

Anna Anisimova, SITE
Maria Perrotta Berlin, SITE
Kata Fredheim, SSE Riga
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From Integration to Reconstruction: Standing with Ukraine by Supporting Ukrainians in Sweden

Sweden has strongly supported Ukraine through both public opinion and government actions, yet there has been little discussion about the needs of Ukrainian displaced people in Sweden. The ongoing war and the rapidly shifting geopolitical landscape have created uncertainty – geopolitical, institutional, and individual. Ukrainian displaced people in Sweden face an unclear future regarding their rights, long-term status, and opportunities, making future planning or investing in relevant skills difficult. This uncertainty also weakens the effectiveness of integration policies and limits the range of policy tools that can be deployed, which hinders participation in the labor market, affecting both displaced and employers. Addressing these challenges is essential, not only for the well-being of Ukrainians in Sweden, but also for Sweden's broader role in supporting Ukraine. Helping displaced Ukrainians rebuild their lives also strengthens their ability to contribute both to Swedish society and to Ukraine's future reconstruction and integration into Europe.

The Swedish Approach to Displaced Ukrainians

In response to the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the Temporary Protection Directive (2001/55/EC) (commonly referred to as collective temporary protection) was activated in March 2022, granting Ukrainians seeking refuge temporary protection in EU countries, including Sweden. This directive provides residence permits, access to work, education, and limited social benefits without requiring individuals to go through the standard asylum process.

However, the practicalities of the Directive's use differed significantly between countries. Sweden, despite its, until recent, reputation of being relatively liberal in its migration policies, has at times, lagged behind its Scandinavian neighbors in supporting Ukrainian displaced people. To illustrate this, it is useful to compare the Swedish approach to that of other Nordic states, as well as Poland.

Comparison to Other Nordic States

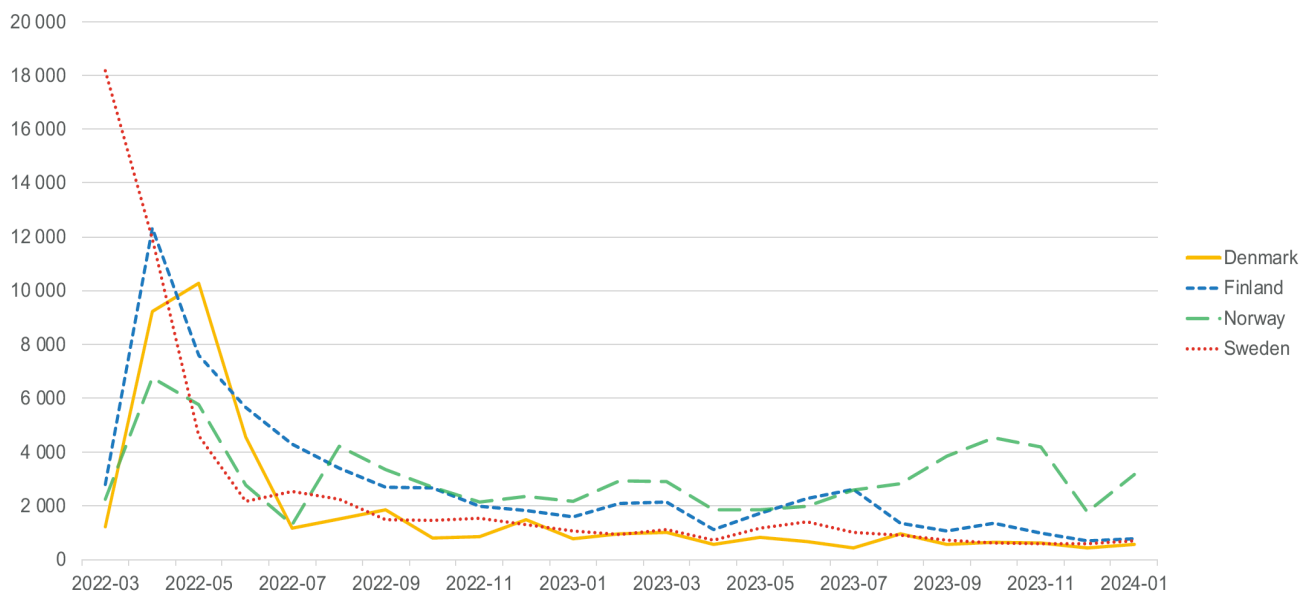
The Nordic countries have implemented the directive in different ways, adopting varying policies toward Ukrainians demonstrating different degrees of flexibility and support. Despite its generally restrictive immigration policy, Denmark introduced some housing and self-settlement policies for Ukrainians that were more liberal than its usual approach. Norway also initially introduced liberal measures but later tightened regulations, banning temporary visits to Ukraine and reducing financial benefits. Finland, meanwhile, has taken a relatively proactive stance, granting temporary protection to over 64,000 Ukrainians – one of the highest per capita rates in the region. Its strong intake reflects a more flexible and effective implementation of the directive, particularly from late 2022, when it surpassed Sweden and Denmark in number of arrivals.

