

Civic engagement of Ukrainian forced migrants in Estonia: Key challenges and perspectives

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Introduction

The full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, which occurred in 2022, caused an unprecedented wave of forced emigration from Ukraine, which reached almost 6 million people globally, among whom more than 5 million found international protection in European countries (UNHCR, 2025). As of March 2025, 65,335 Ukrainian forced migrants had applied for temporary protection in Estonia, with 42,550 officially recorded in this country (Eurostat, 2025a), making it the third-largest EU receiving country in relative terms, i.e. in terms of the number of Ukrainians with temporary protection per 1000 residents (Eurostat, 2025b).

Furthermore, the Ukrainian migration to Estonia, which had a long history before 2022, made Ukrainians the second-largest national minority group in this country (Minority Rights Group International, 2024). According to Estonian statistics, the number of people of Ukrainian ethnicity in 2025 reached 73,597, which means that the number of Ukrainian forced migrants (UFMs) is significantly higher than the number of Ukrainians that lived in Estonia before 2022 (Statistics Estonia, 2025). Taking only the sheer numbers into consideration, we can assume that the newcomers

have a significant effect on Ukrainian community building as well as the development of Ukrainian diaspora organizations in Estonia.

At the same time, Ukrainian community building in Estonia before 2022 was characterized by several challenges and problems. Prior to 2022, Ukrainian diaspora organizations struggled with low engagement, as their activities reached only a small minority of the community despite a long history and state funding (Kasianczuk, 2022). Community development was significantly hindered by internal institutional issues, including conflicts of interest, a lack of transparent internal policies and visible competition between organizations. Furthermore, political disagreements and a focus on self-promotion among some leaders also contributed to social fragmentation and a general sense of dissatisfaction among community members (Kasianczuk, 2022).

The aim of this article is to examine the key challenges and prospects of civic engagement among UFM in Estonia and to analyze their potential impact on the processes of Ukrainian community building within the host country.

Literature Review

The concept of “civic engagement” has gained prominence over the past three decades as an important topic in developmental science. Much has been learnt about what civic engagement means, how it is measured and how people develop civic engagement. In particular, P. A. Arvanitidis (2017), through an analysis of recent literature, shows that civic engagement is a complex multidimensional concept, taking multiple forms and encompassing a variety of behaviours and actions related to both political and social aspects. Accordingly, civic engagement refers to how an active citizen participates in the life of a community in order to improve conditions for others or to help shape the community’s future, including wide-ranging activities undertaken alone or in concert with others designed to identify and address issues of public concern. Other scholars, e.g. Jonathan F. Zaff et al. (2010), who consider the definition of civic engagement, provide insights into trends of civic engagement over the past 30 years, disentangle the various competing theories on the development of civic engagement, and subsequently place the development of civic engagement within a development systems lens.

Scholars pay special attention to various aspects of the civic engagement of immigrants. By analyzing some of them we can capture several key research findings that have emerged over the past years. The results of these studies often focus on the following key parameters: factors that influence immigrants’ motivations to participate in civic life, especially in the process of integration (Aleksynska, 2011; Vogel & Triandafyllidou, 2005; Cappiali, 2015; Maidanik, 2025a; Voicu & Rusu, 2012), the forms of participation migrants engage in (Maidanik, 2025b; Pajnik & Bajt, 2013), and reasons for the development of migrants’ associations (Caselli, 2009).

