased availability of Ukrainian and/or Russian speaking interpreters at hospitals was expressed.



IN SWEDEN, pregnant women who delivered their children were pleased with the quality of services, with one woman comparing it to an expensive good quality clinic in Ukraine. Those in the early integration phase appeared to be more familiar with the healthcare system in comparison to more recent arrivals who were less informed about how to access health services. Sweden did, however, stand out in only allowing access to emergency and dental care, except for children under the age of 18, in comparison to the other Nordic countries.

- “ Healthcare system is good, but slow and long waiting times. You have to be persistent with them.”
- “ Psychological and social support is needed. During the medical examination, they said that if everything is bad, we can send you to a clinic, but at our own expense.”

FGD participant in Sweden



IN FINLAND, one participant in the initial reception phase shared that it was cumbersome to get a prescription for asthma medication from a doctor.



IN DENMARK, participants in the initial reception phase living at an asylum center mentioned that a doctor is present at the center every other week, but they felt that this was not enough. They shared that they were uncertain about which channels to use to access the right healthcare. They were particularly uncertain what to do in case of an emergency, for example if a child develops a high fever. In the early integration phase, one woman living in one of the bigger cities shared very positive experiences with the healthcare system. When she saw the doctor for her blood pressure, she was weighed, measured, a blood test was done, and she was able to receive the right medication. She was very satisfied with the treatment and indicated that the municipality paid for her medication. She also received antibiotics free of charge. Some of the women living in a big city shared examples of negative experiences with medical treatment. One of the women recounted a situation of her roommate who contracted COVID-19 and was sent home by the doctor, forcing her to live in close quarters with other residents. Another woman with a heart condition was only able to get an appointment to see a doctor after six months, while yet another woman who experienced feelings of stress did not receive any support at all. Similar experiences were shared with regard to access to dental care involving costly and unaffordable treatment.

Children and access to education

The situation of Ukrainian children, their wellbeing, access to education and even the school curriculum was a particularly contentious topic discussed among participants. It was generally evident that the differences were attributed more to individually lived experiences of parents and children rather than concrete differences in services between the three countries. Satisfaction with kindergarten depended very much on the teachers and the school, but many still felt that their children were happy, adjusting well at school, and making new friends.

Opinions were divided about whether it was more optimal from a language and social interaction perspective for children to be placed in classes with only Ukrainian children or with children of other backgrounds and who spoke the host country language.

In all three countries, many parents said that their children attended Ukrainian school online after the end of their regular school day, which placed an additional load on the children. There were different reasons for “double-schooling”, ranging from uncertainty about their future, to the possibility of one day returning to Ukraine and maintaining the connection with their home.



IN DENMARK, parents in the initial reception phase who lived in an asylum center in a rural area were not satisfied with placement of different age groups of children in the same class (ages 7 to 13), because children at different levels of maturity and education are placed together in one class. The issue of mixed classes with Danish children or separate classes with only Ukrainian children was also a point of debate among participants of both the initial reception and early integration phases. Some parents believed it was better for their children to be in mixed classes to learn Danish faster. Other parents felt their children benefited more from being in separate classes with other children from Ukraine. Parents further raised instances of bullying and derogatory language used by other children at school. Participants voiced concern about conflicts arising between children placed in mixed classes. One woman in the early integration phase living in a big city believed the conflicts, could be attributed to a difference in culture and mentality between Danes and Ukrainians.

Generally, several participants in both phases expressed their satisfaction with their children’s kindergarten, school and teachers. In one case, a mother recounted a story about her child, who had misbehaved, and was punished by a Ukrainian teacher at kindergarten by pressing the child’s arm and throwing her shoe in the trash can.

Some of the mothers in Denmark expressed concerns about the general wellbeing of their children, when one parent remained behind in Ukraine, or when the children were missing their home back in Ukraine. It was difficult and emotional for them to talk about their children and how they felt, because it was a sensitive topic. The women suggested that it might be good if teachers at school were taught how to communicate with children affected by war. They believed it was important for them to be able to talk about it at school.



IN FINLAND, some parents had a very good impression of the school system and the impact it has had on their children and their wellbeing. Children with development challenges have received excellent support and care at school, as was voiced by one parent. Participants mentioned that their children were motivated to learn Finnish when they saw their parents studying it. Similar to Denmark, instances of bullying were noted.



