



Online Magazin IAB-Forum

“We see good integration prospects for Ukrainian refugees”

24. June 2022 | Christiane Keitel, Jutta Winters



The war in Ukraine has triggered the largest movement of refugees in Europe since the Second World War. Thousands of refugees have been arriving in Germany every day. Organising accommodation, children’s schooling, language classes and other support services are major political and societal challenges, as Yuliya Kosyakova and Herbert Brücker explain in two current IAB research reports. The editors of the IAB Forum ask them about their findings.

When you look at the current movement of refugees from Ukraine to Europe, how would you say that the situation differs from the refugee crisis of 2015?



Prof. Dr. [Herbert Brücker](#) is director of the Berlin Institute for Empirical Integration and Migration Research and head of the research department “Migration and International Labour Studies” at the IAB.

Herbert Brücker: The situation is different in many respects: the war of aggression against Ukraine broke out only about four months ago, a regular army is defending the country against the invasion of Russian troops, and the EU’s borders are open due to visa-free travel and the activation of the EU’s Mass Influx Directive. In a short period of time, this has triggered the largest refugee movement in Europe since the end of the Second World War. This situation was, for example, different for Syrians, who formed the largest group of refugees in 2015. In Syrians’ case, the war had lasted for almost five years and had claimed between 200,000 and 400,000 lives amongst the civilian population. Besides, the armed resistance of the population were – also through the intervention of Russia – militarily on the verge of collapse. Regular migration to the EU was not possible: only irregular migration via the comparatively risky Mediterranean routes were an option. This had a major impact on the structure of migration: at that time, particularly single young men managed to reach the EU. Today, according to UNICEF, almost half of the Ukrainian refugees are children, and the adult population is almost exclusively made up of women and older people. This is also due to the general mobilisation in Ukraine and the ban on leaving the country for men between the ages of 18 and 60.

Yuliya Kosyakova: I also see differences between 2015 and today in relation to public perception. Even then, at least initially, we saw a comprehensive and strong welcoming culture towards refugees who were essentially Muslim, young, and male. The welcoming culture now seems to surpass that – probably also because of cultural closeness that many Germans feel. Geographical proximity also plays a role: many Germans feel strongly affected by the war. Many are also more willing to take women and children into their homes than men. We must also not forget that a large proportion of the current welcome culture and the engagement of volunteers stems from Germany’s Russian and Ukrainian communities. In 2015, the refugees did not have such a large network.

In 2015, the infrastructure for the integration of refugees firstly had to be set up.

What have we learned from 2015?



Dr. [Yuliya Kosyakova](#) is a senior researcher in the research department “Migration and International Labour Studies” at the IAB and also leads the working group “Consequences of the Corona Pandemic”.

Kosyakova: We have learned a lot. In 2015, the infrastructure for the integration of refugees firstly had to be set up. It was only in Autumn 2015 that the law made it possible for asylum seekers to take part in integration courses while their asylum procedure was ongoing, and this only applied to asylum seekers from countries with good prospects of remaining. In addition to the integration courses, a number of job-specific German courses and measures were introduced in parallel. With

the help of data from the IAB, particularly the IAB-BAMF-SOEP Survey of Refugees, German politicians were able to obtain evidence on what is crucial when it comes to integration.

Our studies show, for example, that taking part in language courses and further training indeed has helped the refugees to find their way into the German job market. We have also learned that the early and sustainable integration of refugee women depends heavily on the integration of their children into the education- and childcare system. Women who have to look after small children at home take part in language courses much less frequently. Correspondingly, we have to create childcare options while they are taking part in courses.

Brücker: Not only have we set up an integration infrastructure and gained important experience from the many integration programmes that have run since 2015, we have also restructured the asylum system. In 2015, the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees was the bottleneck for integration. The asylum procedures took a long time, sometimes several years. Our research results show that, in addition to the outcome of the asylum procedure, its length can also have a lasting impact on labour-market integration. The acceleration of the asylum procedure in 2016 helped. The activation of the EU's Mass Influx Directive has made this even easier, and Ukrainian refugees are given a temporary residence permit without having to go through an asylum procedure. That makes a lot of things easier – for those affected, but also for the administration.

What integration prospects do you see for the Ukrainian refugees in Germany?

Brücker: First of all, it will depend on how the situation in Ukraine develops. It is still completely open as to how many people want to stay in Germany permanently or return to their home country. We also do not know how many more people will come, for example due to the subsequent immigration of their partners. Currently, the focus is rather on security and humanitarian issues, afterwards, the medium- and long-term perspectives for integration come into play. In principle, the adult refugees from Ukraine bring favourable conditions for integration into the labour market with them: the proportion of adults with university and college degrees is higher in Ukraine than in Germany. Yet, many qualifications that are acquired in our dual training system are taught in Ukrainian universities. Compared to many other migrant groups, however, we can speak of a high level of education. This applies to a labour market in Germany that has a high demand for labour ranging from academic fields of activity to unskilled- and semi-skilled work. However, as past experience has shown, this high level of human capital cannot easily be transferred to the German labour market which is highly structured by occupational degrees: while 30 percent of the Ukrainian workforce in Germany perform complex expert and specialist activities, 30 percent also carry out unskilled and semi-skilled jobs. So, at least at the beginning, there is also a devaluation of human

capital. Nevertheless, the medium and long-term prospects for integration are relatively favourable, if people from Ukraine are willing – or have – to stay here.