Methodology and Data

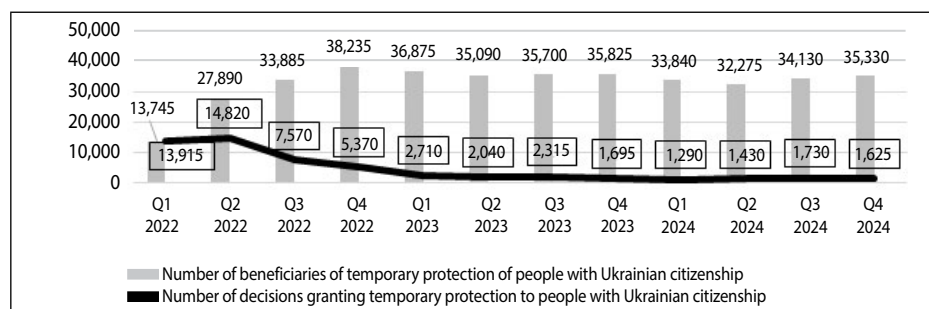
This paper is based on secondary data analysis and two online surveys (quantitative and qualitative) conducted by the International Institute of Education, Culture and Diaspora Relations of Lviv Polytechnic National University (IIEC). The quantitative part of the study was carried out among adult (18 years and older) Ukrainian migrants who had been forced to leave Ukraine for Estonia due to Russia's full-scale invasion and were residing in this country at the time of the survey. Information was collected using an online survey based on the Computer-Assisted Web Interviewing (CAWI) method, implemented through a pre-coded Google Forms questionnaire designed for self-completion. The survey was conducted in April 2024 and the number of the respondents was 112 (91.1% of whom had moved to Estonia during 2022). A key limitation of the study is that the survey is non-representative and is intended to describe the current situation rather than to identify causal relationships. The questionnaire allows general trends in respondents' answers to be traced; the findings cannot be generalized to the broader population of Ukrainian forced migrants in Estonia.

The qualitative component consisted of in-depth semi-structured interviews with representatives of Ukrainian non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The fieldwork for this component lasted from June to September 2024. During this period, 12 interviews were conducted with leaders and activists of Ukrainian diaspora organizations (type 1), Ukrainian forced migrants who joined the activities of these organizations (type 2) and leaders and activists of Ukrainian organizations established after the onset of the war (type 3). To identify the participants, the snowball sampling method was used. In addition, respondents were recruited with the support of IIEC's research partner, the Association of Ukrainian Organizations in Estonia. Interviews were conducted remotely via the platform Zoom. The questionnaire consisted of thematic blocks and contained more than 30 questions, which were adapted to the specifics of each of the three types of respondents listed above. The key limitations of the qualitative study component are as follows: (1) in-depth interviews captured the subjective experiences, views and assessments of individual respondents, i.e. representatives of officially registered NGOs, and therefore entail certain limitations in terms of objectivity and interpretative generalization, and (2) the qualitative sample includes leaders and activists of Ukrainian NGOs in Estonia primarily engaged in cultural and educational activities, while organizations of other orientations (e.g. volunteer groups supporting the Ukrainian army, non-formal activists etc.) are not represented. Thus, the use of the snowball sampling approach and engagement of the partner organization in Estonia lead to selection bias and a relatively homogeneous sample, as respondents and partners tend to recruit participants from their own social and organizational networks.

Migration Dynamics

Analyzing the dynamics of temporary protection beneficiaries and corresponding administrative decisions concerning individuals with Ukrainian citizenship in Estonia over the period from the first quarter of 2022 to the fourth quarter of 2024, we can see that at the initial stage of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine (Q1–Q2 2022), Estonia experienced a rapid and substantial inflow of Ukrainian nationals seeking temporary protection (Fig. 1). The number of beneficiaries increased almost twofold, i.e. from 13,745 in Q1 2022 to 27,890 in Q2 2022, reflecting the country's immediate humanitarian response and the large-scale displacement triggered by the onset of hostilities (Fig. 1). The number of decisions granting protection peaked in Q2 2022 (14,820), which confirms the administrative system's intensive engagement during the crisis's acute phase. The total number of beneficiaries continued to grow throughout 2022, reaching its highest level in Q4 2022, i.e. 38,235 persons (Fig. 1). During 2023–2024, the total number of beneficiaries remained relatively stable within the range of approximately 32,000–36,000 individuals, indicating a consolidation of the displaced population already present in the country. At the same time, the number of new protection decisions declined sharply: from 7,570 in Q3 2022 to fewer than 2,000 per quarter by 2024 (Fig. 1). This divergence between the relatively stable stock of beneficiaries and the declining number of new administrative decisions suggests a transition from the emergency reception phase towards a period characterized by longer-term residence and integration of Ukrainian displaced persons in Estonia. By the end of 2024, 35,330 Ukrainians remained under temporary protection in Estonia, which signifies sustained demographic presence and relative permanence of displacement (Fig. 1).

