

# Refugee Integration and Governance in the Nordic-Baltic Region

Key Findings and Policy Recommendations

*Influx of Migrants Following Russia's Invasion of  
Ukraine: Integration and Governance Dynamics  
in Nordic and Baltic States*

## NordForsk

NordForsk is an organisation under the Nordic Council of Ministers that provides funding for and facilitates Nordic co-operation on research and research infrastructure. NordForsk has funded several research projects on migration and integration. Visit the [NordForsk website](#) to learn more.

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# Introduction

Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, millions have crossed the border to neighbouring countries in the West of whom many have continued through Europe to the Nordic-Baltic region. These refugees and migrants have a different demographic profile than many previous migrant groups, and there have also been several changes to the integration acts in the Nordic countries.

The INFLUX project is a result of special commission which NordForsk received from the Nordic Council of Ministers secretariat to fund research supporting activities with relevance mainly for the integration of refugees from Ukraine in the Nordic countries. The purpose of the NordForsk call has been to capitalise on existing, excellent Nordic research networks from NordForsk's [research initiative on Migration and Integration](#) currently working on highly relevant aspects of migration and integration to provide research-based knowledge which can contribute to the integration of new refugees from Ukraine.

The INFLUX project consists of a strong research team from four of the research projects from the ongoing NordForsk migration and integration initiative, as well as new partners, from Norway, Sweden, Finland, Lithuania and Estonia. The project is an excellent example of Nordic added value by gathering excellent Nordic researchers to address questions of high relevance for the integration of refugees and migrants in the Nordic and Baltic societies, including questions concerning governance and policy development.

The seven policy briefs, which the project has produced, provide valuable insights for policymakers, educators, and civil society organizations working to support refugees in navigating the complexities of displacement and integration.

*Arne Flåøyen,*  
Director of NordForsk

# Summary

This report summarizes the key findings from a research project on the integration, labor market participation, governance, and challenges faced by Ukrainian refugees in Norway, Sweden, Finland, Estonia, and Lithuania following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

The study was performed by the research project *Influx of Migrants Following Russia's Invasion of Ukraine: Integration and Governance Dynamics in Nordic and Baltic States*, with the project time frame May 2023 – October 2024. The project explores structural dimensions of integration and provides insights into the effectiveness of existing policies and governance structures.

The study highlights the critical role of social ties, education, and labor market integration. While Nordic and Baltic countries have made commendable efforts, significant challenges remain in addressing systemic barriers. Policies must prioritize long-term integration by balancing transnational ties with local connections, ensuring equal opportunities, and fostering sustainable governance structures.

The project has produced seven policy briefs with in-depth analysis of the field. Six papers have been submitted or are close to being submitted, and one book chapter is in press. This report summarizes the results, and the key findings have been categorized into three main themes: Processes of integration - young people and their families, integration into labor markets, and refugee and migration governance. For more information, please read the policy briefs in their entirety.

# Project Overview

The backdrop of this project is the Russian invasion of Ukraine (2022). Millions of Ukrainians fled their homeland, seeking refuge in neighboring countries and beyond, marking the most extensive and rapidly escalating refugee situation in Europe since World War II. There is a shortage of evidence to guide policymakers on the economic and/or educational integration of eastern Europeans, a large proportion are female refugees arriving with children and no spouse, having temporary protection. Some of the most important receiving countries have little previous experience in hosting refugees, whereas the Nordic countries generally are experienced in refugee integration. Hence, the studied countries (Norway, Sweden, Finland, Estonia, and Lithuania) have faced distinctive challenges in adapting their refugee reception, integration, and return strategies to this unprecedented influx. The Nordic countries, experienced in refugee integration, have had to adapt their state-led systems to accommodate a new demographic profile of refugees. In contrast, the Baltic states, relatively new to hosting large-scale refugee flows, have implemented ad hoc mechanisms supported by civil society.

