Project ISI- State of Play

About the ISI project and current context

Integrated Smart Inclusion by Volunteers (ISI) is an EU co-financed project on improving volunteer-based support for the integration and inclusion of Ukrainian refugees in a number of countries that host significant numbers of them: Germany, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, and Slovakia. ISI focuses the social context of integration, beyond labour market and language learning but in its work still supporting these two crucial pillars of integration. The project aims to mainstream societal and community orientation support services for refugees from Ukraine. This involves providing refugees with the necessary skills and support to navigate their new environment, addressing the social aspects of integration and inclusion, especially people-to-people interactions and ensuring inclusive activities with host communities with the support of organised volunteers.

ISI approaches the challenge by enabling more qualified voluntary engagement in this area. The project will work on the definition, development and implementation of a volunteer training and piloting services provided by volunteers who have undergone the training course.

The training will consist of a central and mutual part (general target-group specific competences that will be the same for volunteers in all countries) as well as a locally adapted part to build a “knowledge hub” on the community level, with the capacities to assist refugees not only in matters of employment and language courses, but also when it comes to cultural offers and meeting spaces with members of the local community.

This document is one of the early deliverables of the project that takes stock of the practical status quo of activities and services for Ukrainian refugees done by the partner organisations. It is part of the groundwork for the development of the curriculum and further steps within the project.

From a legislative perspective, this attempt to capture the status quo comes at a time of ongoing changes, with many Ukrainian refugees thus far staying within EU countries under the Temporary Protection Directive.

The Council Decision to extend the EU’s Temporary Protection Directive until 4 March 2027 highlights that the importance of integrating Ukrainian refugees into EU societies remains as pressing today as it was at the outset of the war. The Commission Communication “A predictable and common European way forward for Ukrainians in the EU[1],” states that in the first three months of 2025, almost 142.000 decisions granting temporary protection were issued in the EU+, […] and that applications have continued to increase in the first months of 2025, with almost 6.000 Ukrainian asylum applications lodged in the EU between January and February 2025.

While the Commission recommends Member States to allow persons - especially those related to employment, education or family reasons - enjoying temporary protection to transition towards national legal residence statuses, the strategy also acknowledges the importance of cultural and social integration. In the framework of the current realities of

[1] *COM(2025) 649 final*

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Ukrainians in the EU this project is therefore highly relevant, both for newcomers and for already present refugees, as the project's innovative character approaches integration in a more holistic and person-centred approach.

Up to date information on ISI is available at:

https://isi.samaritan-international.eu/

Current and previous work of the project partner organisations

As of 2025, the partners of the ISI project have run or are running a variety of services for refugees from Ukraine.

ASSR, the project partner from Slovakia, has been involved in managing transit centres for refugees in the months immediately following the Russian attack in 2022. These centres have since been closed. However, the contact with the refugees allowed the organisation to take on a number of Ukrainians as volunteers. As a growing organisation with expanding responsibilities, the engagement of these new volunteers is very welcome. They are trained and tasked in the same way as local volunteers for civil protection contexts. The Ukrainian volunteers who joined the team are learning Slovak, even if Russian was a lingua franca in the beginning, as it is still widely spoken as a second language among the population in Slovakia.

Figures for Ukrainian refugees in

Slovakia

Number of Ukrainian refugees' total passed into the country (since 2022):

3 242 217

Number of Ukrainian refugees currently passing into/through the country per week (example, 9.-15.6.2025):

19 663

Number of Ukrainian refugees applying for Temporary protection status:

167 430

Number of UA university students (in the academic year 2023/24):

~ 10 466

Open job offers labelled for Ukrainians

~ 60 000

Number of Ukrainians employed in 2024:

~ 40 000

Overview of activities:

- Establishing two Emergency Temporary Camps (2022).
- Coordination of the refugee transit centres in Michalovce and Kosice (2024). Providing coordination of all humanitarian actors who delivered induction services to refugees, including first psychological aid, arranging legal documentation, food, childcare and also temporary shelter. Refugees were assisted in finding accommodation, transportation, childcare, healthcare, and other essential services. The services were delivered in coordination with state authorities, involving over 80 staff members, including representatives from the refugee community. ASSR coordinated the first contact transit centres based on the ETC SOPs and methods. Some Ukrainian refugees became members and volunteers of ASSR. Engagement of refugees in integration services enriched their knowledge and skills for subsequent labour market inclusion.
- Nonetheless, several Ukrainians continued to engage with the organisation as volunteers. They received training and were assigned responsibilities identical to those of local volunteers involved in emergency medical services and civil protection, becoming fully integrated into the local civil society organisation.