In Sweden the so-called “massflyktsdirektivet” grants Ukrainians temporary protection until at least March 2025. Its future beyond that, however, remains uncertain, adding to the challenges faced by refugees and policymakers alike. Sweden – considered liberal in migration policies (at least, up until 2016) – has been criticized for offering limited rights and financial support to displaced Ukrainians, making it one of the least attractive destinations among the Nordic countries (Hernes & Danielsen, 2024). Under “massflyktsdirektivet”, displaced Ukrainians were entitled to lower financial benefits and limited access to healthcare compared to refugees or residents with temporary permits. It was only in July 2023 that they became eligible for Swedish language training, and only in November 2024 could they apply for residence permits under Sweden's regular migration laws – a pathway that can eventually lead to permanent residence.

Figure 1 illustrates significant fluctuations in the number of individuals granted collective temporary protection in the Nordic countries over the first two years following Russia's full-scale invasion. As Hernes and Danielsen (2024) show in a recent report, all Nordic countries experienced a peak in arrivals in March-April 2022, followed by a decline in May-June. Sweden initially received the most, but aside from this early peak, inflows have remained relatively low despite its larger population (Table 1). Since August 2022, Finland and Norway have generally recorded higher arrivals than Denmark and Sweden. By August 2023, Norway's share increased significantly, accounting for over 60 percent of total Nordic arrivals between September and November 2023.



Figure 1. Total number of individuals granted collective temporary protection in the Nordic countries



Source: Hernes & Danielsen, 2024, data from Eurostat.

Table 1. Total number of registered temporary protection permits and percent of population as of December 2023

	Temporary protection permits granted	Percent of total population
Norway	70120	1.3
Finland	64965	1.2
Denmark	41865	0.7
Sweden	58915	0.6

Source: Hernes & Danielsen, 2024, data from Eurostat.

Comparison to Poland

Sweden’s policies and their outcomes compare rather poorly to those of Poland, one of the European countries that received the largest influx of Ukrainian migrants due to its geographic and cultural proximity. A key factor behind Poland’s relatively better performance is that pre-existing Ukrainian communities and linguistic similarities have facilitated a smoother integration. Ukrainians themselves played a crucial role in this regard, with many volunteering in Polish schools to support Ukrainian children. Sweden also had a

community of Ukrainians who arrived to the country over time, partly fleeing the 2014 annexation of Donetsk and Crimea. Since these individuals were never eligible for refugee status or integration support, they had to rely on their own efforts to settle. In doing so, they built informal networks and accumulated valuable local knowledge. Nevertheless, after the full-scale invasion in 2022, they were not recognized as a resource for integrating newly arrived Ukrainian refugees – unlike in Poland.