Our key focus relates to the structural dimension of integration, as it refers to integration across the core institutions of society. In addition to structural integration, the project acknowledges the transnational dimensions of integration. The overall aim is to understand the integration of, and governance structures relating to, the influx of Ukrainian refugee-migrants in the short-, medium- and long-term. We address refugee integration through phases, including arrival, settlement, educational and labor market participation focusing on urban and rural dynamics while exploring immediate and longer-term integration trajectories. By encompassing these diverse areas, our results illuminate host states' huge dilemmas and responses from the point of refugees' arrival, through either temporary or permanent settlement, or alternatively, the possible return to their countries of origin.

# The INFLUX Project

**Principal Investigator:** Liv Osland,  
Western Norway University of Applied Sciences

**Co-Principal Investigator:** Cathrine Talleraas,  
Chr. Michelsen Institute (CMI)

**Participating countries:** Norway, Sweden, Finland, Lithuania  
and Estonia

## Project partner universities



UNIVERSITY  
OF TURKU



Tampere University

**CMI** CHR.  
MICHELSEN  
INSTITUTE



Stockholm  
University



Western Norway  
University of  
Applied Sciences

# Key Figures



**NOK 4,5  
million**

Budget



**7**

Publications



**19**

Researchers



**19**

Engagement Activities



# Key Findings

The main findings of the project can be structured according to three main areas, as summarized on the next pages, where policy briefs and papers produced represent the main output from the INFLUX project.

## 1. Processes of integration - young people and their families

This project explores the experiences of Ukrainian refugees, particularly children and young people, as they navigate the educational and social challenges in their host countries (Finland, Estonia, Lithuania, and Sweden).

The research focuses on understanding the dilemmas they face due to the temporary nature of their residence permits, disrupted social ties, and the support as well as obstacles they encounter in education.

**Policy Brief #6** (2024) authored by Palonen et al., investigates how social ties, especially those formed through schools, impact Ukrainian refugee families' inclusion and well-being.

Two years after the invasion, the research shows that schools play a key role in providing stability,

facilitating peer interactions, and offering access to resources that support emotional well-being. However, the frequent changes in schools and disrupted friendships exacerbated psychological distress.



The study emphasizes the importance of policies that foster the growth of social and educational networks, promote family connections, and address language challenges, including having school staff with intercultural competence.

*Policy Brief #6 by Palonen et al.*

Ukrainian students maintained connections with their home country through online platforms and "double schooling," helping to preserve friendships with peers in Ukraine. Refugee families continue to rely on strong ties with relatives and local communities, especially within schools.

The study emphasizes the importance of policies that foster the growth of social and educational networks, promote family connections, and address language challenges, including having school staff with intercultural competence, e.g. sharing the Ukrainian refugee students' first language present to support integration.

**Paper #1** by Brinch et al. focuses on the pedagogical and social inclusion of Ukrainian refugee students at Pine Tree School in Sweden.

Data included interviews with school staff, ethnographic fieldwork, and classroom observations.

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Schools are encouraged to provide emotional support for school staff working with newly arrived students, such as offering work counselling for preparatory teachers and low-threshold assistance for multicultural education-related issues.

*Policy Brief #1 by Petäjaniemi et al.*

It reveals that schools serve as both facilitators and barriers to integration. While schools offer important resources, barriers such as the need to navigate Ukrainian and Swedish curricula lead to academic challenges, especially when prior knowledge isn't fully recognized by teachers. Their temporary asylum status adds to the uncertainty about their

educational futures, making long-term planning difficult.

Social inclusion is limited by "polite exclusion," where native Swedish students avoid interacting with their Ukrainian peers, preventing formation of social bonds.

Despite these challenges, schools that offer effective teacher collaboration, on-site competence screenings, and employ Ukrainian-speaking staff improve pedagogical and social inclusion by fostering trust and a sense of security. However, some teachers view the students through a deficit lens, underestimating their potential.

