

# Youth Partnership

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Partnership between the European Commission  
and the Council of Europe in the field of Youth



## Perspectives on young refugees' autonomy in Europe amid ongoing conflict

### A study

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## Executive summary

This study is based on findings of primary (field) and secondary (desk) research conducted between February 2020-April 2023 in 9 countries (8 EU member states and UK). The primary aim has been to explore the polysemous notion of 'autonomy' through the eyes of young refugees of different ethnic backgrounds living in the European Union vis-à-vis their experience with national services and mechanisms, but also civil society actors, humanitarian organisations and youth associations.

Following recent geopolitical developments, but also regulatory changes affecting migration, data and sources featured in the study have been updated accordingly. Moreover, existing findings have been enriched with information derived from the analysis of additional qualitative research, conducted between the period October 2023- April 2024.

Amid ongoing conflict, both in the heart of Europe, but also in the Middle East, the study explores the idea of autonomy from a practical, regulatory, but also interpersonal perspective, observing how implications of gender, ethnicity, culture and attitude affect the amount and quality of support provided by European societies towards dislocated young people today.

Having a social interactionist approach and counting on qualitative methods of data collection and analysis, such as in-depth personal interviews with young people and practitioners, conversations in focus groups, as well as ethnic observation carried out in physical presence in different geographical settings, the purpose of this study is dual:

On the one hand, to identify practices, trends and measures supporting young refugees autonomy in the EU, but also, to highlight gaps, threats and inconsistencies with respect to regulation and practical implementation of relevant policies.

The study is divided in three parts:

- An introductory one, focusing on epistemological information and featuring references to migration-related terms and definitions;
- a first part providing an overview of existing mechanisms -but also trends and attitudes- regarding asylum and international protection across the EU, focusing on the relatively understudied category of young people in transition from adolescence to adulthood;
- a second part, focusing on the contribution of the the youth sector, including, also, practices from youth centres holding the Quality Label\_of the Council of Europe.

Some of the most intriguing findings focus on the importance of projects and mechanisms enabling meaningful youth participation, while emphasis is also given on the impact of youth-led initiatives shaping communities together with the contribution of civil society. Moreover, even though the aim of the study is not to juxtapose the situation of dislocated people from Ukraine with other refugee waves galvanised by conflicts in the Middle East, findings from both primary and secondary research point to the direction that religion, culture and ethnicity are important factors defining the way young refugees are perceived inside European societies.

**Key words:**

Young refugees, dislocated people, autonomy, youth centres, migration, EU.

## INTRODUCTION

### Background and Rationale of the study

Less than a decade after the 2015 increased refugee influx, the refugee presence in Europe has been revisited in the aftermath of the war in Ukraine. This time, European governments have been much more prepared compared with some years ago. Moreover, there is accumulated knowledge based on previous experience. Comparisons are inevitable, just as there is a need to understand the current needs and profiles of displaced persons through the lens of youth research.

The inception of this study goes back to discussions and reflections that started in 2015/2016 with the first great influx of refugees in Europe, following the outbreak of war in Syria. During that period, a significant part of European youth research became greatly interested in the understanding and empowerment of dislocated young people, their socioeconomic integration in European host societies, as well as their role as drivers of intercultural dialogue in society and education. A smaller, yet quite enlightening piece of research focused on the precarious situation of those young people who were in a state of limbo due to family-related conditions, age, educational background, civil status, religion or gender. A wide range of questions and dilemmas emerged, ranging from who and under what conditions would be entitled to receiving asylum and under what circumstances to educational integration and access to the labour market through the recognition of academic titles and vocational skills.

This study was initially informed by the ideas, concerns and findings shared within and after the ["Journeys to a New Life": an expert seminar on the role of youth work in integration of young refugees in Europe](#), organized by the EU-Council of Europe Youth Partnership, in Brussels, between 23-24 November 2016. That seminar was held at the time when most European societies, despite being unprepared to handle an increased migration, had shown laudable determination to support refugees from the Middle East (Vandevoordt 2018), many of whom had neither family bonds nor cultural ties with European societies and way of living.

In the following years, the Council of Europe would organise various workshops, seminars and initiatives aiming at understanding contemporary migration and supporting the educational and socioeconomic integration of young refugees, especially those in transition to adulthood. One of the most recent examples is the set of initiatives conducted within a dynamic project titled [Turning 18 with confidence: Supporting Migrant and Refugee Children in Transition to Adulthood](#), launched in April 2023.

## Connections with existing research in the field

Over the years, academia has observed, among others, a gradual decline (if not a shift) in many European societies' solidarity towards refugees (Bauböck, 2017; Ipsos 2017; Özerim 2018; Agustín & Jørgensen 2019; Eminoğlu et. al 2020; Annaoglou 2022): From being perceived as dignified people worthy of support, refugees' public image has passed through different stages: victimization, pity, contempt and eventually, distrust or even hatred.

In many European societies, refugees have been portrayed as scapegoats for societal challenges and vices. They have been depicted as 'others', whose presence poses a 'threat' to dominant traditions and identity (Botelho et. al 2022) ; they have been targeted by populist voices in politics and the media, especially in times of economic recession and intense social turbulences (Annaoglou 2020); they have been accused for 'stealing local workers' jobs', living on 'taxpayers' expenses', or 'spreading terrorism' (Global Attitudes Survey 2016).