Figure 1. Dynamics of the number of beneficiaries of temporary protection and decisions granting temporary protection to people with Ukrainian citizenship in Estonia, 2022–2024, quarter data



Source: compiled by the author based on Eurostat, 2025a; 2025c.

By analyzing the demographic indicators of Ukrainians with temporary protection in Estonia, we observe a notable structural transformation between June 2022 and December 2024 (Table 1). During this period, the overall number of beneficiaries of temporary protection increased from 27,890 to 35,330 persons, indicating the continued arrival of displaced Ukrainians as well as the prolonged stay of those who had previously sought protection. At the same time, significant shifts occurred in the gender and age composition of the displaced population. In particular, the share of male beneficiaries increased from 30% to 38.8%, suggesting a sharp increase in the arrival of additional male cohorts after the initial predominantly female and child refugee wave (Table 1). The age structure of the Ukrainian population under temporary protection also demonstrates a gradual change: the proportion of migrants aged over 65 years rose from 4.9% to 6.2%, indicating aging of the displaced population, potentially due to an extended duration of stay and family reunifications involving older relatives. Conversely, the share of children under 18 decreased markedly: from 40% to 28.8%, and for those under 14 years – from 30.8% to 20.7% (Table 1). This trend may reflect the gradual return of families with children to Ukraine or their onward migration to other EU member states, as well as the stabilization of adult migrants' status in Estonia.

Table 1. Selected key demographic parameters of Ukrainian citizens with temporary protection status in Estonia, 2022, 2024

	June 2022	December 2024
total number of beneficiaries of temporary protection status	27,890	35,330
share of males	30%	38.8%
share of migrants over 65 years old	4.9%	6,2%
share of migrants under 18 years old	40%	28.8%
share of migrants under 14 years old	30.8%	20.7%

Source: compiled by the author based on Eurostat, 2025a.

Estonian Societal Openness to UFM

Analyzing how UFM perceive Estonian state policy and societal attitudes towards them following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, we observe that both the qualitative and quantitative surveys conducted by IIEC prove the multidimensional nature of openness and overwhelming positiveness, spanning governmental response, people's solidarity and support. In particular, the statements made by the respondents to the qualitative survey, such as "the Estonian state literally carried each refugee in its arms" and "created conditions not even 100%, but 120%", reveal a deep appreciation for Estonia's initial humanitarian response. This framing

presents the state not merely as an administrative entity, but as a moral actor embodying empathy and responsibility. In policy terms, Estonia's early response demonstrates solidarity-based governance, an approach that combines rapid institutional coordination with a humanitarian ethos. However, the same respondents also identify unintended consequences: the preferential treatment of Ukrainians relative to other minorities created perceptions of inequality. The observation that other minorities "wanted a parity basis" underscores the challenge of avoiding hierarchies of deservingness in refugee policy.

As to societal openness, 13.4% of UFM in Estonia assess the attitudes of Estonian society towards them as totally positive and 54.5% as positive. Only 4.5% considered it negative with less than 1% – totally negative. The remaining 26.8% assess it as neutral. Besides, the findings of in-depth interviews on public attitudes show strong initial solidarity from ethnic Estonians, exemplified by voluntary offers of accommodation and community support. Respondents attribute this empathy to shared historical memory, and more specifically to the collective trauma of Soviet domination. As one migrant notes, "Estonians remember their families' experiences with Russia, [...] so they understand the situation firsthand."

