

# THE EUROPEAN LABOUR MARKET IN THE WAKE OF THE NEW REFUGEE CRISIS

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## Abstract

Russia's aggression against Ukraine has led to a humanitarian crisis in Europe unprecedented since the Second World War. After nearly a year, more than 8 million Ukrainian refugees were recorded in Europe, of whom more than 4.8 million were registered under the EU's Temporary Protection Directive (TPD) or similar national protection programmes. The study provides an empirical characteristics of the scale and structure of the refugee wave from Ukraine. Placing a strong emphasis on highlighting the differences with respect to previous crises of this type, the study reveals the scale of the challenges facing European institutions in the face of such an unprecedented humanitarian catastrophe. The objective is also to highlight the need for different priorities and new strategies for integration policies in the European labour market.

**Keywords:** refugees, labour market, integration policy, Ukraine.

## Introduction

Over the past decade, Europe has faced an unprecedented scale of influxes of economic migrants and refugees. As a result of the global economic crisis, climate change, political unrest and, increasingly, war, thousands of people are forced to leave their previous place of residence every day in search of safety. According to UNHCR's annual Global Trends report, the number of people displaced by war, violence, persecution and human rights violations reached 89.3 million in 2021.<sup>1</sup> From a European perspective, however, the situation only gained a shockingly human dimension with Russia's invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022. The war, which has been ongoing for almost a year, has triggered a refugee wave on a scale not seen in Europe since the Second World War and has contributed to the number of forcibly displaced people rising to over 100 million by 2022. Worse still, the prospect of prolonged warfare and escalating attacks on civilian infrastructure may force more victims in the coming months to seek refuge in neighbouring countries, but also in more distant European states. In such a situation, how will Europe cope in the long term politically, economically, socially and, perhaps above all, morally? Has the European Union learnt its lesson from the 2015 migration crisis, when member states were plunged into strife in the face of accepting 1.2 million refugees seeking shelter from wars in the Middle East? Will Europe's politicians and opinion leaders get a humanitarian response to inhuman cynicism this time?

Analysing the humanitarian catastrophe represented by the new wave of refugees, the following paper will attempt a multi-faceted interpretation of the interrelated factors affecting refugee integration, particularly in the context of the European labour market. The first part of the paper will review the literature on European integration policy and the impact of refugees on the labour market. The second part of the paper presents an empirical characteristic of the refugee wave from Ukraine highlighting its significant difference from previous crises of this type. The paper concludes with a presentation of the most relevant challenges facing European institutions and recommendations for refugee integration strategies from a labour market perspective.

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<sup>1</sup> UNHCR, Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2021, 16.06.2022, p. 5.

## 1. Literature review

In recent decades, the intense wave of economic and refugee migration to Europe has been the source of a number of socio-economic problems and, consequently, of much academic debate. In particular, the influx of refugees to Europe has contributed to many interpretations of the effects this process has on the social policies of European countries. The large number of studies devoted to this topic and the variety of often extreme opinions and assessments of the effects of migration expressed in them demonstrate the complexity of the issue under analysis. The source of most of the discrepancies lies not only in the complicated methodology for studying the effects of migration on the economy, but also in its much deeper and staggered impact on the socio-economic structure of individual countries. Political, cultural and religious factors strongly influencing the final assessment of the consequences of the influx of migrants and refugees to Europe are also not insignificant.

The socio-economic impact of the influx of refugees into Europe is measurable through various, often interdependent, transmission channels. Among the consequences of this process are changes in budget expenditures and revenues, an increase in aggregate demand entailing changes in the prices of goods and services, an increase in innovation potential, the creation of new streams of international trade and the risk of increased social conflicts on ethnic, cultural and religious grounds. However, the most obvious effect of the phenomenon under study from the perspective of economic mechanisms is the increase in labour supply translating into turbulence in the labour market.