Except for being a side-effect of a deeper socio-economic crisis across Europe (Eminoğlu et. al 2020: 56), this shift is also to be attributed to the scepticism with which Europeans have come to view the complex and often controversial mechanism of EU support towards refugees, including all the smaller or bigger civil society networks that have evolved together or in parallel with it. Negative and often hateful speech replicated in public political discourse and the media in Europe has often been adding 'fuel to the fire', targeting not only refugees, but also practitioners and organisations aiding them (Amnesty International 2020) .

In the beginning of 2022, as a response to reported cases of 'increasing criminalisation and judicial harassment of civil society actors, in particular those working with minority groups, refugees and other migrants', the European Parliament published a [Report on the shrinking space for civil society in Europe](#) (European Parliament 22.2.2022), where it condemned 'hostile rhetoric and smear campaigns by political figures and allied media outlets designed to undermine public trust in and support for CSOs and human rights defenders, and often designed to target minority groups such as migrants and refugees'.

The unprecedented humanitarian crisis that spread with the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic took asylum and migration off the main socio-political agenda. During the time of total lock-down and seclusion, many refugees got 'trapped' in camps, waiting for months, if not years, for a decision to be issued regarding their petition for international protection and provision of travelling documents.

In parallel with the pandemic, radical geopolitical developments led to new flows of dislocated people. In the summer of 2021, following the withdrawal of American

troops from Afghanistan, asylum seekers from South-Central Asia arrived in Europe as a result of [the Taliban regime](#) coming back to power. One year later, in February 2022, the Russian invasion of Ukraine would violently interrupt EU countries' slow recovery from the pandemic, bringing not only a new wave of migrants, but also, a severe energy crisis. In the months following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, European countries suffered not only the consequences of inflation, energy insufficiency and economic recession, but also insecurity associated with the armed conflict right in the heart of Europe.

Being right in the eye of the storm, but without having much say on what is being said or decided on their behalf at national or regional level, refugees and dislocated people in different settings have developed more strategic approaches to improve their situation, namely through self-initiative, leadership and solidarity among peers (Hussain et.al; Drosopulos 2019; Villares-Varela 2017). On this challenging path towards survival and independence, support coming from the youth sector (youth centres, CSOs, informal groups) is indispensable. The young people whose experiences and insights have shaped the findings of this research perceive the support of the youth sector as useful, but insufficient.

The opinions featured are owned by young persons whose petition for international protection has been judged –at least, initially- as rigid and worth considering, regardless of the outcome. The findings of primary research conducted for this study show that young people claiming protection are often not aware neither of services nor of opportunities available for them in the realm of the youth sector. The contribution of digital resources is vital in spreading the word, especially through online groups where young people can exchange updated information in their own language. In later stages, dynamic interactions can occur as the knowledge is shared and multiplied among young people (refugees and locals), creating a multiplier effect.

## Methodology and Scope of study

### Geographical scope and relevance with migration trends

This study is the product of primary and secondary research conducted in eight EU member states: Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Finland, France, Germany, Greece and Poland, as well as the UK. Desk research has focused on EU policies regarding migration and asylum, but also national policies and practices in the nine aforementioned countries.

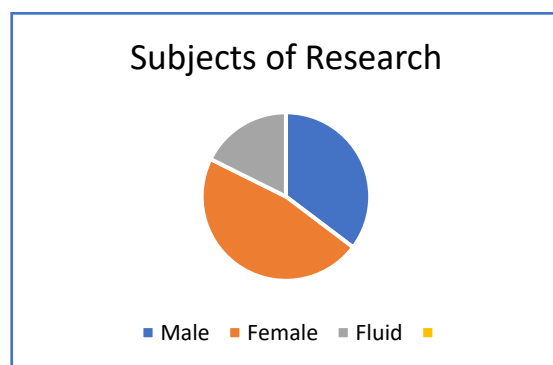
The countries investigated have not been chosen randomly. During the last decades, especially as a result of major geopolitical shifts, such as the dissolution of the Soviet Union or the gradual decline and collapse of Yugoslavia, EU member states like



**Germany** and **France** have been popular destinations for economic migrants and refugees of different ethnic backgrounds. **Belgium** and **Austria** are also economically prosperous countries accepting large numbers of migrants, the latter being the first entry to the EU zone for those entering illegally via the so-called ‘Western Balkan Road’.

Once an important recipient of expats from the former Soviet Union, but also economic migrants and refugees from the Western Balkans, especially post-Pyramid Albania and post-Yugoslav Serbia, **Greece** has been during the last years a transit station for refugees from the Greater Middle East and Africa crossing the borders illegally from Turkey. Nevertheless, many of the people arriving on Greek territory cannot see any promising future in a country which has been struggling for over a decade with economic straits and social turbulences, this is why, they see it a temporary station on their way to more prosperous countries. **Bulgaria** and **Poland** are EU countries that have accepted many dislocated persons from Ukraine. Finally, **Finland** has also been perceived as an interesting case due to its delicate geopolitical relations with its neighbour, Russia. Finland expressed solidarity towards Ukraine and accepted a significant number of Ukrainian refugees, to whom it granted temporary access to certain rights and services. The country managed to become a NATO member on the 6<sup>th</sup> of April 2023, claiming, among its main arguments, its vulnerable geostrategic position due to its geographical proximity to Russia. Finally, although it is no longer in the EU, the **UK** remains an attractive destination for many young refugees and migrants, despite strict migration policies, which have been one of the main arguments for Brexit. Since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, the UK has also received a significant number of dislocated young people.