IN SWEDEN, some parents in the early integration phase in a big city were very satisfied with their children's quality of life, expressing that it had exceeded their expectations. They felt that the children were happier, freer and had gained self-confidence. Some children told their parents that they did not want to go to school, because they did not understand anything. Two children interviewed separately by the FGD moderators, living in a big city in the early integration phase, were very satisfied with their life in Sweden. They experienced positive and friendly attitudes at school. They enjoyed the winter and the snow. They mostly enjoyed the food served at school. They felt their conditions had improved for their family after they were relocated following initial arrival, and that they had everything they needed. They placed trust in their parents to meet their needs. One of the most interesting reasons for "double-schooling", highlighted in Sweden, was the Swedish curriculum. This was described as too easy or lagging behind the Ukrainian curriculum, with parents worried that their children will need to repeat a grade if they return to Ukraine.

Long waiting times for placement in kindergarten was a concern for parents in both **Finland and Sweden** in some cases up to five months. There was a distinction between younger children's ability to adjust in their new environment, compared to children in their older teens, who have not only experienced a more marked sense of uprooting but also had to cope with their own physical and mental changes as teenagers.

“ I don't know if my child is lying but I don't think she would lie to me. The teacher says my child is aggressive and has problems, but of course she reacts to this situation when we are fleeing war.”

FGD participant in Denmark

“ There are some kids that bully my child because he doesn't speak Finnish. It is a stressful moment.”

FGD participant in Finland

“ Mathematics is too easy, I can solve everything quickly.”

“ Everything we are learning now in the 5th grade we were taught in Ukraine in the 3rd grade.”

FGD child participants in Sweden

Access to housing

Access to and the quality of accommodation and housing was another topic of debate among participants. Opinions about both the process of placement to a municipality after the initial phase and the quality of accommodation differed vastly across participants in all countries depending on where they were placed, family size and composition, number of times they were relocated, length of waiting time before placement, whether they were provided their own private apartment or shared quarters, and their own expectations. Living conditions in initial reception centers were not ideal according to many. The decision by authorities and the municipality of allocation of private or shared living space was unclear and perceived as unfair, especially when the same amount of rent was paid for both types. Sentiments were expressed about bureaucratic processes and random placement of individuals without consideration of their specific needs or requests.



IN FINLAND, there were mixed experiences on the housing situation. A family of four received an entire apartment for themselves. Others were placed in a hostel meant to serve as temporary housing. The hostel was usually used as a summer resort. When the municipality came to check on the residents, they were informed that the hostel was good enough to spend the winter in. However, participants who were placed there, perceived it as inadequately equipped for the cold winter.



IN DENMARK, living conditions were generally much better after placement in the municipality in one of the rural areas compared to what they experienced in the initial reception center. In one of the bigger cities, on the contrary, some participants mentioned that their living conditions were better prior to being granted a residence permit, because in that phase, they were given their own rooms or apartments. After being granted a residence permit, they were placed at a housing center. One man with a disability in the initial reception phase was concerned about the remote location of the center and proximity to a hospital. One woman placed in one of the bigger cities in Denmark felt like she had come to paradise after experiencing war and the initial reception center, because she was given her own private modern apartment. Others placed in shared temporary housing centers in one of the bigger cities were unhappy about tight living quarters, loud noises, flea-ridden pets of fellow residents and broken utility equipment in need of repair at their own expense.

Refugees from Ukraine in Denmark did have the chance to request a particular municipality for placement during the application process. The request would be considered if, for instance, the person had secured a job or had close family members in a specific municipality.

“ We got dwelling after a long and complicated bureaucratic procedure.”

FGD participant in Finland

“ All of us who live here came from war, so the loud noises make us scared.”

FGD participant, Ukrainian woman in Denmark

“ It is frustrating to be sent around between various institutions.”

“ We love the Danes, but we hate the bureaucracy here.”

FGD participants in Denmark



IN SWEDEN, some participants in the early integration phase in a big city felt very lucky to have housing and food. Participants also commented on the poor quality of food and insufficient beds to accommodate large numbers of people. In general, participants had different experiences with housing in Sweden. Some found a host family they stayed with themselves or received help finding host families through the volunteers who helped bring them to Sweden. Others sought help from the Swedish Migration Agency, but experienced multiple relocations to different municipalities in the country. Allocation of rooms by the Migration Agency was unclear to participants who observed single people being allocated a large apartment while couples received smaller ones.