Kosyakova: The fact that the German authorities and employers already have a wide range of experience with migrants from Ukraine, and are able to recognise the foreign qualifications of the new immigrants more easily, could also be a factor in helping integration.

The future chances of integration depend to a large extent on how well the care of children in day-care centres, kindergartens, and schools succeeds.

What do you think are the biggest challenges in integration?

Brücker: Family constellations. The future chances of integration depend to a large extent on how well the integration of children in day-care centres, kindergartens, and schools succeeds. Also, probably only a very small proportion of the refugees have a good knowledge of German. All of this suggests that although the medium-term prospects for integration are good, integration into the labour market might initially take longer, as it does for other refugees.

Kosyakova: In order for integration to succeed, it will depend not only on the capacity of the economy to absorb people, but also on the host society. Success will largely depend on the attitude of the German population towards the refugees, the integration efforts and the support from politics, the administration and the education system. The refugees from Ukraine, like all other migrants, will change our society and the labour market. Integration is always a two-sided process.

The Member States of the EU have agreed to activate the so-called “Mass Influx Directive”. Can you explain what this means for the refugees?

Brücker: The so-called Mass Influx Directive was adopted against the background of the Yugoslav wars, but had hitherto not been implemented. Basically, it provides for three things: first, it grants refugees a temporary residence permit without an asylum procedure. This lasts at least for one year by EU law, but has extended to two years in Germany. The EU can extend the Mass Influx Directive, and, hence, the residence permits, up to three years. This simplifies and accelerates integration because the bottleneck in the asylum procedure is bypassed.

Secondly, the Directive, in combination with the visa exemption for nationals from the Ukraine, allows onward migration to any EU Member State. However, the Directive also allows refugees to be distributed amongst Member States. This takes the burden off the Member States at the external borders. The effect of this should not be underestimated, because it ensures the willingness of

Member States to accept refugees and thus the continuation of open borders. This reduces the risk of a collapse of the European asylum system, like it did in 2015.

The same applies to the third point: The Directive enables EU Member States that take in refugees to be compensated, amongst other things through the refugee fund. That is very welcome. Refugees are not objects that can be moved at will. As far as the reception capacity allows, they should decide for themselves on their country- and place of residence. Still, the costs of granting protection should be distributed fairly across the Member States of the Community according to economic power and population. However, unfortunately, the compensation mechanism is not yet effective.

Germany must not repeat the mistakes of the past.

What does German politics now have to consider when implementing the Directive?

Kosyakova: Germany must not repeat the mistakes of the past – by that we mean the distribution of the refugees via the so-called “Königstein Key”. In 2015 and 2016, the key led to refugees being disproportionately settled in structurally weak regions with high unemployment rates. The residence requirement has reinforced this problem. Unfavourable local conditions coupled with residence requirements correspondingly have permanently reduced the employment opportunities for the refugees. Hence, redistribution of newly-arrived refugees to the economically weak regions will lead to the same problem. That’s why we should give more consideration to regional job markets and integration opportunities: Refugees should be allowed to settle where they have good prospects. For example, the number of integration courses offered locally plays a role, as does the available psychological services for coming to terms with traumatic experiences, and of course, because of the high proportion of children, the care and education infrastructure. For refugees who already have networks in Germany, it should be made possible for them to settle close to their network, as far as this is practical – research has long since proven the positive effects of social networks on labour-market integration. It is important to stress that possible higher costs of a “freer” regional distribution of Ukrainian refugees could be overcompensated by higher returns in the form of better labour market integration.

In terms of integration policy, it would also be important to offer those who arrive a longer-term time horizon, for example a three-year residence permit with a clear perspective for a permanent one. In this way, we create good incentives for refugees to learn German, attend courses, invest in their education and qualify for our job market – and we create prospects for companies to hire the refugees. In order to quickly get into the labour market, it is important that refugees are registered at the jobcentres from the outset and, if necessary, receive basic security benefits directly from there. We have seen in the past that refugees who are cared for by the jobcentres take part in

support programmes more often, make more use of the job-placement service – and find a job more quickly.

Brücker: In line with that, an important step has been achieved by integrating the Ukrainian refugees into the regular mean-tested benefit system in Germany, the basic social security system according to the Social Code II, instead of the asylum seeker allowances system by the 1st of June 2022. This has three advantages for the Ukrainian refugees: First, the job placement rates are higher, second, the benefits are generally paid in cash and not as in-kind allowances, and, third, the refugee population is integrated right from the beginning into the job placement- and labour market programme infrastructure of the German Job Centres. The last aspect should not be underrated: Our evidence from the 2015 refugee population shows that asylum seekers who are transferred into the Social Code II benefit system after the decision on their asylum applications tend to participate substantially more in job placement activities and qualification programs of the [Federal Employment Agency](#). This in turns results in rising employment rates. The same is to be expected for the Ukrainian population, although the shift from one benefit system to another might create some bureaucratic turmoil in the beginning.

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