EFFECTIVE ONLINE COMMUNICATION AS A TOOL FOR COORDINATING THE UKRAINIAN REFUGEE CRISIS CAUSED BY RUSSIAN MILITARY INVASION

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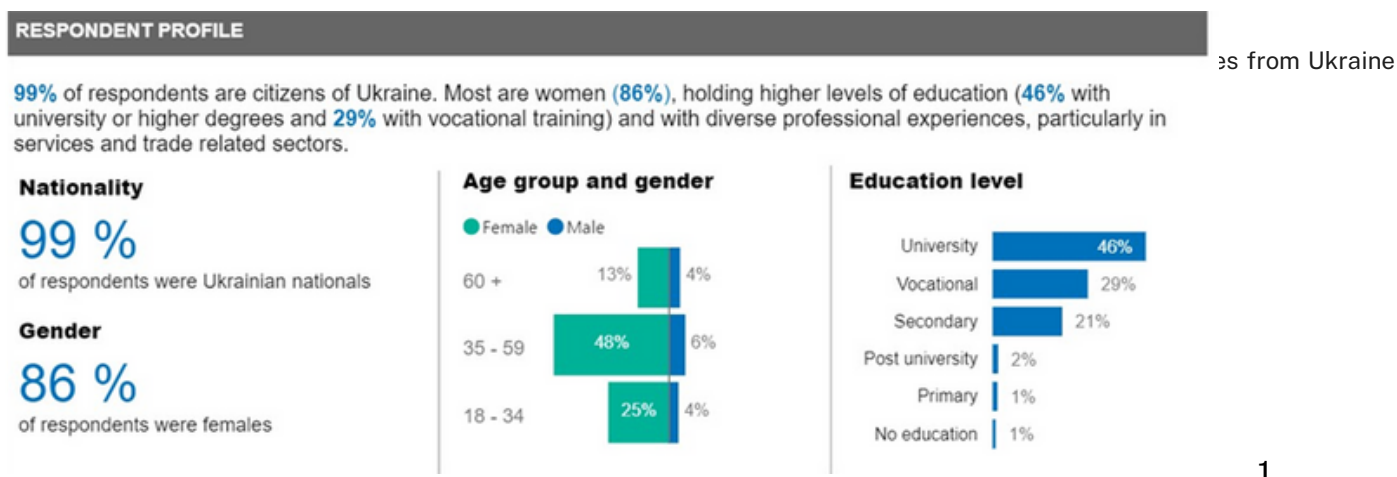Project managers: Polina Soroka, Kseniia Yerofeieva

EFFECTIVE ONLINE COMMUNICATION AS A TOOL FOR CRISIS RESPONSE COORDINATION

The invasion of Ukraine by Russia on 24 February 2022 has forced a 7 million of Ukrainians to flee the country by end of May. In November 2022 7,843,714 are recorded across Europe [1]. This historical mass outflow, unseen in Europe since World War II, has sparked an unprecedented mobilization of institutions and host communities in countries to offer support.

- Effective communication is seen as an essential tool for coordinating the response to the situation.
- It enables Ukrainian war refugees to access relevant and trustworthy information about their rights, obligations and the services provided to them.
- This is key for a smooth running of migration and integration processes as well as a solid background for a well-informed decision-making.

Using online communication channels to provide Ukrainian refugees with up-to-date official information.

For today more than 70 000 Ukrainian war refugees (incl. 24 894 children) [2] settled down in Lithuania. Most of them are women with kids. The disproportionately large share of Ukrainian refugees in Europe and in Lithuania are young women with higher education (46%), high digital literacy, and access to digital devices.

RESPONDENT PROFILE

99% of respondents are citizens of Ukraine. Most are women (86%), holding higher levels of education (46% with university or higher degrees and 29% with vocational training) and with diverse professional experiences, particularly in services and trade related sectors.

Nationality

99 %

of respondents were Ukrainian nationals

Gender

86 %

of respondents were females

Age group and gender

● Female ● Male

	Female	Male
60 +	13%	4%
35 - 59	48%	6%
18 - 34	25%	4%

Education level

University	46%
Vocational	29%
Secondary	21%
Post university	2%
Primary	1%
No education	1%

The major challenge of communication outreach is to ensure that refugees can easily find reliable information on their rights and obligations, as well as the public services provided for them [3]. Research from other contexts confirms that young migrants predominantly use digital channels looking for information on their host community once they have migrated [4].

Therefore, online communication channels turn to be the most relevant for providing Ukrainian refugees with up-to-date official information and not only. Web pages, social media groups enable government and other parties to provide Ukrainian refugees with large amount of vital information in their native and other accessible languages and support its regular update. It is a simple way to connect users to relevant channels, such as humanitarian funds, NGOs, private initiatives.

In response to that governmental and private initiatives almost simultaneously launched the web platforms dedicated to informing Ukrainians. There are 30+ of them in Lithuania. Some are covering particular field in which the organization provides help to the refugees. Others inform on the wider scale of issues.