“The impression is they distribute housing randomly.”

FGD participant in Sweden

3.2 Sustaining a daily living

The low amount of daily allowance provided to asylum-seekers and refugees in the Nordic countries was already a well-documented fact and subject of some criticism and public attention in the first months after the outbreak of the war.⁶ With global inflation also affecting price levels of consumer goods and in general the cost of living in the Nordic countries, and no revision to the daily allowance to match this, the financial situation for Ukrainians has deteriorated. This was expectedly further substantiated and elaborated on by several participants during the FGDs in Denmark, Finland and Sweden. Many participants mentioned that what they received for a one-month period barely lasted for two weeks and was insufficient to cover their daily needs, especially for single parents and families with children.

The challenges experienced were a constant source of stress and anxiety for participants, always struggling to make ends meet and forced to make decisions on which costs to prioritize and almost always at the expense of something else they needed – a job, clothes, a doctor’s appointment. Nevertheless, people were resourceful and found a way to manage. Finding the cheapest supermarkets, leftover food handouts, secondhand shops, searching for items on sale, recycling cans and bottles, making the best use of donations and asking organisations such as the Red Cross to help with day pass transportation tickets, are just some of the examples mentioned. Some even received help from their parents who have remained in Ukraine.



IN FINLAND, participants in the initial reception phase found that their daily allowance was enough to meet their needs, as long as they lived at the reception center, lived modestly and could benefit from donations. Participants also felt it was more profitable not to work because once a person has secured a job and income, they no longer receive an allowance and had to cover expenses that are collectively unaffordable, such as rent, food, medicine, clothes (especially winter clothes for children) and transportation.



IN DENMARK, participants explained that they managed to survive on the amount they received if they were smart about how they spent their money, albeit with difficulty. Mothers with children in the early integration phase no longer received allowance benefits for single parents when the municipality learned that their husbands are still in Ukraine. According to these mothers, no consideration was given to whether their husbands constitute a source of income for the family in Denmark, leaving them to struggle on the lesser amount now received. Participants shared similar concerns as in Finland about it being more profitable not to work. They were also grateful that they did not have expensive habits such as smoking or consuming alcohol.

⁶ See Annex 2 for a comparative overview of the daily allowance in the Nordic countries.



SWEDEN stands out with the lowest daily allowance in the Nordic countries. Although refugees from Ukraine receive the same level of allowance as asylum seekers of other nationalities, it remains at a level that has not been revised since 1994. Some participants expressed concern when they had no other income to survive on apart from the daily allowance. One participant in one of the bigger cities described having to look for plastic bottles to recycle and receive cash in return to meet the daily needs. Another participant described the feeling of not having enough money to live off as one of discomfort and unease.

Another unique topic mentioned repeatedly by participants in Sweden was the correlation between not being issued a Swedish personal identity number and access to BankID,⁷ which facilitates online purchases and access to other services such as internet cable at home. Without a BankID it also becomes challenging to set up Swish,⁸ a system required to manage cashless payments. This barred them from being fully integrated into a largely cashless society.

The high cost of transportation was a recurring problem that came up in all three countries. Participants ended up forfeiting transportation, for example to attend a job interview, in favour of ensuring they had enough money to feed their children.



IN DENMARK participants were unclear about the actual rules regarding free transportation for Ukrainians. Some were fined when they did not have a ticket for their pet, which is quite unique to Denmark in the Nordics.

Participants who came to Denmark with their car from Ukraine struggled to meet the costs of vehicle registration and taxes. Moreover, in order to receive self-sufficiency and repatriation benefits, a person cannot own an asset that is worth more than DKK 10,000 for single persons or DKK 20,000 for couples. Different municipalities have applied this rule differently when considering what to include and consider as a refugee's assets of value. Participants who owned a car therefore worried about having to sell it, partly because they feared they might not be entitled to receive benefits when they own a car, and partly because they wanted to use their car to return to Ukraine.