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- Staff efforts of Samaritans:
    - ETC Humenné 26.2. – 9.4.2022 - 42 days of 24/7 deployment
    - ETC Michalovce 29.3. – 9.4.2022 - 12 days of 24/7 deployment ETC Vojany 8.3. – 20.5.2022 -71 days of 24/7 deployment
    - Total staff engaged: 31 Samaritans + 15 volunteers managed by Samaritans + 21 members of the DHZ of the Stara Lubovna and Kezmarok districts, also managed by Samariatians
    - Induction support and first contact with incoming refugees before being assign a status of temporary protection: 8 month: 7593 refugees
    - Number of overnight stays of refugees with TP 441

    Essentials: Direction toward employment sectors experiencing national shortages while simultaneously highlighting and successfully encouraging social integration through volunteer participation.

Figures for Ukrainian refugees in

Poland

Total number of Ukrainian refugees that entered (and possibly transited) the country

~ 3 500 000

Registered Ukrainian refugees in the country since 2022

~ 993 000

Estimated number of refugees in the country

~ 1 500 000

Refugees in employment

~ 200 000, 50-60% in unqualified jobs

Refugees in education

~ 200 000

Number of refugees with official temporary protection status

~ 462 000

Polish project partner **SFOP** also experienced a change of activities. Immediate aid activities (temporary accommodation, necessities) were the focus in 2022, but since then the demand has shifted to integration services such as employment and language learning. SFOP were also able to recruit some Ukrainians as workers in their (general, not refugee-specific) social services. The organisation is continuously attempting to foster civic engagement for their refugee aid activities – yet it has declined since the beginning of the war. This poses challenges in doing long-term integration work.

SFOP collaborates with other NGOs and also contributes own expertise to identify the current demand and specific needs for services in the regions where they are based. Based on this, there is a demand in their region (Małopolska Province) for integration activities with and between Ukrainian refugees and local society. Such social integration is understood as activities and initiatives that help build mutual understanding, acceptance and cooperation. Corresponding activities include:

- Cultural exchange and education – organizing events, workshops, trips that promote Ukrainian and Polish culture, allowing residents to get to know each other better.

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- Joint social initiatives – volunteer projects, e.g. neighbourhood clean-ups, charity events that engage both refugees and the local community.

- Educational and information activities – campaigns that explain the rights and obligations of refugees, promote tolerance and counteract stereotypes.

- Creating meeting spaces – integration centres where residents can meet, talk and build relationships.

SFOP offers services to all kinds of Ukrainian refugees, but a special focus is on women with children, as those are overrepresented among the refugee population.

For Latvian project partner **LSA**, a key issue is lack of reliable numbers about demand. They also offered temporary accommodation and integration support, such as help with local bureaucracy, but the number of clients has dwindled – presumably because people moved onwards to Western European countries or back to Ukraine. The number of Ukrainians still in Latvia is unknown, making the design and scaling of services difficult. Integration efforts were, from the beginning, challenged by the fact that large portion of the Latvian population are able to speak Russian, thereby disincentivising Latvian language acquisition. LSA has been able to benefit from labour market integration of Ukrainians in their own organisation and is currently employing about 20-30 Ukrainian workers, mostly in unqualified positions. LSA has provided services for Ukrainian refugees of all demographics. However, one specific target group of LSA's services has been refugees with physical disabilities, as they were able to provide accessible temporary accommodation during the, generally longer, search for more permanent accessible housing.