The mechanism of the labour market predicts that with the influx of refugees resulting in an increase in labour supply, the wages of existing workers will change unevenly. The determining factor here is primarily the level of qualification on the part of both refugees and the native labour force. Detailed empirical analysis shows that the influx of refugees does not significantly increase the level of unemployment, but that the part of the local labour force characterised by a low level of qualification faces increased difficulties in finding work and the risk of a reduction in wages for the work previously performed.<sup>2</sup>

Empirical research on refugees' living conditions and their chances of integrating into the labour market shows that they have less favourable conditions when competing with economic migrants. Refugees are 11.6 percent less likely to find employment and 22 percent more likely to join the ranks of the unemployed than economic migrants.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, the level of their incomes is unfavourable - statistically it is significantly lower, which is often due to their desperation and willingness to work in poor conditions, often illegally.<sup>4</sup> The position of refugees vis-à-vis economic migrants, from a statistical point of view, is improving after a decade and a narrowing of the gap between these groups can be observed, but this is more evident in employment rates than in wages.<sup>5</sup> The catalyst for such progress is the promotion of joining the labour force as soon as possible, the integration at school level of refugee minors and access to social assistance<sup>6</sup>

The health status and self-assessment of the mental health of refugees is also not insignificant, especially in the context of refugees from Ukraine, who have experienced a humanitarian catastrophe unimaginable to many Europeans. Studies on the subject show a significant correlation between traumatic experiences prior to fleeing their own country and European integration policies, as well as mental well-being and, as a result, the ability to work in the host country.<sup>7</sup>

Equally important information is provided by research showing the lower professional activity of refugee women in relation to male refugees. This is crucial in view of the influx of a new refugee wave from Ukraine. While in the years preceding the Russian aggression against Ukraine, men dominated the

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<sup>2</sup> Borjas, G. J., *Immigration Economics*, Harvard University Press, 2014, pp. 79-104.

<sup>3</sup> Fasani, F., Frattini, T., Minale, L., (The Struggle for) Refugee integration into the labour market: evidence from Europe, *Journal of Economic Geography*, Volume 22, Issue 2, 2022, pp. 351–393.

<sup>4</sup> Akgüç, M., Welter-Médée, C., Linking migration reasons and origins to labour market outcomes: recent evidence from Europe, *Economics and Statistics*, No. 524–525, 2021, p 109.

<sup>5</sup> Brell, C., Dustmann, C., and Preston, I., The labor market integration of refugee migrants in high-income countries. *Journal of Economic Perspective*, Volume 37, No. 1, 2020, pp. 94–121.

<sup>6</sup> Andersson Joona, P., Gupta, N. D., Labour market integration of FRY refugees in Sweden vs. Denmark, *International Migration*, 2022, p. 11.

<sup>7</sup> Ambrosetti, E., Dietrich, H., Kosyakova, Y., Patzina, A., The impact of pre- and postarrival mechanisms on self-rated health and life satisfaction among refugees in Germany, *Front. Sociol.*, 2021, pp. 12-14.

refugee population, accounting for 59% of the total,<sup>8</sup> in the current situation, up to 90% are women with children.<sup>9</sup> Meanwhile, available studies show that refugee women are about 30 percentage points less likely to be professionally active than male refugees.<sup>10</sup>

Significantly important from the perspective of decisions taken at the political level is the attitude of Europeans towards refugees arriving on the continent, which, in addition to pre-existing cultural backgrounds, is largely created by the media. With the development of technology, it is not only the mainstream media that deserves attention, but also, and perhaps especially, the so-called social media, which are often fertile ground for xenophobic or even racist attitudes. Few studies in this area show a favourable shift in public opinion towards the discussed phenomenon. Statistics from 16 countries based on the European Social Survey show a significant increase in support for the acceptance of refugees between 2002 and 2014.<sup>11</sup>

The above literature review demonstrates the existence of barriers, typical for most refugees and often cumulative, which in effect prevent rapid integration into the labour market. The variety of reasons for low labour market participation, often due to experienced trauma, bureaucracy, discrimination on the basis of gender, religion, ethnicity, lack of education or knowledge of the local language, results in a significant proportion of refugees remaining unemployed for long periods of time or taking up employment in the informal economy or in occupations below their qualifications. Nevertheless, the studies cited show that over time, refugees are adapting to European labour market realities and, by acquiring new qualifications, are able to compete with economic migrants and often with the local population. In addition, there is a consensus among researchers on this issue that improving the integration process requires the effective identification and implementation of key elements of active labour market policies (ALMPs),<sup>12</sup> the tenets of which will be discussed in relation to Ukrainian refugees in the penultimate section of this paper.