IN SWEDEN, similar concerns were expressed about the unclarity of rules around transportation fees for Ukrainians. Depending on which region the participants lived in, some managed to access it free of charge by showing the conductor their Ukrainian passport, while others had to pay for a ticket, which they perceived as very expensive. Participants tried to find solutions to travel for free. Sometimes it depended on whether the conductor was willing to help and allowed people to travel free of charge. Some were fined during control checks when found without a ticket.

“ We are able to pay, but due to lack of Swish we cannot – it’s an economic black hole!”

“ How can I buy a monthly pass if the daily allowance is SEK 19 per day and the ticket costs SEK 815? When you go to the Migration Agency with this question, they say: You are paid SEK 19 per day. That should be enough.”

FGD participants in Sweden

“ If I go to a job interview, I will have to use the money on transportation, and I am afraid to waste my money on transportation, if I don’t know that I will get the job.”

FGD participant in Denmark

⁷ [BankID in Sweden](#) is used as a form of personal self-identification to pay securely on the internet, log in to various government services, digital signatures, tax returns, access personal medical information etc.

⁸ [Swish in Sweden](#) is a mobile payment system used for digital payments to send and receive money through an application.

3.3 Capacities and coping mechanisms

The dialogue with Ukrainian refugees during these FGDs shed light on a wide range of capacities and resilience among participants. The sense of determination helped keep people going. Even when discussing the serious topic of coping mechanisms, the participants were able to maintain their sense of humor. The ability to laugh together as a community, including about their difficult situations brought them closer together, helped them relate to each other's experiences and stripped away the feeling of being alone.

Participants shared numerous examples of activities that not only helped them cope with their situation but allowed them to contribute with their skills to help others. Many stayed active during their free time, practicing yoga, swimming, and knitting socks for soldiers back in Ukraine. They searched for opportunities to attend free events, sports matches and concerts.



IN DENMARK, a group of older men and women in one of the bigger cities all acquired fishing licenses as part of an activity in the senior café for Ukrainians. Some participants volunteered by offering lessons in areas in which they are skilled, such as dancing, singing, music and speech therapy. Children coped by focusing on their studies, participating in after school clubs, chatting with their new friends in Denmark and maintaining connections with friends in Ukraine.

3.4 Intentions to leave or stay in the host country

In all three countries, participants expressed a desire to return to Ukraine and the lives they once had, but the destruction of their homes has currently made that a near impossibility, in their opinion. If the war were to end and it were safe to return, they would return. They kept themselves informed and followed developments closely on the news and social media, even though some felt they needed more information on the specific situation in their former area of residence. Remaining parents and family members in Ukraine have left some participants torn about the decision to stay in the host country or to return. It has been particularly difficult for children who miss their fathers who have remained in Ukraine. Many remained hopeful about staying for a longer period in the host country, in the hopes of building a new future for themselves and their children. They were keen to learn the language and contribute to society. They understood however that this will depend on how long they can benefit from temporary protection schemes in Denmark, Finland and Sweden.

The discussions also revealed some of the reasons why participants chose their host country as a destination in the first place before looking at their intentions to stay or leave. Some of the factors that played a role in the choice of host country included availability of clear information online about procedures for applying for a residence permit, presence of family and friends, the host population's ability to communicate well in English, trustworthy systems in place and availability of good opportunities for their children. Still, some did not care where they ended up. They were merely focused on finding safety. Overall, it became evident that intentions were neither clear nor straightforward for anyone, but dependent on a range of factors, both external and individual circumstances.



IN DENMARK, many participants from the initial reception phase at an asylum center in a rural city expressed a desire to remain in Denmark, particularly for the sake of their children and their future. Others would like to return to Ukraine but cannot as long as it remains unsafe. Several participants from this phase shared their wish to remain in Denmark as long as they can learn Danish and contribute to society in a meaningful way.

In one of the big cities in Denmark, women from the early integration phase explained that their plans for the future depended on which region they were from and whether there is anything to return to in Ukraine. At the time of the discussions in the group, they also felt it was very difficult to find information on the situation in Ukraine and which areas are considered safe for return. They knew of other women who had returned to reunite with their husbands who were left behind. Others had returned because the cost of living was simply too high to afford, ultimately contributing to psychological stress that was too much to bear. One woman mentioned that if her son had not received support from the family consultant for his struggles with mental health, they would have already returned to Ukraine. In fact, they were very positive about the help their children benefited from in the form of support from a family consultant and wished to see the same offered to parents to support their own psychosocial needs.