Municipality pages and agencies examples:

ukraina.vilnius.lt

ihvilnius.lt/home-ua

NGO and private pages examples:

HelpUA.lt

Herojams.lt

dopomoga.lt

ukrainiankids.lt

stipruskartu.lt

www.renkuosilietuva.lt/ru/informacia-dla-grazdan-ukrainy/

Governmental and official information web platforms

Following a coherent communications strategy across state agencies and ministries increases clarity on where to access relevant information. Therefore, each ministry has the page within its official web page dedicated to their relevant fields. Usually, pages are well updated and translated in Ukrainian. However, the access to it can be complicated due to such things as inconvenient naming, long links, lack of steady promotion.

The governmental communication office creates the domain ltua.lt to simplify the access to all original sources of vital information from the state. It redirects those looking for information on integration issues to the web page of Migration department. This page is divided in categories, each of it covers one important field on integration and can give summery on a problem or redirect the person to the page/document from original source of information (like ministry or agency page which is responsible for particular field).

The Migration department page https://migracija.lrv.lt/lt/naudinga-informacija/ukraina-ukrayina-ukraina-ukraine contains information which is often simplified and visualized (provided be ministries and departments). Still the process from searching and identifying needed information, transferring to the links of original source, and sometimes to extra relevant links can be quite confusing for a user.

Other examples:

Ministry of social security and labor

https://socmin.lrv.lt/lt/veiklos-sritys/socialine-integracija/informatsiia-dlia-gromadian-ukrayini-1

Ministry of Education and Sport

Informacija dėl Ukrainos pabėgėlių / Інформація для громадян України / Information for Ukrainian citizens

Ministry of the Economy and Innovation of the Republic of Lithuania

https://eimin.lrv.lt/en/important-information-for-business/coming-to-lithuania-a-guide-for-ukrainians-1

Availability and reliability of information

While digital and social media offer a relatively inexpensive, easily accessible, and media-rich means of communication, their use is not without challenges. For example, many of private webpages facing troubles with long term plan on page operating and steady connection with original source of information. Official pages as well as private ones are not known enough among Ukrainian refugees, while survey and observations show that people do not know what source to refer first to get an essential information. For example, IOM survey on the needs of Ukrainian refugees emphasizes the problem of availability of information. It also shows that social networks and personal connections are main providers of information for them.

The survey also shows that the availability of information (along with accommodation, social benefits, health care, education problems) is identified by Ukrainians as one of the essential needs. [5]

The UNHCR report also underlines the necessity of well accessible information to enable well-informed decision-making for Ukrainians fleeing the war. [6]
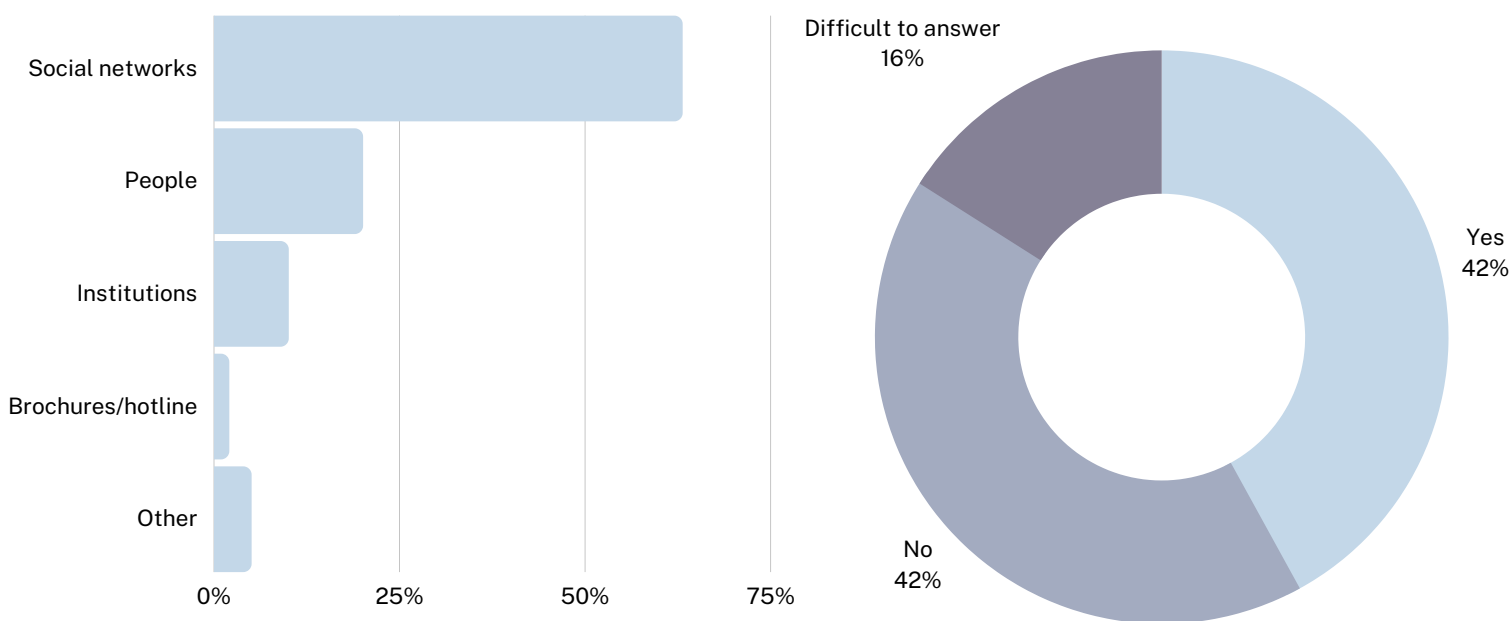
Communicating Ukrainian refugees: problems and causes identified