## 2. Characteristics of the refugee wave from Ukraine

Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, more than 8 million Ukrainian refugees have been recorded in Europe, of whom more than 4.8 million have been registered under the EU's Temporary Protection Directive (TPD) or similar national protection programmes.<sup>13</sup> Such a large refugee wave poses a serious challenge for the socio-economic policies of individual European countries, especially in the area of the labour market. The challenge is all the greater as the number of registered refugees varies drastically from one region of Europe to another. As Figure 1 illustrates, by far the largest number of refugees has been registered in Poland (over 1.5 million), Germany (880,000) and the Czech Republic (485,000). In the initial stage of the crisis, the largest number of refugees reached the countries neighbouring Ukraine, but as time passed, a phenomenon of secondary migration was recorded, aimed at countries much more distant geographically. Another potential problem of the observed refugee wave is its unprecedented dynamics.

<sup>8</sup> OECD, How are refugees faring on the labour market in Europe? Working Paper 1/2016, p. 5.

<sup>9</sup> UN Women, The Rapid Gender Analysis of Ukraine: Secondary Data Review, Kyiv, 29.03.2022, p. 6.

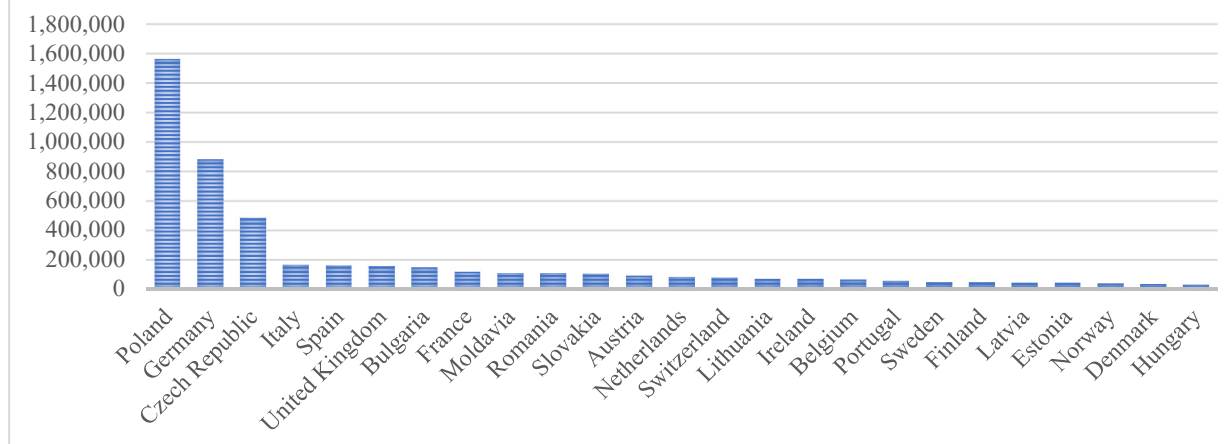
<sup>10</sup> Salikutluk, Z., Menke, K., Gendered integration? How recently arrived male and female refugees fare on the German labour market, *Journal of Family Research*, Volume 33, No. 2, 2021, p. 302.

<sup>11</sup> Abdelaaty, L., Steele, L. G., Explaining attitudes toward refugees and immigrants in Europe, *Political Studies*, 2020, p. 24.

<sup>12</sup> Card D, Kluve J, Weber A., What works? A meta-analysis of recent active labour market program evaluations, *Journal of the European Economic Association*, Volume 16, Issue 3, 2018, pp. 894–931.

<sup>13</sup> UNHCR, Ukraine Refugee Situation, available online: <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/ukraine>, [L.s. 31.01.2023].