Participants in another city mentioned that Denmark had promised to fund reconstruction of towns that had been destroyed in Ukraine, but recognised that at the moment the situation remains unsafe. Some did not want to think too far ahead in the future and would rather focus on the present.



IN FINLAND, some of the younger participants had no immediate plans of returning to Ukraine and are following developments in the country. They did not see themselves returning before six months or a year and instead focused on securing employment, enrolling their children in school and adjusting to their new life in Finland. One couple expressed a desire to return to their families who remained in Ukraine as soon as it was safe enough to return. A small minority had ambitions to acquire Finnish citizenship.

“ If you really want to stay, you will do whatever it takes.”

FGD participant in Denmark

“ The war destroyed everything, so when the war ends, I don't have anything to return to.”

FGD participant in Denmark

“ The Danes are different. They have a different mentality. Danes have a secure future, but so did we, but we know now how easy it can change into an uncertain future.”

FGD participant, Ukrainian woman in Denmark

“ Mom, even if I am in Denmark and learn Danish, I will never become Danish.”

FGD participant recounting her child's words in Denmark

“ No immediate plans of going back.”

FGD participant in Finland



IN SWEDEN, participants in the initial reception phase, who had recently arrived, remained uncertain about their future plans, currently observing the situation and exploring possibilities to make the choice that is best for them. Most participants from the early integration phase leaned toward remaining in the country for the foreseeable future, or at least until the situation in Ukraine is conducive for return.

Some who had planned to return in the fall of 2022 after having arrived earlier in the year abandoned their plans due to the continuation of the war, but also because their children expressed a desire to stay in Sweden after a positive experience at school and feeling safe. In a discussion in one of the bigger cities, a participant stated that everyone has subscribed to different Telegram channels to keep themselves updated about the latest developments in Ukraine. In the same discussion, one participant drew a comparison between entitlements and protection in Sweden and Germany, the latter being more favourable, including in terms of financial assistance provided to beneficiaries of temporary protection. Participants in two different cities both mentioned that there are people who have considered leaving Sweden, not with the intention to return to Ukraine, but to move on to Germany. For the children interviewed separately in one of the bigger cities, the FGD moderators eventually learned directly from their parents that the family intended to move on to North America.



IN DENMARK and **SWEDEN**, participants explained that their choice of destination was based on recommendations of volunteers who either offered to take them to these specific destinations by bus or who painted an attractive picture of the situation in both countries. They expressed, however, that they soon learned that reality in the host country did not necessarily match what they had been told.

“ *The stories from volunteers in Poland about how good life is in Sweden have been embellished 100 times.*”

FGD participant in Sweden

“ *I want to return home in the spring – the children are crying (they don’t like it in Sweden).*”

FGD participant, mother, in Sweden

“ *I would like to go back, because Ukraine has delicious sausages.*”

FGD child participant in Sweden

4. KEY PRIORITY AREAS

Using an empirical approach and a strong participatory focus in the group discussion, this report lends a voice to refugees from Ukraine who took part in these discussions. The following summary points have been identified as the key priority areas and reflections by the refugees themselves.

- ➔ Access to learning the language of the host country should be prioritized because it is key to successful access to information, services and integration. At the same time, language learning needs to be effectively coordinated with job opportunities facilitated by employment centers.
- ➔ The level of financial assistance and daily allowance provided by host countries should be revised to better match the needs of refugees and the increasing costs of living. Being forced to choose which basic need to spend money on is cause for distress and may be counterproductive to language learning, integration and inclusion efforts.
- ➔ Allocation of accommodation and housing should take into account individual circumstances, specific needs and family size. The process should be made more transparent by authorities and municipalities. Living conditions at reception centers and temporary housing should be assessed for gaps and improved.
- ➔ Refugees want to work, attain a level of self-sufficiency, and contribute to society using their existing capacities as well as new skills that they are willing to learn. Host countries should facilitate a better and more accessible recognition of past academic qualifications and work experience to optimize integration into the society and the labour market.
- ➔ Psychosocial support remains a gap and should be given particular attention for both adults and children, including at school.
- ➔ Teachers and early childhood caregivers play a determinative role in the quality of education and well-being of children who have fled the war and experienced trauma. Schools and educators should receive adequate support to enhance their capacity to address the specific needs of displaced children, which are complex and require tailored intervention and solutions at school and at home, in collaboration with parents, guardians, caregivers and other support staff.⁹

⁹ For further guidance on this topic, see UNHCR, *Teaching About Refugees – Guidance for teachers on stress and trauma*, 2021, available at <https://www.unhcr.org/media/39725>.

5. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The aim of the FGDs has been to further understand intentions, concerns and capacities of refugees from Ukraine residing in Denmark, Finland and Sweden. The elaborate and frank inputs from the refugees show both differences and similarities across countries, as well as significant variations in the perceptions and experiences. The discussions and input shared reflect a difference between the phases of initial reception and early integration and geographical differences within countries, but also reveal that individuals have unique needs, capacities and priorities. Different levels of expectations of participants at the outset of arrival to the host country also influence their individual perceptions of the situation in the host country.

With the comprehensive qualitative output of the FGDs, as presented in this report, it is UNHCR's hope that the voices of the participants, and particularly the key priority areas highlighted above, will be considered by all stakeholders involved in the response – and that they will provide an important contribution to inform the programmes and decision-making of host Governments and authorities in the Nordic countries and beyond.

The FGDs highlight important findings regarding Ukrainian refugees' outlook for the future – it is clear that their intentions and prospects for return to Ukraine are not straightforward and are clouded by continued hostilities, insecurity and destruction in their home regions. Decisions to return or remain in the host country are driven by a myriad of factors, including information about conditions in Ukraine, prolonged family separation, as well as experiences, support and ability to adapt in the host country.

As we are all witnessing, unfortunately, the situation in Ukraine remains of grave concern as the full-scale war has continued into its second year. The continued conflict with the destruction, attacks and unpredictability, may lead to more people being forced to flee the country and seek safety across Europe, including in the Nordic countries. It also transforms the context into a long-term and potentially protracted refugee situation, emphasizing the essential focus on refugees' socio-economic inclusion.

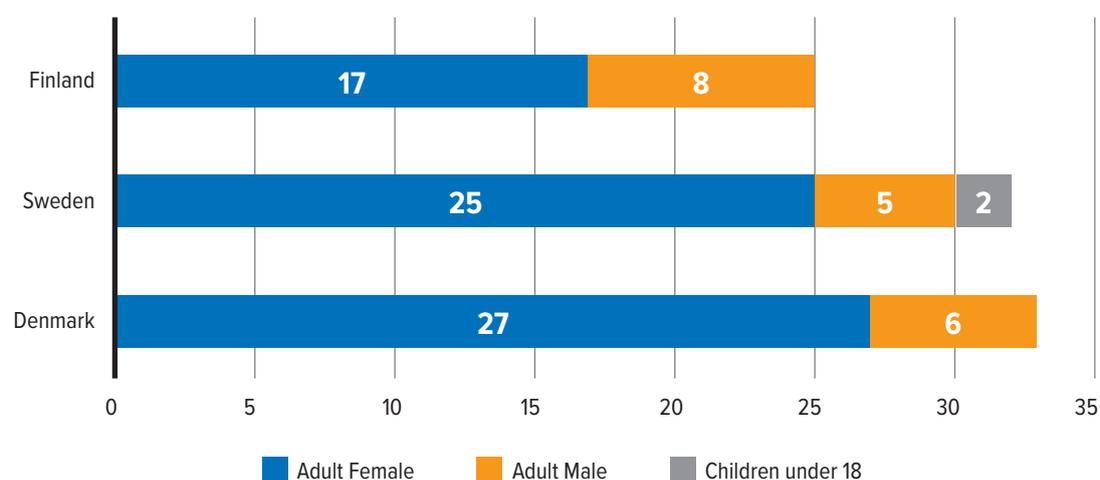
We have seen tremendous and generous reception of refugees from Ukraine across the Nordic region, and UNHCR trusts that this will continue – and that this report and the findings of the FGD will provide a useful tool in this regard.

