

Difficult for Ukrainian migrants in Europe

Due to Russia's invasion in 2022 there are currently more than 5 million Ukrainians in Europe. Of those, more than 46,000 are residing in Sweden.

How do they see their situation and what it means for Europe to receive such a large group of new migrants? This is what a new research programme, funded by the EU Horizon Europe framework programme, will be investigating. The aim is to counteract polarisation and fragmentation due to large flows of displaced people.

The very first time the EU Temporary Protection Directive was implemented was in March 2022 in connection with people fleeing Ukraine. The purpose was to immediately provide residence and work permits, housing and access to school and healthcare. But as the residence permit is temporary it creates a lot of concern, explains Olga Sasunkevich, Associate Professor of Gender Science, who is heading the EU-project MAGnituDe: Migration, Affective Geopolitics and European Democracy in Times of Military Conflicts.

- The directive has been renewed several times and is currently in effect until March 4, 2027. But what will happen after that, nobody knows. The uncertainty will affect Ukrainians who have fled their country. In Sweden, for example, people from Ukraine requesting protection did not get access to integration programmes or Swedish language training during their first year. Sweden has also been criticised for providing Ukrainians with worse

economic conditions than Denmark and Norway.

It is also difficult to know what the rules are at any given time as they keep changing, which impacts adults and children differently, says Oksana Shmulyar Gréen.

- **Someone who**, for example, was in their late teens when they came to Sweden has probably not completed upper secondary school and cannot apply to university. Should they then have to study for a Swedish certificate for university despite perhaps soon leaving the country, and, if so, how should it be financed? As you have to have stayed in Sweden for 1-2 years to get a personal ID number it takes time before you can apply for a study grant from CSN. One alternative is to continue their studies at a Ukrainian school, but this would then would have to be done remotely.

Expectations are also great on Ukrainian refugees to be able to work, often from day one, explains Oksana Shmulyar Gréen, Associate Professor of Sociology and one of the researchers in the project.

- **But expecting someone** who has been forced to leave their country, has ended up in a completely different one and in unknown surroundings, perhaps suffering from trauma, to be able to start working immediately is an unreasonable expectation. As Ukrainians who fled from the war do not know how long they will be allowed to stay they often take whatever job they can get, mostly unqualified low-wage jobs that may also involve long commutes.

Even before the full-scale invasion, it was not unusual in Ukraine to have one of the parents working abroad, such as in

Poland or Sweden. But having the family split up because of war is a different matter, Olga Sasunkevich explains.

- Around 4 million of both internal refugees and those who received protection in Europe have returned to their homes in Ukraine. The reasons are many: It may be about keeping the family together or about returning to care for their parents or other older relatives. Children, who have grown into adulthood and who did not themselves make the decisions to flee, perhaps see greater opportunities in Ukraine than as migrants in a foreign country. And those who fled from one of the occupied territories perhaps return out of concern for losing their home. As there is a labour shortage in Ukraine, the Ukrainian state is encouraging people to return, which can be particularly attractive to someone who has temporary protection but cannot get a job that corresponds to their education. At the same time, receiving large groups of returning migrants will be a challenge to Ukraine.

Paradoxically, it appears that a good refugee policy leads to more people returning home compared to where the reception of refugees has been less than ideal, Oksana Shmulyar Gréen explains.

- This could be due the fact that someone who was able to get an education, to work and support their family simply feels strong enough for yet another move, compared to someone who fared worse.

Wir schaffen das, "We'll manage it", was Chancellor Angela Merkel's famous remark when Europe, not least Germany and Sweden, received large numbers of refugees from Syria in 2015.

Now the situation has changed, and opposition to refugees has increased in many European countries, including



Oksana Shmulyar Gréen and Olga Sasunkevich hope that their research will increase understanding between different groups.

»Paradoxically, it appears that a good refugee policy leads to more people returning home compared to where the reception of refugees has been less than ideal.«

OKSANA SHMULYAR GRÉEN

Sweden and Germany, Olga Sasunkevich points out.

- There is a risk of unfortunate antagonism, both between different refugee groups, as well as between refugees and the majority population.

These and other important matters will be investigated in MAGnituDe which is a partnership between seven universities and two NGOs: Help Ukraine in Gothenburg and Zavod Apis in Slovenia. The

project is based on the feminist concept of affective geopolitics which have analysed how emotions shape policy. The focus will be on the relationship and interplay between fleeing Ukrainians and representatives of authorities and civil society at different levels, as well as other migrants, and also the host country, says Olga Sasunkevich.

- The project comprises six packages where the University of Gothenburg is in charge of the area of affective, or emotional, citizenship as well as managing the entire consortium. One of the things that the project will investigate is how mass migration, in the wake of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, will affect European democracy and how the position of refugees from Ukraine, but also other refugees, can be strengthened in order for them to feel welcome and involved in their new society. Thus it is a project that will investigate very current issues.

Text: **Eva Lundgren** Photo: **Johan Wingborg**



Facts: The research and innovation project *MAGnituDe: Migration, Affective Geopolitics and European Democracy in Times of Military Conflicts* investigates

the consequences for European democracy of the mass displacement of Ukrainian citizens. The project is headed by Olga Sasunkevich, Associate Professor of Gender Science at the Department of Cultural Sciences, and is supported by the European Commission's framework programme *Horizon Europe* to the amount of 3 million euros. The project will run from 2025–2029. The following parties are involved: Universitat Pompeu Fabra (Spain), Zavod Apis (Slovenia), the Lithuanian Centre for Social Sciences, the Karazin Kharkiv University (Ukraine), the University of Eastern Finland, Gdansk University (Poland), the University of Greifswald (Germany), Help Ukraine Gothenburg as well as the University of Gothenburg. Other participants from the University of Gothenburg include Oksana Shmulyar Gréen, Associate Professor of Sociology, and Andrea Spehar, Associate Professor of Political Science.

In October 2025, more than 5 million Ukrainians were staying in Europe, of whom 46,570 were residing in Sweden, according to figures from <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/ukraine>.