Discussing the problem of info reach with stakeholders, refugees and those providing info services there where indicated a number of problems that ecosystem faces.

Here you can see complete Problem tree of Integration

Foreign practices

The level of cooperation between different ministries and state agencies in implementing online communication strategies varies between European governments. While some countries follow a decentralized communication approach, others, such as Belgium, Estonia and Australia, have established a single online platform collecting all relevant information from across governmental agencies. Lithuania, as mentioned above, united the vital information under the roof of Migration department page and created an easy to remember domain gateway to access it. Germany4Ukraine, for example, a dedicated web platform for Ukrainian refugees operated by the German Ministry of the Interior and Community, serves as the Federal Government's central point of contact for Ukrainian refugees. It collects all information from across ministries, notably on how to apply for a residence permit and get access to accommodation, social benefits, medical care, public services. A chat function allows users to ask questions.

An example of a dedicated online application is the Smart Migration App launched by the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs of the Czech Republic in April 2022. It is accessible in Ukrainian, English and Russian and gives Ukrainian refugees easy access to important information on employment opportunities and public services. The application includes a set of interactive tutorials that provide users with information tailored to their individual situation. It also features an intelligent personal assistant using natural language processing technology. It is trained in topics described in the tutorials and is able answer questions in a dialogue.

Many Ukrainian refugees had issues accessing mobile internet data once they have left Ukraine. Against this background, initiatives have been put in place to give Ukrainians facilitated access to the internet on their territory. Portuguese government signed a collaboration agreement with the national association for electronic communication operators to offer free communication services for displaced persons from Ukraine and distribute SIM cards. Lithuania have implemented similar agreements.

Online and offline channels to increase the reach to vital information

The simultaneous use of online and offline communications to provide with vital information and messages can further help to minimize the effects of possible communication disruptions.

Many host countries such as Poland, Estonia and Latvia use multilingual phone hotlines as an accessible communications tool which requires little technical equipment and knowledge and through which an interactive communication with migrants can be facilitated, as direct conversations also help state agencies better understand the information needs of refugees. Several main hotlines are operating in Lithuania. NGO Stiprus Kartu in cooperation with the Ministry of Social Security and Labor are providing help, looking for accommodation for Ukrainians, hotline of Migration Department provides with information on legal migration procedures and basic necessity questions, as well as hotline of Lithuanian Red Cross.

Equally, the use of text messaging can serve as a cost-effective and direct means of communication particularly when it comes to distributing information on how to access assistance and services. This practice is planned to be implemented if the second wave of Ukrainian refugees fleeing the war should take place.

Most host countries also use printed leaflets that are distributed in strategic places such as welcoming centers, providing essential information and redirecting refugees to the relevant online platforms and contacts. Many of them also include guidelines of how to protect yourself and others from becoming victim of human trafficking [7].

The advantage of printed information is easy distribution to third actors, such as NGOs, operating help centers providing services to refugees in physical offices, acting as multipliers of official government information.

Conclusions

The overview of the integration process in Lithuania and abroad shows that access to information should be in focus as a key to successful integration. In response to that more than 30+ web pages are already created in Lithuania by governmental, NGOs and private institutions dedicated to supporting Ukrainians. Nevertheless, lack of updated information on vital needs is still indicated as a problem according to IOM surveys, interviews with refugees, and information given by stakeholders (like the Ukrainian Embassy in Lithuania, International House of Vilnius, etc.).

The detailed analysis of the ecosystem of informational web sources for Ukrainians was conducted by Create Lithuania.

Possible solution of better informing refugees on their rights and obligations, as well as social benefits and private initiative suggestions can lie in increasing the reach of existing information resources along with a support on constant update of their content.

References:

[1]Source - UNHCR

[2] MIGRIS of Migration Department

[3] OECD report How to communicate on the Ukrainian refugee crisis and build on the support of host communities

[4] OECD report How to communicate on the Ukrainian refugee crisis and build on the support of host communities

[5] IOM Survey of Ukrainian refugees

[6] UNHCR REGIONAL INTENTIONS REPORT#2 LIVES ON HOLD: INTENTIONS AND PERSPECTIVES OF REFUGEES FROM UKRAINE

[7] OECD report How to communicate on the Ukrainian refugee crisis and build on the support of host communities