The study also highlights how Sweden's stricter migration policies undermine integration, as the uncertainty about students' future status limits social and pedagogical inclusion.

In a broader exploration of challenges faced by Ukrainian refugee families in Sweden, the **book chapter #1** by Brinch et al. examines the role of "pedagogical love" in supporting students.

It highlights the emotional labor of school staff who invest time and effort in making newly arrived students feel safe and welcome. These staff members, particularly those who share cultural and linguistic ties with the students, act as crucial bridges between the students and the wider school community. However, the emotionally demanding nature of this work calls for more professional support and resources for staff to continue their efforts.

## 2. Integration into labor markets

**Paper #2** by Tammaru et al. examines the labor market integration of Ukrainian war refugees in Estonia, focusing on spatial context, labor market conditions, and co-ethnic presence, alongside gender, language, and family status.



The biggest Ukrainian refugee group is formed by women with children. Women with children also face highest obstacles in swift labour market integration. Securing day-care and educational support may be two important policy fields that could help to address this challenge.

*Policy Brief #2 by Tammaru et al.*

Based on data from 25,039 refugees granted temporary protection by January 2023, the findings reveal that regional centers offer better employment opportunities than industrial areas like North-East Estonia. Refugees in Tallinn fare similarly to those in smaller towns or rural areas.

Women face greater employment challenges in high-unemployment areas, while men are less affected.

Proximity to co-ethnics provides emotional support but does not significantly impact employment outcomes. Employment likelihood increases over time, with women in their 40s more successful, while men over 50 face challenges.

Refugees with academic degrees are less likely to work, possibly due to skill mismatches, and Ukrainian speakers fare better than Russian speakers. Policies supporting childcare and addressing language dynamics could further enhance integration.

**Paper #3** is authored by Severinsen et al.: Norway's dispersal policy for refugee settlement aim to achieve regional growth, preventing segregation, obtain social/economic integration and to obtain affordable housing. The study examines the policy's conflicting goals and its impact on refugees' labor market integration, defined as having a job or not.

Using population registers of refugees who arrived in Norway from 1992-2023, aged 18-60 at arrival, from Bosnia, Kosovo, Syria, and partially Ukraine (n=38269), it finds that refugees are allocated to low-unemployment, rural municipalities, but not necessarily where job opportunities are abundant.

Men are more likely than women to be employed within 2 years, and employment likelihood decreases with age. Ukrainians are less likely to be employed within 2 years than previous groups.

Employment likelihood is up to 25 percentage points higher during low national unemployment. High job diversity, accessibility, job rates, and low local unemployment increase employment chances.

Longer unemployment in initial municipalities reduces local job

offers. Rural placements may benefit regional policy but harm labor market integration.

#### **Paper #4 and Policy Brief #7**

by Andersen and Osland uses longitudinal microdata to analyze factors influencing emigration among refugee families in Norway after their initial resettlement.

Main findings: emigration is a rare but heterogeneous event, primarily occurring within the first 2-3 years of settlement mainly involving refugees under temporary protection schemes.

Norway's policy of dispersed settlement places refugees in both rural and central areas quasi-randomly. Families in rural municipalities, characterized by fewer job opportunities and service functions, are more likely to emigrate than those in central areas.

Internal migration in Norway typically involves moving from rural to more central municipalities, suggesting that the dispersal policy increases overall refugee mobility rather than fostering stability. Later arriving cohorts have lower emigration rates, potentially due to compositional differences and improved integration policies.

Labor market integration reduces emigration likelihood, with stronger effects for higher-earning employment. Starting a family and raising children is also associated with lower emigration tendencies, particularly for male-headed families.

Refugees with temporary collective

protection have significantly higher emigration rates, likely tied to the situation in their home countries and the transient nature of their legal status.



It is important to increase our understanding of what promotes residential stability and improves integration efforts. Do the national and local benefits of dispersed settlement outweigh the disadvantages for both refugees and the affected municipalities?