**FIGURE 1**  
 NUMBER OF REGISTERED REFUGEES FROM UKRAINE IN SELECTED  
 EUROPEAN COUNTRIES UNDER THE EU TEMPORARY PROTECTION  
 DIRECTIVE (TPD) OR SIMILAR NATIONAL PROGRAMME  
 (FROM 24.02.2022 TO 31.01.2023)



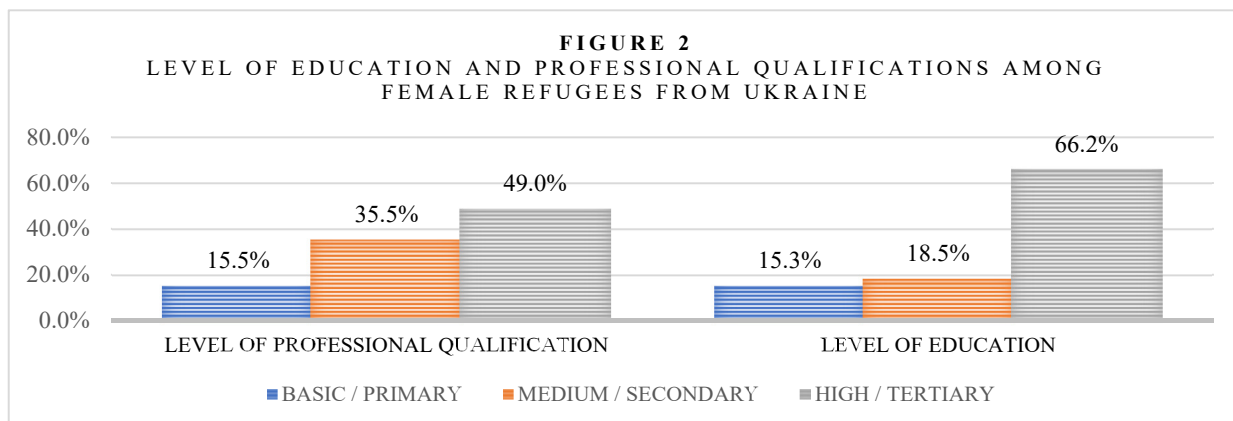
Source: own compilation based on UNHCR data.

Its scale is illustrated by comparing statistics from two similar periods in 2021 and immediately after the outbreak of war. In the first half of 2021, more than 55,000 refugees and migrants were registered in Europe,<sup>14</sup> and from 24 February to 26 July 2022, more than 6 million refugees were recorded from Ukraine alone. Despite Europe's unfavourable demographics and the resulting labour shortages in many of its regions, such a large and unexpected number of refugees will continue to pose a staggered problem for local labour markets over many months, and possibly years.

In addition to its scale and dynamics, the current refugee crisis also differs from those observed in previous decades in a number of other aspects, among which are the gender, education and age of refugees, previous professional activity, as well as their willingness to work and settle in the host country. As mentioned above, 90 per cent of refugees from Ukraine are women with children and often post-working age people. The reason for this is the decree of the President of Ukraine banning men aged 18-60 from leaving the country. Such a preponderance of women in the refugee wave from Ukraine raises another challenge for European integration policy. Research over the past decades shows that the employment rate of refugee women in Europe was only 45%, 17% lower than that of male refugees. Similarly, the participation rate of refugee women relative to male refugees was significantly lower at 57% and 77% respectively, translating into high unemployment among refugee women of around 21% in previous years.<sup>15</sup> Adding to the burden of taking up employment is the fact that a significant proportion of refugee women currently care for children and elderly immediate family members alone. This phenomenon, known as enforced single motherhood, often puts them at risk of being victims of sexual crime and exploitation in informal work. This gloomy picture emerging from the above data is mitigated somewhat by the level of education and qualifications possessed among Ukrainian women seeking refuge in Europe.

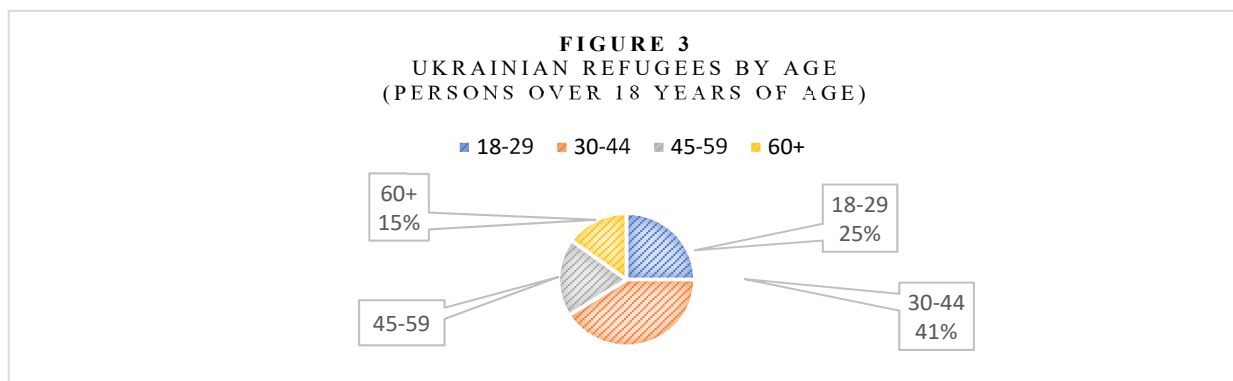
<sup>14</sup> UNICEF, *Refugee and migrant crisis in Europe*, Revision 1, 2021, p. 11.

