LATVIA PROTECTION BRIEF #1

October 2024

Context

Latvia is among the countries that have received a large number of refugees from Ukraine compared to their population size. As of 21 May 2024, an estimated 55,175 refugees from Ukraine have applied for temporary protection, similar national protection schemes, or asylum in Latvia.

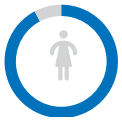
Since the start of the crisis, Latvia has shown an incredible level of support to refugees from Ukraine. Notably, the government has established a one-stop support center in Riga city, where various experts assist refugees with different matters, including finding accommodation, food, and obtaining documentation. An official website called "Ukraine to Latvia" has also been set up, providing refugees with a wide range of information. In 2023, the government adopted an action plan aimed at ensuring refugees' access to rights and integration in Latvian society.

About this report: in Latvia, UNHCR and its NGO partner "Gribu palīdzēt bēgļiem" (I Want to Help Refugees) have been conducting a protection monitoring exercise to assess the situation and needs of refugees from Ukraine. Between October 2023 and March 2024, 458 interviews were conducted. This report presents the main findings, with a focus on access to employment, access to education and the protection of persons with specific needs.

Key protection monitoring figures

459
total respondents

99%
of respondents are Ukrainians



76%
of respondents are women

25%
of households have at least one person with a specific need

9%
of households comprised of older persons

5%
of households have children who are separated from both parents

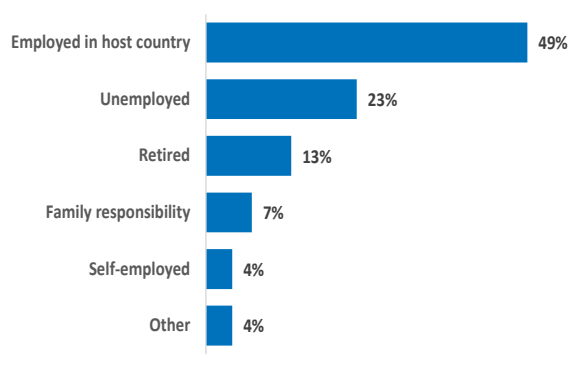
Key protection issues

1. Limited access to work and risks of labour exploitation

Almost half (48%) of refugees surveyed reported being employed in Latvia. However, some employed refugees have reported working conditions, which could be considered as labour exploitation. For instance, two percent of employed refugees have reported the confiscation of their identity documents by their employers, while three percent have reported having partial to no access to their earnings. A range of factors heighten refugees' vulnerability to labour exploitation, notably poverty, language barriers and limited access to decent work opportunities.

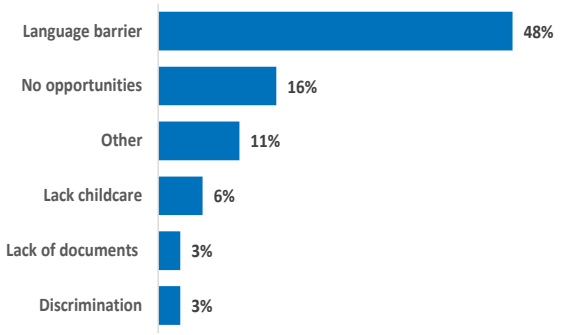
In Latvia, limited access to employment also remains a pressing concern for many refugees. Of those interviewed, 23% of refugees reported unemployment, mainly due to language barriers (48%) and a lack of decent work opportunities (16%). Six percent of respondents have also pointed out a lack of access to childcare services as an obstacle to employment. During focus group discussions, refugee women reported a lack of access to childcare arrangements as a major impediment to employment. Due to family separation – with 66% of respondents separated from their immediate family members – refugee women often lack family support in caring for their children.