*Policy Brief #7 by Andersen and Osland.*

### **3. Refugee and migration governance**

As part of the project, important insights have been gained concerning refugee and migration governance, with key insights emerging from research carried out in Estonia, Norway and Finland.

Three case studies, focusing on Norwegian reception facilities for Ukrainian refugees, the transnational dimension of the Ukrainian refugees' integration processes in Estonia, and border control at the Norwegian-Russian border, has contributed to the research field on migration and refugee governance.

**Policy Brief #3** and adjacent **Paper #5** authored by Knudsen, examines the reception and integration of Ukrainian asylum seekers in Norway

following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

Benefiting from the EU's Temporary Protection Directive, Ukrainians were granted group asylum status, enabling expedited registration and temporary protection.

Findings reveal significant procedural differences between Ukrainians and other asylum groups, with Ukrainians transitioning through centralized reception centers and municipalities within weeks rather than months.

This logistified approach—emphasizing speed and efficiency—has strained reception center staff, highlighting “friction” in the system.



Temporary protection policies will need revision as the war prolongs and EU protection expires in 2026.

*Policy Brief #3 by Knudsen.*

Despite the Ukrainians' young, educated demographic, and high adaptability, their employment rates lag behind those in Denmark and Sweden. Norway's recent policy shift, including benefit reductions and stricter asylum conditions, aims to align with Nordic counterparts.

The study underscores a tension between welcoming refugees and the challenges of sustaining long-term support, with broader implications for the handling of mass displacement and integration policies.

Targeting networks in integration processes, **Policy Brief #5** and

corresponding **Paper #6** by Nuga, highlight Ukrainian refugees' integration experiences.

Main findings include that strong ties to Ukraine fostered local networks, with transnational activities offering purpose but requiring resources and shifting priorities.

War-related factors like death and political tensions weakened ties for many, while others severed connections due to mistrust.

Younger and elderly refugees often struggled with local integration due to language barriers, relying on family networks for support.

Schools and volunteer activities aided community connections, and Estonia's efficient e-bureaucracy was widely appreciated despite challenges for the elderly.

While Estonia's digital systems eased initial integration, long-term connections with locals remained limited, hindered by language and social barriers.

Refugees often leaned on Ukrainian networks for stability, which sometimes impeded local integration. Drawing on this, the research finds that policymakers should balance preserving transnational ties with fostering local networks.



Policymakers should balance preserving transnational ties with fostering local networks.

*Policy Brief #5 by Nuga.*

With a focus on border governance in Norway, **Policy Brief #4** which is authored by Talleraas and Koch, provided a comparative analysis of border management practices at the Norway-Russia and Finland-Russia borders, focusing on how these have evolved in response to key events between 2015 and 2023.



Policy recommendations emphasize the importance of proactive local engagement, cross-border cooperation, knowledge exchange, and flexibility in addressing evolving security challenges.

*Policy Brief #4 by Talleraas and Koch.*

Drawing on the 2015 "refugee crisis" and the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, the brief explores how both countries adapted their border control practices, policies, and relevant collaborations.

As external borders of the Schengen Area and NATO members (with Finland joining in 2023), Norway and Finland present distinct approaches

to border control, shaped by differing geopolitical contexts and local dynamics, including the fact that Finland's border with Russia is also a European Union (EU) external border.

The main findings highlight lessons learned from the 2015 so-called "refugee crisis", such as preparedness and inter-agency cooperation, and how these lessons have influenced current border security measures.

Drawing on this research, policy recommendations emphasize the importance of proactive local engagement, cross-border cooperation, knowledge exchange, and flexibility in addressing evolving security challenges.

This research has also attracted further interest and research funding with a research grant from the Ministry of Defence to carry out further research on the role of migration at the Norwegian border to Russia.

The sole responsibility for the content of the policy papers lies with the researchers. NordForsk is not responsible for any use of the information contained in the papers.