ANNEX 1:

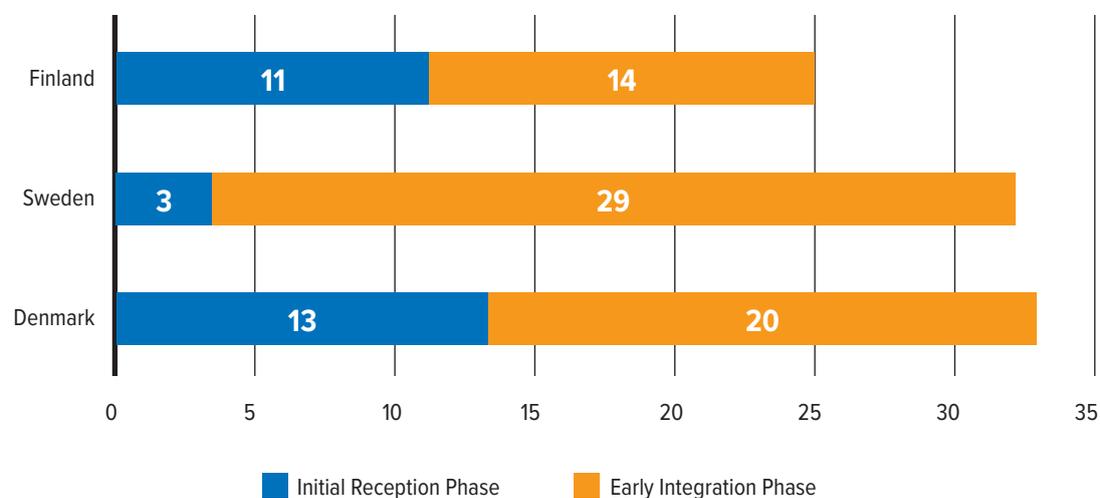
ADDITIONAL DATA ON FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION PARTICIPANTS

Between 15 November 2022 and 1 December 2022, UNHCR's partners – Danish Refugee Council, Finnish Refugee Council and Svenska med baby – conducted focus group discussions with a total of 90 refugees from Ukraine: 33 in Denmark, 25 in Finland and 32 in Sweden. The following graphs illustrate the gender and age breakdown in each country, as well as the distribution between the initial reception and early integration phase.

Gender and Age Distribution



Initial Reception versus Early Integration Phase



ANNEX 2:

COUNTRY-BY-COUNTRY IMPLEMENTATION OF TEMPORARY PROTECTION FOR REFUGEES FROM UKRAINE IN THE NORDICS¹⁰

Denmark	Finland	Iceland	Norway	Sweden
WHO IS COVERED BY TEMPORARY PROTECTION				
(a) Ukrainian nationals residing in Ukraine before 24 February 2022; (b) Stateless persons, and nationals of third countries other than Ukraine, who benefited from international protection or equivalent national protection in Ukraine before 24 February 2022; and, (c) Family members of the persons referred to in points (a) and (b).				
Those persons referred to above but who fled Ukraine on 1 February 2022 or later or who already lived in or had a residence permit in Denmark at the time.	Ukrainian nationals regardless of their date of departure from Ukraine, or those already living in Finland and their family members. Those persons referred to above in (b) and stateless persons, and nationals of third countries other than Ukraine, who were legally residing in Ukraine before 24 February 2022 with a valid permanent residence permit (based on non-protection grounds), and who are unable to return safely to their home country.	Those persons referred to above but who were in Iceland on 24 February 2022 (e.g., had unresolved cases with the government or their residence permit cannot be extended).	Those persons referred to above and Ukrainian nationals who were in Norway on or before 24 February 2022 (e.g., seasonal workers or students).	Those persons referred to above and those referred to in (a) and (b) if they entered Sweden from 30 October 2021 to 23 February 2022 and remained in the country.
DURATION OF THE PERMITS BASED ON TEMPORARY PROTECTION				
Two years until 17 March 2024. Possible extension until 17 March 2025.	One year until 4 March 2023. Can be renewed up to three years in total.		One year until 11 March 2023. Can be renewed up to three years in total	One year until 4 March 2023. Can be renewed up to three years in total.
ACCESS TO HOUSING				
Short-term housing in asylum centres and in private accommodation (households are financially compensated). Long-term accommodation provided by municipalities after settlement.	Short-term (transit) centres and long-term housing at reception centres.	Short-term housing (various housing solutions) for up to eight weeks. Long-term private rental housing after settlement in a municipality.	Short-term housing at reception centres and MAMOT housing scheme, emergency accommodation. Long-term accommodation provided by municipalities after settlement.	Short-term housing provided by the Swedish Migration Agency. Long-term accommodation provided by municipalities after settlement.
ACCESS TO INTRODUCTION PROGRAMMES, INCLUDING LANGUAGE				
Self-support and repatriation programme includes Danish language studies, company internships and wage subsidies. Basic Integration Education (IGU) includes vocational/language studies and work experience.	Integration Training includes language studies and work-related education and training. Guidance and counselling at reception centres.	No introduction programme. Community education course and language training are available.	Introduction Programme includes community education, work-related education and training and language studies.	No introduction programme. No access to SFI "Swedish for Immigrants". Basic language training offered by folk high schools and adult education organisations.