This alignment of historical narratives facilitates symbolic identification between host and receiving communities, reinforcing national self-conceptions rooted in resistance to Russian imperialism. It reflects what scholars term affective solidarity: emotional resonance grounded in parallel experiences of oppression. In the Baltic context, this form of solidarity operates as both a moral bond and a geopolitical statement of alignment with Ukraine's struggle.

Furthermore, it should be stressed that UFM experienced discrimination and negative attitudes predominantly in their interactions with Russians; this was pointed out by 48.2% of respondents to the quantitative survey carried out by IIEC. These specifics were also observed in the qualitative survey results:

Of course, there are some people who don't like this whole situation with Ukrainians coming here – mostly Russian-speaking Estonians. They've got their own propaganda, their own kind of pain, so we just don't pay attention to that. But the ethnic Estonians, who are the majority here, treat us really well and understand why this is happening, that we didn't just come here to live for no reason (forced migrant).

In this context it should be emphasized that Estonia's contemporary socio-political environment is strongly shaped by its historical experience and demographic structure. The country's collective memory of Soviet occupation, repression and mass deportations during the twentieth century has contributed to a persistent perception of security risks associated with Russian geopolitical ambitions, making Russia's war against Ukraine a matter of particularly close public and political attention (Ploom et al., 2025). At the same time, the Russian-speaking minority in Estonia, which constitutes around 21% of the population (Ploom et al., 2025), creates a complex societal

landscape in which differing historical narratives, information spaces and political attitudes generate tensions in public discourse and influence the broader context.

Only a small share of UFM (9.8%) experienced negative attitudes in their interactions with the Ukrainian community. This is also an important indicator when it comes to effective community building and civic engagement in Ukrainian diaspora organizations in Estonia.

Civic Engagement and Community-Building

Among the respondents to the IIEC's quantitative survey, more than half (55.4%) indicated that they had participated or continue to participate in the activities of Ukrainian NGOs in Estonia. Among the variety of events organized by Ukrainian diasporic associations that forced migrants attended during their stay in Estonia, cultural, religious and national-patriotic events prevail, which was reported by 68.8% of the respondents. Community initiatives supporting adaptation and integration were also significant: 59.7% received informational or legal aid, 31.2% humanitarian assistance, 28.6% psychological support, and 54.5% attended Estonian language courses. Moreover, 40.3% participated in political actions and marches promoting Ukraine's interests in Estonia. The least popular activities were Ukrainian language courses (6.5%) and volunteering (3.9%). Besides, UFM are generally satisfied with Ukrainian NGOs in Estonia; more than 60% rated their activities at seven or higher on a ten-point scale.

The in-depth interview respondents estimate that up to 20% of UFM engage in Ukrainian civic activities. They believe that newcomers' level of involvement in community activities depends mostly on their available time and emotional capacity: many are eager to contribute, but their ability can be limited by more important things, such as learning Estonian and job seeking, which highlights the tension between survival needs and social participation during the adaptation process:

Forced migrants are quite open to public activity. Those who have the strength and motivation to get involved do come and offer their help. There are many such people. A lot of people come to weave camouflage nets. It's a simple activity. [...] But when people start learning Estonian, looking for a job, then of course, they have less energy and fewer resources (diaspora).

They don't get involved very actively. Maybe 20%. And it's not because people don't want to, but because they find themselves in a foreign country and face challenges: housing, work. What kind of civic participation can they think about? They can think about how to survive and get by. Maybe they would like to get involved, but they don't have the resources, because after the war everyone is already exhausted (forced migrant).