# Policy Briefs

We encourage readers to explore the full reports to access all policy recommendations in their entirety. Available at: <https://www.hvl.no/en/research/project/influx/>

#1. Petäjaniemi, M. Brinch, R., Kaukko M. & Lund, A. (2024). [Successful practices and lessons learned: Ukrainian students in Swedish and Finnish schools](#). INFLUX Policy Brief, 1(1)-2024, Western Norway University of Applied Sciences (HVL), Haugesund, Norway

#2. Tammaru, T. Kalm, K. Kährik, A. & Tammur A (2024). [Refugees find employment in very different settlement contexts](#). INFLUX Policy Brief, 1(2)-2024, Western Norway University of Applied Sciences (HVL), Haugesund, Norway

#3. Knudsen, Are John (2024). [Arrival of the fittest: Asylum seekers from Ukraine transecting temporary accommodation in Norway](#). INFLUX Policy Brief, 1(3)-2024, Western Norway University of Applied Sciences (HVL), Haugesund, Norway

#4. Talleraas, Cathrine, Koch Katharina (2024). [Border management in flux: Comparative lessons from the Norway-Russia and Finland-Russia borders \(2015–2023\)](#). INFLUX Policy Brief, 1(4)-2024, Western Norway University of Applied Sciences (HVL), Haugesund, Norway

#5. Nuga, Mari (2024). [Transnational and local connections in the integration of Ukrainian refugee families](#). INFLUX Policy Brief, 1(5)-2024, Western Norway University of Applied Sciences (HVL), Haugesund, Norway

#6. Palonen, Tuire, Horlenko, Kateryna and Nuga, Mari (2024). [Protective ties for integration: Schools as support hubs for Ukrainian refugee families](#). INFLUX Policy Brief, 1(6)-2024, Western Norway University of Applied Sciences (HVL), Haugesund, Norway

#7. Andersen, Henrik Lindegaard and Liv Osland (2024). [Refugees in Norway: Stay or Leave Rural Areas?](#) INFLUX Policy Brief, 1(7)-2024, Western Norway University of Applied Sciences (HVL), Haugesund, Norway.

# Papers

#1. Brinch Rebecca, Lund Anna, Petäjämäniemi Maria, Kaukko Mervi. *The Dual Process of Inclusion and Exclusion: Ukrainian Refugee Students and Organizational Learning in a Swedish School.* (submitted).

#2. Tammaru, Tiit, Kadi Kalm , Anneli Kährik , and Alis Tammur. *Spatial dimension of economic integration of Ukrainian war refugees in Estonia: The role of initial settlement pattern in immediate labor market entry.* (submitted)

#3. Severinsen, Karl Gunnar; Gjestland, Arnstein; Thorsen, Inge Heldal & Jan Ubøe. *Refugees, dispersal policies and labour market integration: Insights from Norwegian data.* (submitted)

#4. Andersen, Henrik Lindegaard and Osland, Liv. *Stay or go? Norwegian settlement policy and probability of refugees' emigration Quasi-experimental evidence.* (submitted).

#5. Knudsen, Are John. *Arrival of the fittest. Asylum Seekers from Ukraine Transecting Temporary Accommodation in Norway.* (In preparation for submission).

#6. Nuga, Mari. *Navigating Integration: Family Networks and Transnational Ties Among Ukrainian Refugee Families.* (In preparation for submission)



# Book chapters

#1. Brinch, Rebecca & Lund, Anna (accepted for publication, forthcoming May 2025). "Det är som en berg- och dalbana faktiskt." Skolpersonals pedagogiska kärlek i mötet med nyanlända ukrainska elever. In: Gunnarsson, David; Lund, Anna & Månsson Niclas (eds.) *Migration, nationella minoriteter och utbildningsfrågor*. Huddinge: Södertörns högskola.



CC: Cathrine Talleraas / INFLUX project



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