Figures for Ukrainian refugees in

Latvia

Total number of Ukrainian refugees that entered (and possibly transited) the country

~ 218.080

Registered Ukrainian refugees in the country since 2022

~ 52.120

Estimated number of refugees in the country

~ 31.120

Refugees in employment

~ 9.300, 39% in unqualified jobs

Refugees in education

~ 4000

Number of refugees with official temporary protection status

~ 60% of total

The need for the provided services was determined together with various other relevant stakeholders. Contact with a Ukrainian partner organisation that assisted several refugees on their way to the EU informed the creation of the initial temporary accommodation offer. Later on, the ministry of welfare requested the accommodation of additional persons and contact with the a Latvian disabled people's organisation SUSTENTO led to increased awareness of the lack of accessible accommodation and the creation of the corresponding offer.

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Figures for Ukrainian refugees in

Lithuania

Total number of Ukrainian refugees that entered (and possibly transited) the country

Number not available

Registered Ukrainian refugees in the country since 2022

~ 96.253

Estimated number of refugees in the country

~ 45.610

Refugees in employment

~ 36.100

Refugees in education

~ 9600 (school-age)

LSB from Lithuania continues to provide a variety of services from material or food help to psychosocial support. Local LSB branches set-up a "one stop shop" for multiple support services (food and care packages, clothing, consultation and support with bureaucratic requirements) On top of this, LSB is focusing safe spaces for connection and meetings – amongst themselves but also with an on open line of communication and coordination to the local LSB organisation. This served as a low-threshold network of social support and coordinating and actively supporting such networks had integrative benefits. Local centres conducting meetings and coordinate everyday support via chat groups. A small number of volunteers from Ukraine have joined LSB's activities and have become active in supporting other refugees that came after them, but also in the services LSB provides for the general population. LSB does not target a specific demographic and offers these services to any incoming refugee from Ukraine.

A notable challenge, similar to Latvia, is that despite wide availability of Lithuanian as a foreign language courses, the motivation for language acquisition is low, as locals often speak Russian as a second language.

German partner organisation ASB the largest organisation in the consortium with a federal structure and thus has a large portfolio of support services ongoing from employment consulting to different types of therapy, integration in first aid courses and activities and initiatives by ASB's youth wing for gaining young Ukrainians as volunteers. The general services correspond to the portfolio of integration services that branches of ASB offer for refugees and migrants from any country, not just Ukraine. The scope of demanded services has changed considerably compared to the early days in 2022. Many people have left the service provisions, presumably because they established themselves and do not require them anymore, but the people who do remain clients of ASB's services and/or remain in temporary accommodation have significant need of them. ASB is trying to engage these remaining refugees with low-threshold projects, "meetings for coffee" with other groups of refugees, language learning, activities such as gardening or participation in the temporary accommodations democratic self-determination. Apart from the youth wing's efforts, integration into the qualified volunteering or staffed services of ASB is tricky due to qualification requirements, including good command of the German language.

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ASB is working in collaboration with the responsible authorities. In the federal structure of Germany, this usually means state and/or municipal public entities. In the case of the Hamburg branch active in the ISI project, they work together with the ministry of the interior and the social ministry of the city-state of Hamburg and a dedicated public agency “Fördern und Wohnen” (“Support and Housing”), led by the authorities for social affairs. These define the need for accommodation as such and basic standards, while the details of the need for support, consultation, referral to additional services etc. are determined by ASB (and other organisations tasked with care for refugees) by way of their own expertise.

By definition, the target group for the temporary accommodations is open and, for more than a year at the time of writing, not even differentiated by refugees from Ukraine or from other places any longer. Yet, some of the additional support work done by ASB has natural target groups – e.g. the youth organisation working with youth.

Figures for Ukrainian refugees in

Germany

Total number of Ukrainian refugees that entered (and possibly transited) the country

1.664.140

Estimated number of refugees in the country

~ 1.257.048

Legal basis for residence:

Residence permit 1.090.207

Temporary residence permit 54.403

Application for permanent residence permit: 42.224

Filed interest of protection 34.768

Neither filed interest for protection nor granted a residence permit 35.446

Refugees in employment

212.000 people from Ukraine in Germany are unemployed (includes non-refugee Ukrainians)

Ukrainians in integration services (of any kind):

89.000 attending official integration course

270.000 have finished the course.