Overall, the main barriers identified in the study, which can be analyzed on several levels, are the following:

1. Individual level:

- psychological consequences of war trauma and the reluctance to engage in activities that may evoke painful memories of the war;
- limited time resources, as well as difficulties related to financial constraints and the process of adaptation to the host-country;
- lack of experience or understanding of civic activism and NGO activities, as well as a limited internalization of civic and volunteering practices common in European civil society;
- a sense of paternalism among some forced migrants who became accustomed to receiving humanitarian assistance and may not immediately recognize the need for personal civic contribution:

Some people who arrived at the beginning of the war became accustomed to receiving everything for free and may not immediately realize the need to contribute themselves. For some, this understanding comes with time, they eventually see that it's time to get involved in civic activities, but for others, it never does (forced migrant).

2. Social level:

- insufficient sense of belonging to Ukrainian culture and limited willingness or ability to communicate in Ukrainian;
- negative or exclusionary attitudes of some Ukrainian diaspora organizations towards newly arrived forced migrants;
- tensions within the Ukrainian diaspora in Estonia, including institutional fragmentation and rivalry between two umbrella organizations.

3. Structural level:

- the absence of Ukrainian civic organizations or institutionalized associations of Ukrainians in some of the initial cities or localities where forced migrants first arrived, which restricts opportunities for early engagement and networking;
- limited dissemination of information about the activities, initiatives and thematic focus of Ukrainian civic organizations in Estonia.

4. Political level or specifics of broader socio-political context:

- external pressure of the Russian minority: the fear of Russian-linked hostility deters public activity and puts geopolitical constraints on local civic life; civic engagement in Estonian regions which are close to Russian border becomes a politically risky act:

People have become afraid of being active. Because it's about safety in our region. For example, during a recent city celebration, many parents refused to let their children perform, here in our town. [...] many choose to hide in their niche so they won't be seen. The town is small, everyone knows that we're Ukrainians, and we're constantly being watched. This creates discomfort and discourages community activity. And those who are afraid don't come. [...] This is due to the ties with Russia, which almost the entire population of the town still maintains (diaspora).

Despite the barriers and challenges to the involvement of UFM in civic activism and community building in Estonia, the surveys also revealed the following motivating factors that encourage them to participate in civic activities:

- the desire to help forced migrants to adapt, having gone through this difficult experience themselves;
- the opportunity for self-realization, self-development, expansion of the network of contacts and social circle;
- the realization that there is greater strength and broader opportunities in unity;
- a way to receive psychological support and help, a sense of unity with like-minded Ukrainians,;
- an effective way of socialization, a sense of home and support;
- a way of preserving national identity and the Ukrainian language;
- a sense of responsibility for Ukraine, a desire to unite to help the Motherland and the Armed Forces of Ukraine;
- the positive attitudes of Estonians and their help offered sincerely.

Thus, the findings underscore civic activism not merely as participation, but as a coping and adaptation strategy: migrants engage to regain control over their circumstances, establish social networks and reconstruct a collective identity. Their motivations range from altruism (helping others to adapt) to psychological support and national pride. These reflect both instrumental and expressive dimensions of civic engagement. These factors of civic engagement prove that Ukrainian migrants' participation fosters bonding ties (within the Ukrainian community) and bridging ties (with Estonians), thus engagement becomes both an act of resilience and an assertion of belonging in a host society.

As to the institutional framework of the civic engagement of UFM, the surveys (both quantitative and qualitative) show that they not only engage in existing Ukrainian NGOs, but also create their own. For example, the findings indicate that almost 11% are already planning to start a new NGO, and additionally, 34.8% expressed interest in founding such an association but are hindered by a lack of relevant skills and knowledge in this area. It is noteworthy that UFM engage not only in the activities of Ukrainian diaspora associations, but also participate in other non-governmental organizations. According to the survey data, 27.7% of respondents reported such involvement.