The study focuses on young refugees and dislocated young people, aged 18-25 at the time of the research, living in the aforementioned countries. 32 people have been interviewed in total, 26 individually, while other six as part of focus groups, consisting of three people, respectively. Of all people interviewed, 16 have identified as female, 12 as male and four of ‘fluid gender’.

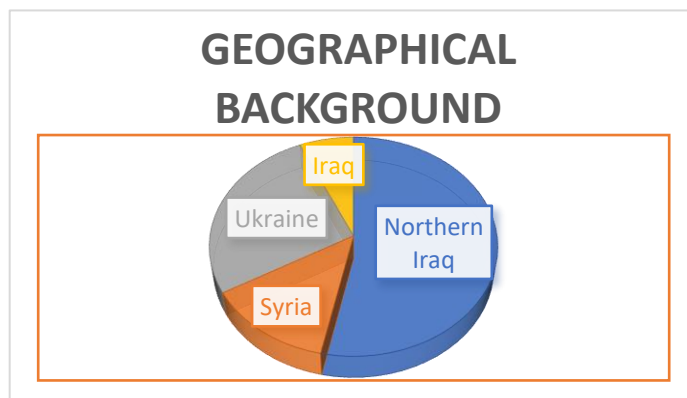


Regarding the ethnic profile of interviewees: respondents have originally been from Syria, Northern Iraq, and Ukraine, currently living in different parts of Europe. Interviewees from the Middle East have identified in their majority as male, while interviewees from Ukraine have been almost exclusively female. Despite initial efforts to secure gender balance, this result is representative of the demographic trends among young refugees and dislocated people in Europe. Refugees from the Middle East are predominantly male as confirmed by international data (Pew Research Centre

2016; [Statista Research Department 2022](#)) Moreover, cultural implications should be considered, as girls and women from certain ethnic communities are harder to reach due to social norms. Interviews with girls and women from the Middle East were conducted only in situations where there was the opportunity to develop -through frequent encounters- an interpersonal relationship based on mutual trust.

On the contrary, it was exclusively young women from Ukraine who shared their insights. Three of these women were accompanied by small children. This result is directly correlated with the fact that Ukrainian men do not have the right to exit their country based on the martial law in Ukraine as per Decree № 64/2022.

In cases where respondents did not speak English, communication became possible with the help of friends who wish to remain anonymous and who interpreted from Arabic, Kurdish (Kurmanji, Sorani, Badini), Russian and Ukrainian



into Turkish or English. Interviewees were selected through networks and connections via a snowball effect, where one person would introduce another, mainly by using small groups on the social media.

#### Epistemology of the study

Methodologically, primary findings have been derived using qualitative methods based on an interpretivist research approach. Social interactionist tools has been used, such as study visits, ethnic observation inside refugee communities and refugee camps, diary keeping and personal interviews with refugees and practitioners, some of whom have been interviewed at different phases of their lives, between June 2020 and May 2023.

Furthermore, an academic diary kept in times of peace to track the progress of Ukrainian students who participated in a series of international youth projects (two of which coincidentally focused on the educational and social integration of migrants and refugees in Europe) became the witness of a dramatic shift in the life of these young people: As a repercussion of Russia's aggression on Ukraine, from being external observers of the refugee trauma, these young students suddenly found themselves in similar situations.

Most interviews have been conducted in the form of in-depth conversations in relaxed environments, where young people would be asked to narrate their story. Other interviews have been conducted in a semi-structured format, with guiding questions.

Names have been changed to protect personal data and special attention has been given not to portray any person or associate them with any given situation. Moreover, the same person might have been interviewed more than once during the research, to better document attitudes and reactions to life-related developments.

The research has been epistemologically guided by grounded theory, a reliable and powerful tool in documenting trajectories portending a potential change in societies (Morse 2006: 1-2). Grounded theory involves the construction of hypotheses through the collection and analysis of data. In the specific case, it has enabled the identification and classification of repeated patterns in young people's social interaction with peers and organisations, allowing the research to outline factors that can effectively facilitate social change. Moreover, the grounded theory procedure is more flexible with regards to the collection, merging and analysis of data (Charmaz & Henwood 2008: 241; Pidgeon & Henwood 1997: 255), granting investigators greater autonomy over the sequence of steps to be taken.

## Terms and definitions

### **Refugee**

According to Article 1 of the [The 1951 Refugee Convention \(UNHCR\)](#) (see *references*, Geneva Convention) a refugee is someone who "owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of [their] nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail [themselves] of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of [their] former habitual residence, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it."

### **Refugee rights**

According to the principle of 'non-refoulement' of the Article 33 of the Geneva Convention, a refugee should not be returned to a country where they face serious threats to their life or freedom. Other rights outlined in the 1951 Convention include:

- *The right not to be expelled, except under certain, strictly defined conditions (Article 32)*
- *The right not to be punished for irregular entry into the territory of a contracting State (Article 31)*

- *The right to non-discrimination (Articles 3 and 5)*
- *The right to decent work (Articles 17 to 19 and 24)*
- *The right to housing, land and property, including intellectual property (Articles 13, 14 and 21)*
- *The right to education (Article 22)*
- *The right to freedom of religion (Article 4)*
- *The right to access to justice (Article 16)*
- *The right to freedom of movement within the territory (Article 26 and Article 31 (2))*
- *The right to be issued civil, identity and travel documents (Articles 12, 27 and 28)*
- *The right to social protection (Articles 23 and 24 (2-4)).*

### **Asylum seeker**

According to [UNHCR](#), an asylum-seeker is 'someone who is seeking international protection. Their request for refugee status, or complementary protection status, has yet to be processed, or they may not yet have requested asylum but they intend to do so'. It should be emphasized that 'not all asylum-seekers will be found to be refugees, but all refugees were once asylum-seekers'. Governments are usually the ones to assess asylum applications to determine whether an individual's circumstances make them a refugee or not. While awaiting the outcome of their application to be granted international protection, asylum-seekers 'have the right to and should be protected'.