Challenges and volunteer-based approaches for solutions

The project group of ISI conducted a state-of-play assessment at their first meeting to guide the priorities for the development of their volunteer training and to get the aid organisations from different countries on the same page as to what the current situation and most pressing challenges are.

Two central questions were answered.

The current challenges and obstacles to making integration more effective

Aid organisations face a complex and multi-faceted picture of challenges when it comes to the integration of Ukrainian refugees. Many of these challenges are rooted in the traumatic experiences that they had, but also in **persisting uncertainty,** lack of perspective and sometimes a lack of subjective safety. As in other more recent conflicts that led to a significant number of refugees, there is a risk of ongoing re-traumatization as there is constant contact with people left behind – relatives, friends, etc., who remain immediately affected and confronted by the war.

It should be noted, as described in the status of services chapter, that the persons in aid organisations’ or other integration services are a different demographic from the very mixed

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and general Ukrainian public that fled to the EU in the early days after the attack in 2022. Many persons have, administratively speaking, vanished from integration services because, presumably, they have either managed to build upon their qualifications and/or had the benefit of existing familial ties within the EU and therefore have since established themselves independently, or they have returned to Ukraine after regional differences in the severity of being affected by the war became apparent.

So the challenges in the following mainly concern the demographic that has not, for a variety of reasons, managed to establish themselves as fully independent, have remained within the EU and are still seeking out integration support services.

There are also challenges by differing approaches to Ukrainian identity or desire to go back. This can, for example, be the case for Roma people or other minorities that do not identify with Ukrainian nationality or if can be people who had made a life decision to emigrate even before the war created necessity but also opportunity to follow through on this plan.

The challenges for this aforementioned group can differ from the challenges of Ukrainians who are hindered from integration, including in the labour market by a perception that permanent perspectives either are not open to them or are not worthwhile considering that the situation is deemed temporary.

Additional circumstances pose challenges, such as businesses abusing subsidies and available benefits to underpay Ukrainian workers. Lack of childcare opportunities, which is not only an issue specifically for Ukrainians or even refugees as a group, but for some of the EU countries' in general, has effects on the integration of Ukrainian refugees in particular. Women with children are overrepresented among Ukrainian refugees and, consequently, their time to attend or make use of integration-focused events or services is limited, as is the option for employment.

Another challenge is the integration of school-age children. The formal differences in education systems and the incompatibility with the originally planned school careers are a challenge for each host country's schools. Combined with the aforementioned sense of temporariness of the stay, this leads to many Ukrainian children attending Ukrainian schools via video classes rather than going to an EU school – despite the language learning and integration benefits this would have.

On top of this, there are challenges that, in some form, arise for many groups of refugees or migrants.

The bureaucracy of the host countries can be challenging for refugees, be it for applying for benefits, seeking employment, enrolling children in school or finding and attending government-funded integration offers. Procedures vary from country to country and are rooted in their different administrative traditions. They can be inaccessible to persons with a limited understanding of the local language and procedures may seem arbitrary if they have to be fulfilled form a perspective outside the national context. This issue is universal for migrants of all kinds from anywhere, and social organisations have long-standing support offers to help navigate the national bureaucracy.

The language barrier remains an important factor. While Russian as a shared language immediately facilitates communication in Baltic and Eastern European states (where it is also still spoken, especially by older generations), it complicated the situation for sustainable integration. Young people in these countries tend to learn English instead of Russian as their first foreign language, thus refugees with Russian language skills won't be able to communicate with everyone. At the same time, the perception that it's possible to

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communicate with at least a substantial portion of the local population diminishes the motivation to learn the local language. Thus, Russian as a, sometimes, possible lingua franca makes things more complicated in the long run by making immediate conversation seem easier.