When considering the perspectives of Ukrainian community building in Estonia and the effect of UFM in this process, it should be stressed that approximately 20% of UFM are already active in civic initiatives, while another 11% plan to create NGOs. This quantitative insight points to a nascent yet rapidly expanding civic infrastructure. Forced migration, though initially disempowering, has stimulated organizational innovation within the Ukrainian diaspora. The emergence of new associations and the revival of dormant ones testify to the capacity of crisis to reinvigorate collective identity and social solidarity. Crucially, this transformation

extends beyond the Ukrainian community; by engaging with Estonian institutions, migrants contribute to transnational civic spaces that transcend national borders. Their activities support Ukraine materially and symbolically, while simultaneously fostering integration and intercultural dialogue within Estonia. However, in our opinion, the sustainability of this momentum remains contingent on three key factors: (1) the economic integration of war migrants, (2) organizational cooperation, primarily between Ukrainian diaspora umbrella institutions and then with newly created NGOs, and (3) the sense of Ukrainian identity among forced migrants.

Conclusions

The data concerning the dynamics of Ukrainian forced migration to Estonia for the period 2022–2024 suggest a transition from the emergency reception of large refugee cohorts in 2022 to a more stable demographic and administrative pattern by 2024. The displaced Ukrainian community in Estonia has evolved into a more settled and demographically mature group, with a slight increase in male representation and elderly beneficiaries. These transformations point towards processes of community stabilization, adaptation to host-country conditions and potential shifts from temporary protection towards longer-term residence or integration frameworks.

Estonia's response to the arrival of UFM's has been characterized by a high degree of societal openness and state-led humanitarian solidarity. Both policy measures and public attitudes demonstrate a broadly positive and empathetic stance, rooted in shared historical experiences and collective memory. However, such a supportive environment faces friction from the Russian-speaking minority who, influenced by Kremlin narratives, exhibit attitudes of open hostility, discrimination and social exclusion towards Ukrainians. Besides, the preferential focus on UFM's has also produced certain perceptions of unequal treatment among other refugees.

The civic engagement of UFM's in Estonia demonstrates both significant potential and notable challenges. On the one hand, their participation in Ukrainian and Estonian civil society organizations reflects emerging forms of resilience, self-organization and community solidarity. Civic activism serves not only as a means of adaptation and psychological coping but also as a vehicle for preserving national identity and fostering integration into Estonian society. On the other hand, numerous structural and psychosocial barriers, such as limited information, a lack of institutional presence in certain regions, psychological trauma, issues concerning the use of the Ukrainian language, intra-diaspora tensions and geopolitical pressures, continue to hinder broader participation.

Despite these constraints, a growing interest in creating new NGOs and forming collaborative networks indicates promising prospects for the development of a more cohesive and dynamic Ukrainian community in Estonia. The long-term sustainability

of this civic revival, however, depends on addressing core challenges: ensuring migrants' economic stability, enhancing civic competence and strengthening cooperation within the Ukrainian diaspora and with Estonian institutions.

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Civic engagement of Ukrainian forced migrants in Estonia: Key challenges and perspectives

Abstract

This article examines the challenges and prospects of civic engagement among Ukrainian forced migrants (UFMs) in Estonia and their impact on Ukrainian community building based on quantitative and qualitative surveys conducted by the International Institute of Education, Culture and Diaspora Relations of Lviv Polytechnic National University in 2024, as well as secondary data analysis. The article also presents the evolving dynamics of Ukrainian migration following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The findings reveal that Estonia's response has been marked by notable openness and solidarity, fostering favourable conditions for integration civic activism and community development. At the same time, migrants face structural and psychosocial barriers such as information deficits, intra-diaspora tensions, psychological exhaustion and Russian minority pressure. Despite these challenges, the emergence of new civic initiatives and NGOs demonstrates growing organizational potential and social resilience.

Keywords: temporary protection, forced migration, migrants' integration, migrants' civic engagement, Ukrainian diaspora

Author Contributions

Conceptualization: O.P.

Methodology: O.P.

Formal analysis: O.P.

Investigation: O.P.

Resources: O.P.

Writing – original draft: O.P.

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Conflict of Interest

Oksana Pyatkovska declares no conflict of interest.