However, Poland’s approach was shaped not only by these favorable preconditions but also by deliberate policy choices. As described in a recent brief (Myck, Król, & Oczkowska, 2025), a key factor was the immediate legal integration of displaced Ukrainians, granting them extensive residency rights and access to social services, along with a clearer pathway to permanent residence and eventual naturalization.



Barriers to Labor Market Integration

Despite a strong unanimous support for Ukraine across the political spectrum, there is less public debate and fewer policy processes in Sweden regarding displaced Ukrainians, most likely attributable to the general shift towards more restrictive immigration policies. The immigration policy debate in Sweden has increasingly emphasized a more “selective” migration, i.e. attracting migrants based on specific criteria, such as employability, skills, or economic self-sufficiency. This makes it puzzling that displaced Ukrainians, who largely meet these standards, have not been better accommodated. Before the full-scale invasion, Sweden was a particularly attractive destination among those who wanted to migrate permanently, especially for highly educated individuals and families (Elinder et al., 2023), indicating a positive self-selection process.

When large numbers of displaced Ukrainians arrived after the full-scale invasion, many had higher education and recent work experience, which distinguished them from previous refugee waves that Sweden had received from other countries. Despite a strong labor market in 2022, their integration was hindered by restrictions imposed under the Temporary Protection Directive, which limited access to social benefits and housing. At the same time, Sweden explicitly sought to reduce its attractiveness as a destination for migrants in general, contributing to a sharp decline in its popularity among Ukrainians after the war escalated.

In addition to the restrictiveness and numerous policy shifts over time, the temporary nature of the directive governing displaced Ukrainians – rather than the standard asylum process – creates significant policy uncertainty. This uncertainty makes it difficult for Ukrainians to decide whether to invest in Sweden-specific skills or prepare for a potential return to Ukraine, whether voluntary or forced, complicating their

long-term planning. It also hinders labor market integration, increasing the risk of exploitation in the informal economy. Another key challenge is the unequal distribution of rights, as entitlements vary depending on registration timelines, further exacerbating the precarious situation many displaced Ukrainians face in Sweden.

A survey of 2,800 displaced Ukrainians conducted by the Ukrainian NGO in Sweden “Hej Ukraine!” in February 2025 provides key insights into their labor market integration (Hej Ukraine!, 2025). Survey results show that, currently, 40 percent of respondents are employed, with 42 percent of them holding permanent contracts while the rest work in temporary positions and 6 percent being engaged in formal studies. Employment is concentrated in low-skilled sectors, with 26 percent working in cleaning services, 14 percent in construction, and 12 percent in hospitality and restaurants. Other notable sectors include IT (11 percent), education (8 percent), warehousing (7 percent), elderly care (5 percent), forestry (3 percent), and healthcare (3 percent). The lack of stable permits, access to language courses (until September 2024), and financial incentives for hiring displaced persons have complicated their integration.

As mentioned above, the Swedish government has over time introduced several initiatives to facilitate the integration of displaced Ukrainians. However, assessing their effectiveness is crucial to identify persistent challenges and to formulate targeted policy solutions.

The Role of the Private Sector and Civil Society

The business sector, civil society and NGOs have also played a role in supporting displaced Ukrainians, filling gaps left by the public sector. This includes initiatives aimed at creating job opportunities that encourage voluntary return. However, broader systemic support, including simplified diploma recognition and targeted re-skilling programs, is needed to enhance labor market participation.



Moreover, there is a lack of information among displaced, potential employers and public institutions (municipality level) about the tools and programs available. For example, a community sponsorship program funded by UNHCR, which demonstrated positive effects on integration by offering mentorship and support networks, was only applied by five municipalities (UNHCR, 2025). Similar programs could be expanded to address structural barriers, particularly in the labor market. Another example is the **Ukrainian Professional Support Center** established to help displaced Ukrainians find jobs through building networks and matching job seekers with employers (UPSC, 2024). The center was funded by the European Social Fund, and staffed to 50 percent by Ukrainian nationals, either newcomers or previously established in Sweden, to facilitate communication. Experiences from this initiative, shared during a recent roundtable discussion – *Integration and Inclusion of Ukrainian Displaced People in Sweden*, highlighted that between 2022 and 2024, about 1,400 Ukrainians participated in the project, but only one-third of participants found jobs, mostly in entry-level positions in care, hospitality, and construction. Restrictions under the temporary protection directive, along with the absence of clear mechanisms for further integration, posed significant challenges; the lack of a personal ID, bank account, and access to housing were considered major obstacles. The uncertainty of their future in Sweden was also reported as a significant source of stress for participants.