<sup>15</sup> OECD, *How are refugees faring...*, op. cit., p. 19.



Source: own compilation based on International Labour Organisation data.

As Figure 2 illustrates, refugee women are dominated by a high proportion of those with higher education (66%) and a previously highly qualified profession (49%).<sup>16</sup> In contrast, the education rate for Ukrainian citizens as a whole is only 30%. An additional source of optimism is the fact that in the years prior to the current crisis, only 20% of refugees arriving in Europe had a university degree. The juxtaposition of the above data, on the one hand, may give refugee women hope of quickly finding regular high-paid work, while on the other hand, the realities of the European market may force them to take up work in sectors offering low wages in relation to the presented qualifications. A significant problem in the case of refugees with such a high level of education may additionally be the problem with the recognition of diplomas or the inability of a potential employer to verify the declared competences. A similarly important role as the gender and education of refugees is played by their age. As illustrated in Figure 3, data collected among refugees arriving in Poland, which received the highest number of them, shows that the largest group are persons in the age of the highest economic activity. For comparison, in the structure of labour immigration in previous years, as many as 2/3 were men, of which 3/4 were under 45 years of age.<sup>17</sup>



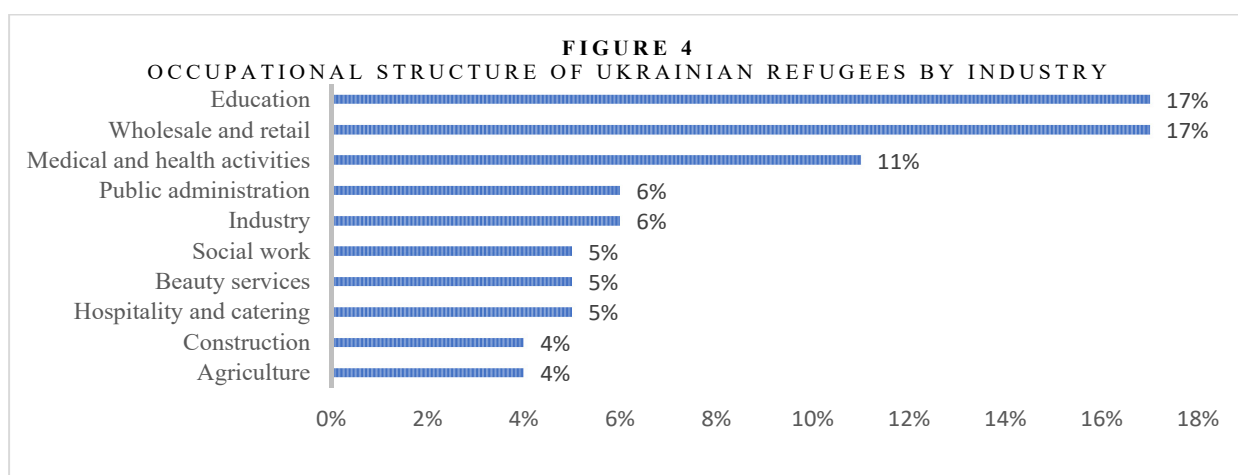
Source: own compilation based on data from the National Bank of Poland.

An additional factor increasing the chances of rapid assimilation into the European labour market is the high rate of refugee professional activity prior to the outbreak of war. According to a survey conducted by UNHCR, as many as 76% of refugees were previously employed (Figure 4), with nearly half of them in the education, trade and health care sectors.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>16</sup> ILO, The impact of the Ukraine crisis on the world of work: initial assessment, Geneva, 11.05.2022, p. 10.

