ESTONIA PROTECTION BRIEF #1

October 2024

Context

At the end of 2021 – prior to the war in Ukraine – 336 refugees and asylum seekers were recorded in Estonia.[1] Following the escalation of the war in Ukraine in February 2022, 58,210 refugees from Ukraine applied for asylum, temporary protection, or similar national protection schemes in Estonia. As of 30 June 2024, there were 33,882 persons with active temporary protection status and 6,021 persons with subsidiary protection status from Ukraine. Despite the sudden and massive increase in the number of refugees, Estonia has taken a series of measures to promote refugees' swift access to rights. For instance, Estonia has the highest number of refugee children from Ukraine who are enrolled in local schools.[2]

About this report: to better understand the protection situation and need of refugees from Ukraine in Estonia, UNHCR, in collaboration with the Estonian Refugee Council, has conducted a protection monitoring exercise.[3] Between May and October 2023, 621 refugees were interviewed (first round). After the launch of a revised questionnaire in October 2023, 228 interviews were conducted – until March 2024 (second round). This report presents the key findings of interviews conducted between May and October 2023, with a focus on access to documentation, employment, and healthcare. Where relevant, the analysis has been complemented with the results of interviews conducted between October 2023 and March 2024.

Key protection monitoring figures

621
total respondents

99%
of respondents are Ukrainians

83%
of respondents are women

23%
of households have at least one person with a specific need

9%
of households comprised of older persons

14%
of households have children who are separated from both parents

1. See https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics/download/?url=lAr67y
2. Estonia: UNHCR refugee integration assessment and recommendations | European Website on Integration (europa.eu)
3. *While respondents have been randomly selected to reduce bias, non-probability sampling was used. Results cannot necessarily be extrapolated to all refugees from Ukraine in Estonia*

Key protection issues

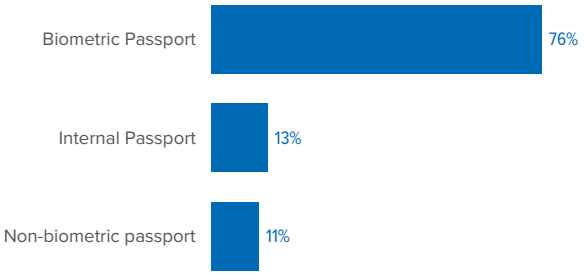
1. Access to documentation

Thirty-one percent of respondents have at least one household member without a valid identity document, with 87% lacking an international passport. Of the 31% of respondents who reported having a household member without identity document, **54% are unable to obtain a replacement in Estonia**. As findings from the second round of data collection revealed, most refugees are unable to obtain a replacement because of long waiting times at the Ukrainian Embassy in Estonia.[4] Some refugees reported waiting for a year before deciding to travel to Poland instead and replace their documents there, while others reported waiting for two years as they were unable to travel to Poland due to financial constraints. Ten percent of respondents who had reported lacking documentation, stated not knowing whether they can renew/replace their documentation in Estonia, signalling the challenges regarding the availability of information on this subject.

Households with at least one person with a disability reported experiencing more challenges obtaining identity documents than households that do not have a member with a disability: 35% of households with one member with a disability reported lacking documentation, which is higher than the 29% recorded among other households. In comparison with other households, a higher percentage of households with a person with a disability also report inability to obtain a replacement in the host country (61% vs 51%).

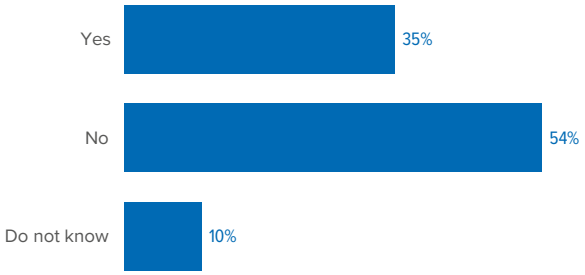
The lack of an international passport, for instance, hinders refugees' ability to travel abroad, while the inability to obtain a replacement in Estonia compels them to return to Ukraine to retrieve documents even if the security situation may not permit it. According to a recent UNHCR survey, out of 28% of refugees who temporarily returned to Ukraine from Estonia, 28% did so to obtain documents.[5]

TOP MISSING DOCUMENTS*



** Multiple responses were possible, so percentages can go over 100% when added.*

ABILITY TO REPLACE DOCUMENTS**



*** Due to rounding some percent totals do not add up to 100%.*

4. Regional Protection Profiling & Monitoring (Oct 2023 onwards) (unhcr.org) (data as of 12 April 2024)
5. Ibid

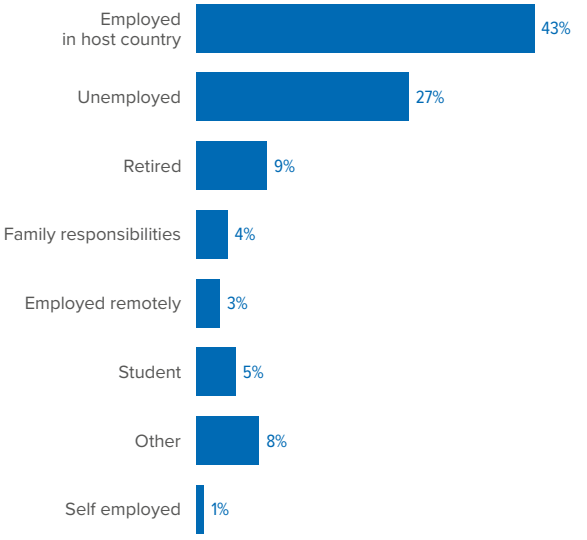
2. Access to work

From organizing job fairs to setting up websites aimed at connecting refugees with employers, the Estonian government has taken various measures to ensure refugees' access to work. As a testament to these efforts, 47% of refugees surveyed reported being employed in Estonia.