CURRENT MAIN ACTIVITY*



** Due to rounding, some percent totals may no add up to 100%

BARRIERS TO EMPLOYMENT*



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

2. Limited access to education

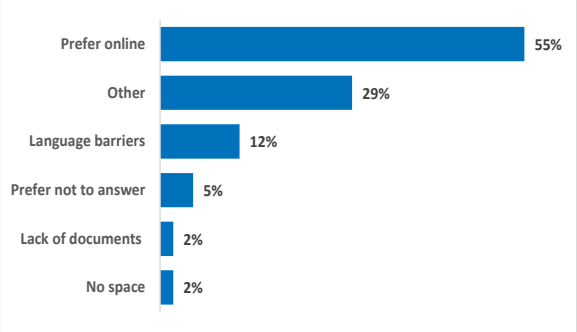
The Law on Assistance to Ukrainian civilians establishes the right of Ukrainian children to receive education according to the Asylum Law. Relevant sections of Asylum Law prescribe the right of asylum-seeker, refugee, or beneficiary of subsidiary status children to receive education according to rules laid down by the Cabinet of Ministers. However, the enrolment of refugee children from Ukraine in the education system in Latvia is not compulsory.

According to the Ministry of Interior, as of 12 October 2023, there were 6,357 refugee children from Ukraine aged 7 to 17 years, eligible for enrolment in either primary or secondary schools. Nevertheless, 61% of these children were not registered for school.

According to protection monitoring, 29% of households with school-age children reported having at least one child who is not attending school in Latvia. This is mostly because of preference for online education through the Ukrainian curriculum (55%). But in some cases, the enrolment of refugee children online is driven by other factors, including a lack of space in local schools, a lack of supporting documents, and language barriers. In this context, 12% of households with school-age children reported not enrolling their children in local schools due to

language barriers. Providing language trainings through formal and informal courses for school-age children is a critical step in promoting the inclusion and will result in higher enrolment of refugee children from Ukraine in the Latvian national education system

REASONS FOR NOT ENROLLING CHILDREN*



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

3. Limited access to rights for persons with specific needs

Latvia is among the few countries which have adopted procedures aimed at identifying persons with specific needs. Identification of persons with specific needs is carried out by the State and Rescue Service upon refugees' arrival. However, the identification process is not always continuous due to capacity constraints. The lack of efficient identification process often means that persons with specific needs do not receive tailored support, hindering their access to rights and services. In this context, households containing persons with specific needs report limited access to rights as compared to other households.

Persons with disabilities: 8% of households surveyed have at least one household member with a disability. 31% of households with at least one person with a disability reported being employed, significantly lower than 56% recorded among other households. A relatively lower level of employment among households with persons with disabilities could inter alia be attributed to limited access to suitable job opportunities that cater to their needs. During focus group discussions, refugees have reported a lack of support for persons with disabilities with finding suitable jobs.

School attendance is also lower among households with people with disabilities. 39% of households with at least one person with a disability reported having a child who is not attending school in Latvia, which is substantially higher compared to the 26% recorded among other households. Refugees have identified the lack of specialized education for children with disabilities as an obstacle to education, among other challenges.

Persons with serious medical conditions: 25% of households surveyed have at least one person with a serious medical condition. As compared to other households, a higher portion of households containing a person with a serious medical condition reported missing their identity documents (22% vs 15%). However, a slightly higher portion of households with at least one person with a serious medical condition reported inability to obtain a replacement identity document in Latvia compared to others (32% vs 30%). The most reported barrier to obtaining documents for these households is the difficulty in accessing Ukrainian consular services.

Calls to action

1. UNHCR recommends increased efforts to improve awareness of labour rights and reporting mechanisms for exploitative working practices amongst refugees from Ukraine. UNHCR further recommends facilitating access to language trainings to support the inclusion of refugees in the labour market.
2. UNHCR recommends increasing the enrolment and attendance of refugee children in Latvian schools. Refugee children also require additional language classes to ensure their swift integration into the national education system.
3. UNHCR recommends improving the identification and registration of persons with specific needs, including by age, gender, and municipality, to provide timely and targeted assistance.