### **International protection**

In the *global context*, the UNHCR (see references, *UNHCR Glossary*) envisions international protection as a set of 'actions by the international community on the basis of international law, aimed at protecting the [fundamental rights](#) of a specific category of persons outside their [countries of origin](#), who lack the national protection of their own countries'.

In the *EU context*, [the European Commission](#) (see references, EC Directive 2011) foresees protection 'that encompasses [refugee status](#) and [subsidiary protection status](#)'. The first refers to the 'recognition by an EU Member State of a [third-country national](#) or [stateless person](#) as a [refugee](#)'.

### **Dislocated or displaced person**

In the *global context*, the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) [defines](#) as dislocated or displaced (terms used interchangeably throughout the study to refer to

the same people) persons or groups of persons 'who have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence, either across an international border or within a State, in particular as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, violations of **human rights** or natural or human-made disasters' (IOM 2019).

In *the EU context*, the following definition is provided in the framework of the [Directive - 2001/55](#) (EUR-lex 2011) :

'A [third-country national](#) or [stateless person](#) who has had to leave their country or region of origin, or has been evacuated, particularly in response to an appeal by international organisations, and is unable to return in safe and durable conditions because of the situation prevailing in that country, who may fall within the scope of Art. 1A of the [Geneva Refugee Convention and Protocol](#) or other international or national instruments giving [international protection](#), in particular:

- (i) Persons who have fled areas of armed conflict or endemic violence;
- (ii) persons at serious risk of, or who have been the victim of, systematic or generalised violations of their [human rights](#)'.

## PART 1

### TERMS, TRENDS AND ATTITUDES

#### 1. Autonomy in the youth migration context

##### 1.1 Initial reflections

Whether associated with financial independence and the acquisition of material assets or envisioned in the framework of humanistic and patriotic ideals, autonomy is a polysemous, dynamic and often elusive term, the perception of which is very much dependent on personal perspective, context and certainly, age.

For those whose application for asylum is still pending, becoming autonomous might primarily mean getting out of the refugee camp, receiving a passport and finally being able to travel, work and study. For recognised refugees, autonomy might stand for access to decent work and housing, financial independence, owning an apartment or opening one's business. Becoming autonomous might be synonymous to living away from parents and strict family or community rules; alternatively, for young refugee women with small children, it might translate into finding a workplace with childcare. For displaced people whose country is under occupation, in conflict or unrecognized, autonomy might be linked with self-determination and nationhood, representing a primarily collective rather than individual ideal.

By using autonomy both as a point of reference, but also as an ongoing journey of self-growth and self-development inside a society, the study aspires to contribute to the wider discussion about young refugees and dislocated people today from the lens of youth research, hoping to inspire more studies in this dynamic field.

##### 1.2 Young refugees: understudied and misrepresented

All over Europe, actors classified under the wider umbrella of the youth sector have been keen to protect minor refugees, especially unaccompanied ones. At cases where government support has been limited, inadequate or even inexistent, civil society has gone the extra mile to fill in gaps and manage the 'no system' conditions (Heinrich Böll Stiftung 2021:42).

Upon turning 18, however, an adolescent who is neither a minor, nor a 'grown up', suddenly loses childhood-related privileges and rights that they had been granted in the host country and is suddenly treated as an adult. Research previously published by the Youth Partnership (Pasic 2017) had identified legal and practice gaps with regards to empowering and supporting young refugees on the transition to adulthood.

The findings of this study indicate that figures are disproportionate across Europe. The youth sector in Southeastern Europe is trying to cope with insufficient support coming from governments and consequent absence of regulated systems of cross-sectorial cooperation, holistically applying to the entire territory of the country. With different standards applying to different geographical regions inside countries, the fate of some young people is often left 'to chance' (Heinrich Böll Stiftung 2021:42). The encouraging message is that there are noteworthy practices at a civil society level, while the know-how and expertise collected among actors working at a grassroots level with young refugees could be transferred to other countries of the region who are less inexperienced in the field.

Some EU countries, such as Sweden, Germany, France and Austria, have gained valuable experience ever since the 2015/16 refugee influx and have developed strategies to empower and integrate young refugees through coordinated efforts among different actors. These states are pioneers in organizing the process of organizing individual skill-mappings in the refugees' mother tongue, recognising qualifications and matching them with the needs of the labour-market. It is not a coincidence that these are countries where youth work is recognized, validated and regulated and where national youth strategies are implemented in practice.<sup>1</sup>

Many gaps in policy still exist with regards to the situation of young asylum seekers residing in reception centers and camps. This is a phenomenon which has been observed at large in European Union countries. Young people find themselves in a state of limbo while waiting for a decision to be reached by public authorities on their asylum status. Many of them get moved around from settlement to settlement in different geographical parts of the host country, making it very hard to make friends, create a network or even benefit from opportunities provided by the local youth sector. These challenges should be considered under the prism of two observations: Firstly, their underrepresentation of these young people as a separate age group in large demographics on migration; secondly, their misrepresentation in research and the media.