Implications and Policy Recommendations

The lack of clarity surrounding the future of the EU Temporary Protection Directive, as well as its specific implementation in Sweden, leaves displaced Ukrainians in a precarious situation. Many do not know whether they will be allowed to stay or if they should prepare for a forced return. This uncertainty discourages long-term

investment in skills, housing, and integration efforts.

Uncertainty also affects Swedish institutions, making it difficult to implement long-term policies that effectively integrate Ukrainians into society. To address these issues, the following policy recommendations are proposed.

- **Extend Temporary Protection Status Beyond 2025:** Clear guidelines on the duration of protection are necessary to provide stability for displaced Ukrainians
- **Improve Labor Market Access:** Introduce targeted programs for skill recognition, language training, and financial incentives for businesses hiring displaced Ukrainians
- **Enhance Civil Society and Private Sector Collaboration:** Support mentorship and community sponsorship programs that facilitate integration
- **Acknowledge and Utilize displaced Ukrainians as a Resource:** Recognizing displaced Ukrainians as potential assets in rebuilding Ukraine and strengthening European ties should be a priority.
- **Increase Public and Policy Debate:** There is a need for greater discussion on how to integrate Ukrainians in Sweden, as an important complement to the policy priority of providing aid to Ukraine.

By implementing these measures, Sweden can provide displaced Ukrainians with greater stability, enabling them to engage in the formal labour market rather than being pushed into informal or precarious employment. This not only benefits Ukrainians by ensuring fair wages and legal protection, but also strengthens Sweden's economy through increased tax revenues and a more sustainable labour force.

As Sweden continues to support Ukraine in its fight for sovereignty, it should also recognize the value of displaced Ukrainians within its borders,



fostering their contribution to both Swedish society and Ukraine's eventual reconstruction.

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Anna Anisimova

Stockholm Institute for Transition Economics
anna.anisimova@hhs.se
<https://www.hhs.se/sv/persons/a/anisimova-hanna/>

Anna Anisimova obtained her PhD in Economics from Donetsk National University in 2010, with her doctoral thesis being centered around Industrial Management. She joined the University as Associate Professor at the Department of Business Statistics and Economics Cybernetics in 2010 where she taught courses in Statistical Theory, Economic Statistics and Quantitative Methods in Sociology. In June 2020 she joined SITE and currently holds a position as a Researcher. Her main research interests are within gender economics, human capital development and transition economics.



Maria Perrotta Berlin

Stockholm Institute for Transition Economics
maria.perrotta@hhs.se
<https://www.hhs.se/sv/persons/p/perrotta-berlin-maria/>

Maria Perrotta Berlin is Assistant Professor and Policy and Communication Manager at the Stockholm Institute of Transition Economics (SITE). She earned her Ph.D. from the Institute for International Economic Studies (IIES) at Stockholm University. Maria's main research interests are development and political economics, with a focus on gender issues and environmental policy.



Kata Fredheim

Stockholm School of Economics, Riga
kata.fredheim@sseriga.edu
<https://www.sseriga.edu/fredheim-kata>

Kata Fredheim is Executive Vice President of Partnership and Strategy, Associate Professor in Economics and Business at SSE Riga and Research Fellow at BICEPS.

As a social anthropologist, Kata's research focuses on migration, internationalization, and higher education. Her most recent work is on Ukraine. She directs courses in Economic Anthropology, Market Research, and Global Challenges, and serving as the director of the Women in Leadership executive course.

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