<sup>17</sup> Łątkowski, W., Wszyński, R., Polski rynek pracy w obliczu fali uchodźczej z Ukrainy, Obserwator Finansowy, No. 5, Warsaw, 2022, p. 19.

<sup>18</sup> UNHCR, Lives on hold: Intentions and perspectives of refugees from Ukraine, 2022, p. 11.



*Source: own compilation based on UNHCR data.*

The last characteristic of the described refugee wave, whose impact on the European labour market cannot be underestimated, is their willingness to settle in the host country and the refugees' readiness to work. Despite the high uncertainty of the collected data resulting mainly from declarations for the purpose of surveys, in most host countries, most Ukrainian refugees express their intention to return to their own country as soon as possible. Willingness to stay in the host country for longer than the duration of the war is declared by a slightly different percentage of refugees depending on the host country. This is probably due to the existential conditions, the integration policy and the perspectives for the future that the individual countries have offered. For example, the results of the report "Refugees from Ukraine in Poland", carried out by the Foundation for the Support of Migrants on the Labour Market "EWL", show that as many as 56% of the refugees surveyed plan to return to Ukraine as soon as possible, while the willingness to stay in Poland permanently was expressed by only 7% of the people.<sup>19</sup> The percentage of respondents declaring a willingness to work in countries that have received refugees is equally high. Data collected among Ukrainian refugees in Germany shows that only 10% of respondents have no possibility or willingness to take up a job, while 16% rate their chances of finding a job as low. The remaining 74% of respondents declared that they have already found, or are looking for, a job in their profession (42%), or are already working, or are willing to work, in an occupation below their qualifications (32%).<sup>20</sup>

The above characteristics reveal the nature of a refugee wave that breaks from previous, often stereotypical, perceptions of refugees from countries at war. In the case of refugees from Ukraine, Europe is facing a phenomenon of unprecedented magnitude in recent decades, but the potential of highly educated and skilled people could provide a significant boost to a continent struggling with a serious demographic crisis. Also, the first studies collected show an optimistic outlook for the integration of refugees from Ukraine, and their entry into local labour markets has been much faster than in previous refugee waves.<sup>21</sup>

### 3. Recommendations for integration measures in the European labour market

The refugee crises of the past decades have confronted the institutions responsible for the integration of refugees with the dilemma of choosing between 'work-first' and 'human capital' policies. The former systemic solution boiled down to depriving refugees of social benefits as quickly as possible and thus forcing them to look for any kind of employment. Even in the case of low qualifications and lack of relevant education, which was mostly the case in the earlier waves of refugees, this system allowed for the necessary retraining of the employed worker in the new workplace, thus quickly increasing their productivity. Human capital policy, on the other hand, mainly consists of offering job-seeking refugees an often lengthy training system, from learning the local language to specific courses required for certain

<sup>19</sup> Foundation for the Support of Migrants on the Labour Market „EWL”, Uchodźcy z Ukrainy w Polsce, 2022, p. 10.

<sup>20</sup> Panchenko, T., Prospects for Integration of Ukrainian Refugees into the German Labor Market: Results of the ifo Online Survey, CESifo Forum, Volume 23, Issue 4, 2022, p. 73.

<sup>21</sup> OECD, What we know about the skills and early labour market outcomes of refugees from Ukraine, 2023, p. 9.

professions. The disadvantage of this solution is that, on the one hand, it prolongs the time refugees undergoing training remain unemployed and, on the other hand, by increasing their competences, it exposes them to a lack of jobs corresponding to their acquired qualifications and higher salary expectations.<sup>22</sup> With the above in mind, the question arises about the selection of effective elements of previously applied strategies to effectively support the integration of Ukrainian refugees into the European labour market.