The desk research conducted in the context of this study has shown that young people as a category other than 'children' or 'unaccompanied minors' are mostly absent in data shared by large international organizations. It is hard to find and collect reliable, inclusive and updated figures and other pieces of information i) depicting the profile of young refugees who are under the wider category of youth but cannot be considered children, ii) not associating age with gender through semantic

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<sup>1</sup> For instance, ever since 2018, Austria, having received funds by the Structural Reform Support Program of the European Union, is being supported by the Commission in [improving the design and delivery of policies targeted at young migrants and refugees through youth work](#).

connotations invoking stereotypical narratives.<sup>2</sup> In this sense, research focusing on young refugees in a holistic, apathetic and inclusive way is very much relevant and needed.

Furthermore, it would be valuable for existing literature to have a stable continuation. For instance, in 2019 the [European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights](#) published a report on the Integration of young refugees in the EU. It would be of great value to see i) whether the good practices listed still exist, ii) how tools that have proven to be efficient could be reproduced in other contexts, iii) whether challenges that had been identified back then continue existing or have been targeted and addressed by relative policies.

## 2. On International Protection

### 2.1 Overview of the latest asylum trends in Europe

All data regarding migration and asylum (including past years) in the EU are available on the [Eurostat Database](#); these refer, among others, to the number of applications for international protection, with age focus if needed, as well as to the number of decisions granting international protection.

It is worth highlighting some trends and developments that have taken place throughout the past years in the field of migration, by providing report-based figures and situating these amid social and geopolitical factors that might have triggered a change.

According to the 2022 Asylum report, issued by the European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA), examining asylum in EU+ countries<sup>3</sup>, in 2021, despite ongoing COVID-19 restrictions, traffic at the EU's external borders intensified, with the number of arrivals returning to pre-pandemic levels (EUAA 2022a). Geopolitical developments in certain regions played a critical role. Taliban's rise to power and then, Ukraine's invasion from Russia, led to large waves of displaced people coming from these two regions in 2021 and 2022, respectively. Moreover, the year 2021 was marked by the so-called 'Belarus border crisis' (as reported by the international media and humanitarian organisations), where hundreds of people, mainly from the Middle East (Yemen, Syria or the Iraqi Kurdistan), stranded for weeks at the border, with some freezing to death (UNHCR, 10.11.2021).

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<sup>2</sup> In his article entitled 'Why is the world afraid of young refugee men?', Patrick Strickland (20.6. 2016) elaborates on the negative image of refugees shaped by their fragmented, one-sided representation on research and the media as people who either need protection or pose a security threat.

<sup>3</sup> Member States of the European Union, Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway and Switzerland.



As per data provided by the European Council, in 2021 it was ‘Syrians, Afghans and Iraqis who lodged the most applications for asylum, together accounting for almost 40% of all applications in the EU member states in that year’ (EC 2021). According to the same source, among EU members, Germany was the country that received the most applications (30% of asylum applications in the EU), followed by France (19.1%) and Spain (10,4%).

Figures indicate that, instead of gradually declining, the cases of people seeking international protection are increasing (Frontex 14.11.2022). According to the UNHCR, ‘the number of refugees in Europe more than doubled in 2022’, while the internally displaced rose to almost 9 million’. The [EUAA October 2022 report](#) stresses that the last months of 2022 have been exceptional, as it has been the first time since the ‘refugee crisis’ of 2016, when more than 100.000 asylum applications for international protection have been made in the EU+. Specifically in the month of October 2022, ‘applications were at all-time highs for numerous citizenships, including Turks, Tunisians, Moroccans and Georgians. Russians and Iranians applied the most in years’ (EUAAb). The number of children and young asylum seekers, in particular, seems to be on the rise (DfE UK 2022; EUAAb).

With respect to nationalities granted the status of recognised refugees, recognition rates were especially high for Ukrainians, Syrians, Eritreans, Belarusians, Yemenis and Malians (EUAAb). This is where another interesting fact comes in. As the number of refugees increases in Europe, apparently so does racism and discrimination against them (UN 21.3.2022; OHCR 31.10.2022).

2023 has been a critical year in terms of migration. According to the most recent EUAA data (28.2.2024), ‘EU+ countries received 1.14 million applications for international protection, reaching a 7-year high’. As in previous years, the majority of asylum-related applications came from Syrians. Afghans continued being the second largest applicant group, although with much fewer applications compared to the previous year.

Finally, it is too soon to predict the impact that the current situation in the Middle East will have on asylum figures in Europe. Developments have been rapid since the Hamas-led attacks across Israel started in October, 2023 and the tragic events that followed, including the dire humanitarian situation in Gaza. According to the [European Network on Statelessness](#) (ENS 14.7.2022), Palestinian applications constitute complex cases, due to different views across EU+ countries regarding the recognition of Palestinians as ‘stateless persons’ throughout the asylum process. This creates additional obstacles for Palestinians trying to access international protection.

## 2.2 Implications of age, gender and religion

The factor of gender reportedly has its implications, triggering either a more or a less favorable treatment by national authorities. According to the [Refugees International 2020 report](#), women and girls are more prone to be granted international protection due to the fact that they are considered at heightened risk of sexual and gender-based violence. On the contrary, there have been reported cases of male young asylum seekers who had to be separated from their families when their parents and younger siblings received international protection and travelling documents, but they were considered 'fit, healthy and male'<sup>4</sup> enough to go back to a region in conflict.