Then, despite Ukrainian refugees being from a similar cultural circle on a larger scale, cultural differences and proliferation of negative stereotypes pose a challenge for refugees as well as the local population. Add to this that Ukrainian refugees, in the early days of the war, had low-threshold access to social benefits, which, despite overall great solidarity with the Ukrainian people, was not perceived as fair by all of the population in the EU countries. These are potential sources of conflict that are known for other groups of refugees as well, but in the case of Ukraine substantial efforts of propaganda and disinformation in, typically right-wing, media and by "pro-Russian" politicians are exaggerating these issues for effect. Disinformation can also be a problem within temporary accommodations themselves, as quick spread of (false) rumours is inherent in such crowded situations.

Building on volunteer-based services to address existing challenges and improve integration

Voluntary engagement has huge potential in improving integration outcomes. It allows for services and offers in key areas but also in important and effective complementary areas (such as long-term contact points, maintaining community among refugees but also low-threshold contact between refugees and aid- and support organisation. Volunteers can be communicators and, importantly, donate time that qualified staff often does not have – for high-impact but time-intensive tasks such as just being there for a conversation, which is low-level psychosocial support and, at the same time, one of the few opportunities for conversational language learning for refugees before they have any other local contacts. By standing ready to provide such tasks, they also can spot the necessity for further professional action (e.g. referral to psychological support) and can thereby lead to a more targeted and efficient application of the limited professional resources.

To be able to fulfil these tasks and have an impact (which is, of course, important to their beneficiary refugees, but also an important factor in the larger volunteer management picture of the organisations, as volunteers need to feel that their work is meaningful to keep their engagement up), volunteers need training. Even well-informed persons with good intuitive understanding of the situation and good empathetic soft skills can easily be overwhelmed by issues brought to them by their refugee beneficiaries and will require additional background knowledge, specific problem-solving approaches and firm knowledge of where to turn to for anything that goes beyond their possibilities.

These points were re-affirmed by the project group as they jointly drew up the "state of play", and they specifically defined the following points as a starting point to design the project's planned volunteer training.

Awareness

Volunteers should be aware of the cultural background of their prospective beneficiaries and the challenges that come with that – particularly vis-à-vis their respective local culture. They should know what typical practical obstacles to integration arise from this in general and in their national context (i.e. – that and why certain bureaucratic or formal requirements may

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seem particularly foreign to the refugees). They should also be aware of psychological trauma, how it is expressed, how they can help and when professional support should be sought. They should be aware of their own added value of volunteers in this situation with respect to the limits of the professional or state-sponsored support services and thus be able to have an idea where, when and how to apply themselves (notwithstanding that the organisations responsible for, e.g. a refugee accommodation, does have a management and leading role that they need to comply with).

Necessary tools and techniques

It is necessary that volunteers learn about the operating procedures of the aid organisation they'll be working in, at least to the extend necessary to provide their end of coordination of all activities and to know who to contact for different issues that may arise.

They need to learn communication skills specific to the task, i.e. "how to speak" with the target demographic, considering linguistic or cultural barriers or psychosocial sensitivities. Which channels to use for this (e.g. a lot of organisations stay in touch with the refugee communities they're supporting via chat groups) and how should also be part of the communication toolkit.

Volunteers should also be trained in participatory methods for groups, as self-determination of groups of refugees (e.g. in a temporary accommodation but possibly also in a different context where a community is taking decisions) is important. It improves ownership of a group's decisions and demonstrates the primacy of democratic and participatory principles in EU countries as a component of cultural integration.

Volunteers should also know that they are in a teaching role and learn how to fulfil it. Whether explicitly (e.g. tutoring a refugee child going to a local school) or implicitly throughout any consulting services they provide. Showing how and why they do what they do is also an important component in making refugees consider to also go into volunteering with their organisation once their own individual matters are settled.

Basic knowledge of regulatory framework

When working with refugees, a basic understanding of the regulatory framework is necessary. This concerns legislation and rules for residence law, employment, housing, benefits and other entitlements that refugees may have & corresponding contact points.

Besides this, any volunteer also needs to know about refugees' rights that they themselves need to honour, including confidentiality/privacy of anything that comes up during the service provision.

Volunteers should also be taught the basics of humanitarian standards (especially in temporary accommodation contexts) and the limits of what they may do by law, depending on their formal qualifications, and when they are obligated to bring in officially qualified personnel.

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