Taking into account the characteristics of the Ukrainian refugee wave described in the previous part of this study, Europe is currently facing the challenge of choosing between assimilating Ukrainian refugees into the labour market as quickly and smoothly as possible, or providing them with employment in a profession corresponding to their relatively high skills. The choice of the first solution is intuitive insofar as, on the one hand, it allows for the rapid provision of means of self-support and, on the other, it relieves the host countries of the burden of maintaining hundreds of thousands of potential beneficiaries of various welfare payments. This solution, however, carries the risk of pushing financially disadvantaged refugees, mostly well-educated single women caring for children, into sectors typical of the informal economy, such as hospitality, commerce, agriculture or household services.<sup>23</sup> In addition, this group requires above-average protection and support, as they are most vulnerable to the stress and trauma of being separated from their families and experiencing the horrors of war, and to the risk of violence and sexual exploitation. Europe, faced with a humanitarian crisis of this magnitude, being itself the cradle of human rights, cannot afford such ambivalence, and not only for moral reasons. The demographic crisis, which is increasingly making itself felt in many regions of the continent, means that Europe cannot waste the potential of educated refugees to provide an opportunity to keep its economy innovative and competitive. The experience to date with the integration of Ukrainian refugees and research conducted over the past 30 years also shows that any form of work restrictions on newly-arrived refugees has a disastrous effect not only on those concerned to enter the local labour market quickly, but also on the economies of host countries. Various estimates indicate that the restrictions on refugees taking up work enforced in previous years reduced their labour force participation by 15% and contributed to a production loss of €37.6 billion.<sup>24</sup> This is why the Temporary Protection Directive, which guarantees immediate and temporary protection for displaced persons from third countries in the event that the current asylum system is unable to cope with the massive influx of refugees, was an important and prudent step on the part of the European Union.<sup>25</sup>

The experience so far of European countries in the integration process of Ukrainian refugees shows that there are still many challenges that require urgent intervention. Some of the main problems include: the low availability of care institutions, the difficult process of recognising professional qualifications, the lack of affordable decent accommodation and the insufficient availability of training, especially in learning the local language. In addition, given that the vast majority of refugees are women who are single caring for children and elderly immediate family members, integration policies of host countries should include subsidised childcare and assistance in caring for the elderly. However, the biggest challenge, which cannot be solved in the short term, is the structural mismatch between labour supply and demand, due to the fact that jobs are mostly sought by highly educated refugee women, while the sectors in which workers are sought offer employment requiring relatively low qualifications and the ability to perform physical work.

## Summary

The specifics of the current refugee crisis in Europe, triggered by Russia's aggression against Ukraine, differ in many ways from previously described phenomena of this kind. Today's refugee wave has little

<sup>22</sup> Arendt, J., Labor market effects of a work-first policy for refugees, *Journal of Population Economics*, 2020, p. 171.

<sup>23</sup> Instytut Prognoz i Analiz Gospodarczych, *Szara Strefa 2022*, 2022, Warsaw, p. 17.

<sup>24</sup> Fasani, F., Frattini, T., Minale, L., Lift the Ban? Initial Employment Restrictions and Refugee Labour Market Outcomes, IZA Discussion Paper No. 13149, 2020, p. 37.

<sup>25</sup> Council of the European Union, European Union Council Directives 2001/55/EC of 20 July 2001 on minimum standards for giving temporary protection in the event of a mass influx of displaced persons and on measures promoting a balance of efforts between Member States in receiving such persons and bearing the consequences thereof, *Official Journal of the European Union*, Article 2a, 2001, p. 164.

in common with the stereotypical image of refugees from war-torn countries seeking refuge in Europe. The majority of Ukrainian refugees are women, the vast majority of whom are of working age, highly skilled and previously professionally active. Importantly, the vast majority of refugees interviewed in various surveys declare a willingness to work, but their willingness to settle permanently in the host country is relatively low. In the face of such a major change, Europe must seek new solutions for the effective integration of refugees into the labour market. Effective enough to simultaneously guarantee rapid integration into the labour force with the need to secure permanent employment in sectors corresponding to their high qualifications. This daunting challenge necessitates a departure from the relatively restrictive approaches of the past and a search for more liberal solutions to support the rapid social and economic integration of refugees. Lessons learnt from previous refugee crises indicate that the most pragmatic alternative is to provide refugees with conditions for effective post-traumatic recovery combined with a simultaneous system of counselling and training to enable rapid adaptation to the new realities of the labour market. However, the efforts made so far have been of a temporary nature in many countries and, with stagflation looming on the horizon, many countries have decided to cut back on existing benefits for the assimilation of refugees. This complex and costly process can only be achieved if Europe proves that it is still the cradle of liberal democracy with a strong commitment to values such as tolerance and solidarity.



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