In the last two decades, migration officers have grown more sensitive towards cases of people fleeing their region due to fear of being persecuted based on their sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression and/or sex characteristics (Hojem 2009, Heinrich Böll Stiftung 2021). This is a positive development that has taken place over the past years, especially if one considers that in asylum-related studies and campaigns of the previous decade, migration authorities in Europe had been criticised for failing to recognise the danger that LGBTQ+ persons from the Middle East would be facing upon returning to their regions (Hojem 2009:1).<sup>5</sup> This shift in attitude is at a large extent the outcome of coordinated efforts and campaigns of civil society in Europe, supported by the UNHCR. Nowadays, the [UN Refugee Agency](#) calls upon all practitioners working with refugees to be mindful of culture and gender-related issues and delivers training courses on Protection and Solutions for LGBTQ+ people in forced displacement.

At this point, it would be interesting to look at the other side of the coin and point to an understudied subject, which is the misuse of this parameter of the international protection policy by young asylum seekers who have deceived (or attempted to deceive) authorities over their sexual orientation, aiming to a positive answer to their asylum petition. Among the interviewees of this study, alongside the cases of young persons identifying as 'gay men' who have been rightfully granted asylum due to their sexual orientation, there have also been young asylum seekers who -despite confidentially admitting to being heterosexual- have lied during asylum-related interviews over their sexual preferences. Some succeeded in convincing the

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<sup>4</sup> This is faithful translation of a phrase written in Greek at an official document dated in September 2022 justifying the Greek court's decision to reject the asylum petition of three young male adults from Northern Iraq, aged 18, 23 and 27, respectively, at the time of submitting the file.

<sup>5</sup> In April 2009, the UNHCR published the *Eligibility Guidelines for Assessing the International Protection Needs of Iraqi Asylum Seekers*, where it listed lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) persons as a group at risk. Before that, older UNHCR publications would attempt to raise awareness over gender identity, but by referring only to homosexual refugees, as in the 2002 Guidelines on International Protection: Gender-Related Persecution and Guidelines on International Protection, "Membership of a Particular Social Group". Following this groundbreaking 2019 publication, a few months later, Human Rights Watch released a report entitled *They Want Us Exterminated; Murder, Torture, Sexual Orientation and Gender in Iraq*, which received much publicity from the media and led to raise-awareness campaigns organized by NGOs.

authorities, some did not. As the latter confessed during our discussions, they found themselves at a loss for words when the migration officers asked extremely personal questions that they did not expect and obviously, did not know how to answer.

This study also identified cases of young people from the Middle East who have used dogma to achieve better treatment in the host country. Some interviewees claimed that they thought that they would 'possibly be more easily accepted' by a society which is 'dominantly white and Christian' by becoming or introducing themselves as Orthodox or Catholic (depending on the country). Among the young people interviewed, there have been some who had used religion as an argument to justify their claim for asylum in a European country, but there have also been recognised refugees who have played the Christian card to get a job, get married to an EU-national, find an apartment to rent or simply, fit in.

Although the following chapter will provide more concrete information on EU's response towards displaced people from Ukraine, including references to the alleged 'double standards', it is worth concluding this chapter by briefly mentioning that Ukrainian presence in the EU has been a reason lately to examine protection under the lens of gender, religion, but also external appearance. The latter have been identified throughout interviews as factors allegedly predisposing European citizens and authorities towards certain 'types' of refugees. Discussing with young refugees from the Greater Middle East and Africa, one of the topics that has popped up has been their perception of an 'unfair social treatment' compared to the way European societies and EU institutions have embraced and supported refugees from Ukraine, especially with regards to asylum, jobs, educational opportunities and matching of skills. International media has highlighted the phenomenon of Europe's more favorable treatment towards Ukrainian refugees (Laitin in De Witte 24.3.2022; Traub 21.3.2022). Last July, in an [interview with Euronews](#), the UN Syria Commission chair Paulo Pinheiro had characteristically said that 'Syrian and Ukrainian refugees should receive the 'same treatment' and spoke of "depressing" double standards of hosting refugees.

## 2.3 Receiving international protection as the first step to autonomy

### 2.3.1. The New Pact on Migration and Asylum

Asylum is a fundamental right, recognised in the 1951 [Geneva Convention on the protection of refugees](#). As mentioned in the introductory chapter, the core principle of the 1951 Convention is 'non-refoulement', which asserts 'that a refugee should not be returned to a country where they face serious threats to their life or freedom' (see *references*, Geneva Convention). Respecting this fundamental right constitutes an international obligation for countries. Under the [Common European Asylum System](#),

‘EU countries have a shared responsibility to welcome asylum seekers in a dignified manner, ensuring that they are treated fairly and their case is examined following uniform standards. This ensures that, no matter where an applicant applies, the outcome will be similar. Procedures must be fair, effective throughout the EU, and impervious to abuse’.

Ever since 2022, the EU Asylum Agency (EUAA) has replaced the European Asylum Support Office (EASO) with a strengthened mandate. In the immediate future, this will practically mean a reinforced operational capacity regarding the implementation of the newly established [Pact on Migration and Asylum](#), which is ‘a set of [new rules managing migration and establishing a common asylum system](#) at EU level, that delivers results while remaining grounded in (shared) European values’ (EC 11.4.2024).

### 2.3.2 The Temporary Protection Directive

In many countries, people identified as members of ‘vulnerable’<sup>6</sup> social groups (unaccompanied minors, pregnant women, disabled people, victims of human trafficking etc.) might benefit from special reception conditions and fast-track processes (Asylum Information Database 30.5. 2022). Exceptional measures might also be applied in the aftermath of humanitarian crises leading to a mass influx of displaced persons from non-EU countries, as in the recent case of people fleeing the war in Ukraine.