¹⁰ The Nordic Council of Ministers, Anna Berlina, [Implementation of temporary protection for refugees from Ukraine – A systematic review of the Nordic countries](#), 7 December 2022.

Denmark	Finland	Iceland	Norway	Sweden
ACCESS TO LABOUR MARKET AND LABOUR-MARKET MEASURES				
Direct access to the labour market after submitting an application. Assessment of skills and qualifications, wage subsidies. A new website to assist job seekers from Ukraine.	Direct access to the labour market after submitting an application. Employment support assistance: career counselling, assessment of skills, language training, support in finding appropriate job openings.	Conditional access to the labour market. Job counselling and help in finding jobs.	Direct access to the labour market after the permit is granted. Work training as part of the Introduction Programme. Assessment of skills and career guidance.	Direct access to the labour market after the permit is granted. Support in finding jobs through public employment service, incl. wage subsidies.
ACCESS TO BENEFITS AND FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE				
Same level as of asylum-seekers if they are under the provision of the Danish Immigration Service, i.e. EUR 222 per adult per month if meals are not included with their accommodation. No basic allowance if meals are included. Instead, supplementary allowance is available. Caregiver allowance for those with children.	Same level as asylum seekers. In reception centres: EUR 323 per adult per month without meals and EUR 95 per adult per month with meals.	Same level as beneficiaries of international protection for the first eight weeks - basic allowance EUR 235 per adult per month. After relocation to a municipality, the financial assistance ranges between EUR 1,046 and EUR 2,428 per adult per month depending on municipality. Special housing assistance grant; loans to cover a deposit /insurance and a furniture grant available.	Same level as asylum seekers. In reception centres: EUR 260 per adult per month without meals and EUR 87 per adult per month with meals. During the introduction programme financial support is available.	Same level as asylum seekers. Daily allowance: EUR 195 per adult per month without meals and EUR 66 per adult per month with meals. A special payment in cases of a particular need. No access to residence-based social security.
ACCESS TO CHILDCARE AND EDUCATION				
Access to preschool, primary, lower secondary and upper secondary education. Vocational training, if the beneficiary speaks Danish. Special programme for recognition of qualifications and transfer to higher education programmes in Denmark.	Access to preschool, primary, lower secondary and upper secondary education. Free vocational education. Non-degree courses and courses at Finnish Open Universities free of charge.	Access to preschool, primary, lower secondary and upper secondary education. General admission requirements to higher education institutions apply.	Access to preschool, primary, lower secondary and upper secondary education. Primary and lower secondary education is compulsory for minors from Ukraine. Vocational training for adults available. Exceptions from the general admission requirements to higher education institutions apply.	Access to preschool, primary, lower secondary and upper secondary education. Vocational training, if the beneficiary speaks Swedish. Scholarships for Ukrainian scientists. Qualifications Assessment Tool available to compare foreign qualifications with Swedish ones.
ACCESS TO CHILDCARE AND EDUCATION				
Access to healthcare services in the same way as permanent residents in Denmark.	Access to healthcare services in the same way as permanent residents in Finland. Student welfare services focusing on trauma treatment.	Access to healthcare services in the same way as permanent residents in Iceland.	Access to healthcare services in the same way as permanent residents in Norway.	Emergency medical and dental care only, except for children under the age of 18, who have access to regular care.