Notwithstanding, many refugees routinely report being engaged in low-wage jobs that are below their qualifications, largely due to limited suitable work opportunities and language barriers. Furthermore, during the second round of data collection, some refugees reported working without an employment contract and excessively long hours, as well as having irregular to no access to their earnings.

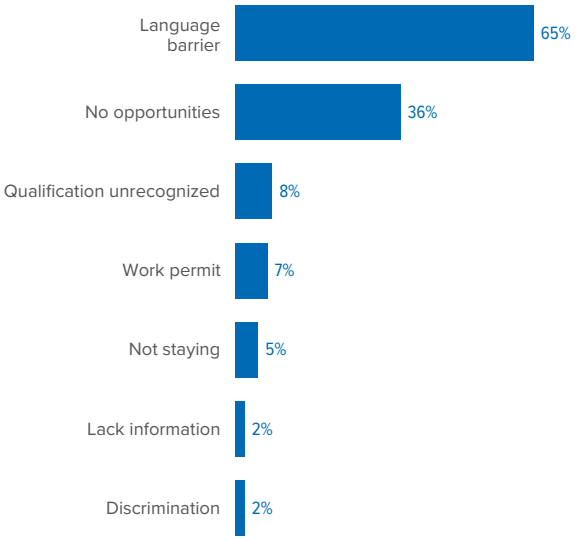
A sizable portion of refugees interviewed (27%) have also reported unemployment. The obstacles faced in securing employment among this group are similar to the refugees engaged in low-wage jobs that are below their qualifications. Of the 27% who are unemployed, 65% reported language barriers as the main obstacles. During focus group discussions, refugees repeatedly raised the shortage of language courses as a key barrier to employment. In limited instances where online language courses are available, refugees with limited digital skills or without access to digital devices are unable to attend. Another big obstacle for unemployed refugees is limited access to decent work opportunities, that match their qualifications, which is indicated by the 36% of the interviewed.

CURRENT ACTIVITY**



* *Due to rounding some percent totals do not add up to 100%*

MAIN REASONS OF UNEMPLOYMENT*



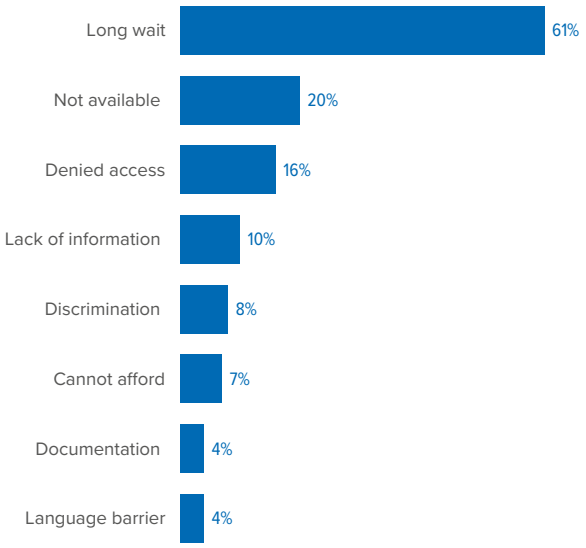
* *Multiple responses were possible, so percentages can go over 100% when added.*

3. Access to healthcare

Among refugees interviewed, 28 per cent indicated healthcare as one of their most urgent needs. The high demand for healthcare indicates the prevalence of challenges limiting refugees' access to it; 34% of refugees interviewed experienced difficulties accessing healthcare system in Estonia.

As reported by 61% of refugees who had difficulties accessing healthcare, the most common obstacle is long waiting times, possibly attributable to an overall shortage of healthcare providers. It should be noted that this issue is common for all people in Estonia and is rather a characteristic of the healthcare system than an indication of the low accessibility of healthcare services for refugees. Nevertheless, long waiting times pose a serious challenge for refugees with serious medical conditions, as they often require regular care and follow up.

MAIN DIFFICULTIES ACCESSING HEALTHCARE SYSTEM*



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Calls to action

1. UNHCR recommends continued efforts to address administrative or legal barriers which hinder refugees' access to documentation services. Refugees, particularly those with specific needs, require additional support to replace and have identity documentation issued to them in host countries.
2. UNHCR recommends addressing barriers to employment, including by creating more language training opportunities for refugees, specifically beyond the A1 level and in-person. UNHCR also recommends increased efforts to improve awareness of labour rights and reporting mechanisms for exploitative working practices amongst refugees from Ukraine.
3. It is important to raise awareness among refugees about the national health care system and how this system operates. UNHCR recommends organizing regular information sessions and developing information materials together with NGOs and health organizations to explain how the national health care system works, how to register, and what services are available. In addition to this, it would also be beneficial if healthcare professionals from refugee communities are included in the workforce of national healthcare systems on a wider scale. This will benefit both host and refugee communities, including by enhancing health system capacities and addressing language barriers.