In February 2022, the Council of the European Union voted for the re-activation of the [Temporary Protection Directive \(TPD\)](#), a tool that had been employed in 2001 to assist persons displaced by the conflict in the former Yugoslavia in 1992 (EUR-LEX 2001). Temporary protection is an emergency measure that has been employed in different parts of the world since the early twentieth century to alleviate the situation of people fleeing conflict (Fitzpatrick 2000). As per conclusions drawn by the Executive Committee of UNHCR (1979: 3) in 1979, 1980 and 1981, “in cases of large-scale influx, crime persons seeking asylum should always receive at least temporary refuge”. According to the UNHCR (2005: 36), temporary protection is to be used ‘mainly by industrialized states as a short-term, emergency response while postponing determination of eligibility for refugee status. Refugee groups are received

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<sup>6</sup> According to Articles 39(5)(d) and 58(1) of the International Protection Act (IPA) the following groups are considered as vulnerable groups: “children; unaccompanied children; direct relatives of victims of shipwrecks (parents, siblings, children, husbands/wives); disabled persons; elderly; pregnant women; single parents with minor children; victims of human trafficking; persons with serious illness; persons with cognitive or mental disability and victims of torture, rape or other serious forms of psychological, physical or sexual violence such as victims of female genital mutilation.” According to Article 58(2) IPA “The assessment of vulnerability shall take place during the identification process of the Art. 39 of this law without prejudice to the assessment of international protection needs”. According to article 58(4) L 4636/2019 “Only the persons belonging to vulnerable groups are considered to have special reception needs and thus benefit from the special reception conditions”.

temporarily and offered protection according to minimum standards based on the principles of the 1951 Convention and its 1967 Protocol' (Genç & Öner 2019: 2).

As in the case of protection granted to people fleeing former Yugoslavia, the EU has urged its Member States to develop national schemes to address the situation, therefore, it is at each government's discretion to decide how to implement the EU directive. In the current context, TPD grants dislocated people from Ukraine the right to access residence permits, employment, education and healthcare all over the EU, yet mechanisms and procedures might vary from state to state. TPD does not translate into a refugee status<sup>7</sup>; it is a temporary measure initially foreseen for one year with a possibility for extension. As it is extremely hard to predict the duration or the outcome of the ongoing conflict, odds are that the temporary protection applying to dislocated Ukrainians will keep being extended for as long as it is needed. It is worth saying that it is mainly women and minors who have benefited from the directive, given the imposition of martial law in Ukraine as per Decree № 64/2022 (President of Ukraine 24.02.2022) prohibiting male Ukrainian citizens aged 18 to 60 from travelling abroad.

Comparing EU's response towards dislocated people from Ukraine with that exhibited to previous migratory waves coming from the Middle East and Africa, it could be said that this time, the EU leaders went the extra mile to assist the first. The Temporary Protection Directive has been an emergency measure which was put forward to help alleviate the situation. In the last years, a legitimate question raised by migration scholars has been why the EU did not choose to activate this tool earlier (Genç & Önder 2019) to address previous refugee waves, for instance, masses of people fleeing the conflict in Libya (2011), Tunisia (2011), Syria (2011 and afterwards) or Afghanistan (2021). Interpretations might vary and they are not the object of this particular study; the purpose of citing these open-ended questions is to understand the wider spectrum of a complex rationale behind any argumentation over the so-called 'double standards' mentioned above.

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<sup>7</sup> Consequently, the term 'dislocated people' rather than 'refugees' is more appropriate when referring to Ukrainians who have fled their country.

### 3. Opportunities and challenges in refugees' accessing autonomy

#### 3.1 'I need to have my own pocket': Access to the labour market

For most young people whose perspectives formed the foundations of this study, the journey towards autonomy starts with finding a job, or better said, doing the necessary actions to increase one's chances of getting employed. Gender is a particularly important factor, as evidenced throughout the analysis of interviews conducted for this study. Accessing the labour market appears to be the main priority for male young refugees. Apparently, these young people are driven not only by their own need to be financially independent, but also from cultural and moral norms, associating men with the image of the 'breadwinner' of the house and the one whose 'value' or success in life is strongly connected with the extent to which they can support not only themselves but also their family (parents, younger siblings, a partner, children, if any, but also relatives or close friends and neighbours in need).

*In religious celebrations and other occasions, we are expected to send money and gifts back home. Relatives often have an unrealistic image of Europe; they picture it as another 'Promised Land' and believe that it is easy to make money here. I try my best to help, even if I deprive myself of some things. It is also part of our tradition to provide an annual amount of money to poor families and neighbours; imagine it like a charity, where each person's contributions depend on how much they have earned.*

Ahmed, 23, Recognised refugee from Northern Iraq, living in Germany

Clarifying the difference between an 'asylum seeker', a 'refugee' and a 'dislocated person under temporary protection'<sup>8</sup> is useful when it comes to understanding who has a right to work and who does not. EU law envisages access to employment for recognised refugees as soon as they receive a positive decision, or for asylum-seekers at the latest within nine months after having applied for asylum ([European Parliament 22.6.2022](#)). Ukrainians, as mentioned above, can easily register for temporary protection in one of the EU Member States and make use of the rights envisioned under this directive. EU Member States reserve the right to apply more favourable provisions and/or grant access to the labour market subject to conditions.

Different standards apply currently within the EU on who has access to the labour market, when and under which conditions. For instance, in Belgium, Finland and Greece, an asylum seeker awaiting a decision on their case can work without restrictions after six months of filing an asylum petition ([ECRE 2022](#)).

Other EU countries have much stricter policies. In Austria, during the first three months of lodging an asylum claim, access to labour is permitted under certain criteria

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<sup>8</sup> See introductory chapter for terms and definitions.

only. Asylum seekers may only do very limited work and they need a work permit for gainful employment. According to information published by [Caritas](#), such work permits are usually 'only issued for seasonal work in agriculture and tourism and only when no other Austrian or non-Austrian with a work permit is available for the job in question'. The phenomenon of refugees doing jobs that locals would not opt for doing is widespread across EU countries: [Studies have found](#) that 'refugees complement native workers rather than competing with them' (Clemens et. al 2018; Refugees International 28.7.2022).

Since Brexit, the UK has tightened its policies in respect to migrants' access to labour. According to information included in the asylum 2022 report published by the [House of Commons](#) (Gower et. al 2022), asylum seekers are generally not allowed to work in the UK. Exceptional permissions may be granted if a person has been waiting twelve months for a decision, and they are not considered responsible for the delay. It is worth mentioning that there is a long-running campaign in the country to have the permission to work rules relaxed, towards which the Government has responded with scepticism, over the argument that such as reform could create a 'pull factor' of asylum seekers to the UK (Gower et. al 2022).

### 3.1.1 Additional EU measures to support refugees' employment

The current wave of displaced people from Ukraine is different than those of previous years, as it consists mainly of white, Christian young women with children (OECD 2022; 22.7.2022). Ukrainian culture supports women in employment; this, however, might not always be the case with women refugees coming from other parts of the world. A recent [World Bank report examining refugee policies through a gender lens](#) highlights how the ethnic and cultural background of some refugee women constraints their autonomy, by limiting significantly their choices (World Bank 2022: 31); for instance, some communities of refugees from Iraq, Jordan and Syria living in the EU strongly oppose the idea of a woman working. These values are perpetuated by refugee men and women living in the EU.

According to the OECD policy brief on [the potential contribution of Ukrainian refugees to the labour force in European host countries](#), 'relative to other refugees, Ukrainian refugees have some characteristics that facilitate their integration prospects, such as educational profile, existing social networks and immediate access to employment' (OECD 27.7.2022). The same report foresees the impact that the presence of active Ukrainian workforce in the EU:

*The overall estimated impact on labour force is about twice as large as that of the 2014-17 inflow of refugees to the European Union. Most of it will be observed in a few*



*countries (in relative terms, Czech Republic, Poland and Estonia) and, given the differences in migrant profiles between 2014-17 and today, with more women and more high-educated, the most affected labour market segments will be different – likely less unskilled manual labour and more service occupations.*

(OECD 27.7.2022)

The EU has taken special measures to support dislocated people from Ukraine. To name a few: [The European Network of Public Employment Services](#) matches the skills of newly arrived Ukrainians with the demands of the EU labour market, while it has [publicly expressed its commitment](#) to supporting displaced people escaping the war in Ukraine through implementation of measures to enhance their rights, as well as practical support (European Commission 5.4.2022). The EU has been supporting the Member States and other stakeholders in providing language courses and training in different countries, as well as guidelines in the Ukrainian language on how to access the job market. The [EU Skills Profile Tool](#)<sup>9</sup> and [Europass](#) have been translated into Ukrainian, while in October 2022, the European Commission launched the [EU Talent Pool Pilot](#) (EURES 2022), an innovative initiative available in English, Ukrainian and Russian, accessible via the European Labour Authority's EURES portal, designed to match Ukrainian refugee skills with vacancies offered by more than 4 000 validated and registered employers and EURES Members and Partners.

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### 3.2 'Education can make a big difference'

According to the [2022 Global Refugee Work Rights Report](#), 'at least 64 percent of refugees live in countries that provide adequate access to basic schooling in practice, with similar access—for at least 60 percent of the refugee population—to secondary school' (Refugees International 28.7.2022). In order to access this right, mastery of the local language is a prerequisite, but this is an area where many refugees have been falling behind, as indicated in several reports (OECD 2016, OECD 2022). The findings of primary research conducted for this study verify this phenomenon: Refugees struggle with understanding and reproducing the high level of local language command required for them to attend school; this becomes a reason for them to drop out of classes or not enroll at all.

*In my hometown, I had finished high-school, but had failed the final exams to earn a certificate. A few months after I arrived to Greece, with the help of a social worker, I joined the 'second chance' school, which takes place in the evenings and*

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<sup>9</sup> This is a tool which helps map the skills, qualifications and work experience of refugees, migrants and citizens of non-EU countries who are staying in the EU with the needs of the EU labor market.



*is considered easier than the 'integrated high school'. I had to start from scratch. They had me enrolled in the first class, but even this was too difficult for me. I had two obstacles: On the one hand, the difficulty of the local language. On the other hand, the toll of physical and mental fatigue on me: It was extremely hard to concentrate at school after 8 hours of working at a warehouse. I eventually stopped but I still wish I could find a way to pursue my education.*

Ali, 22, asylum seeker from Iraq, living in Greece

Another critical challenge related to both education and employment is the lack of recognition of refugees' academic and vocational qualifications received back home (Özerim 2018: 52). Previous studies have shown that markets tend to devalue foreign qualifications; this inevitably affects a refugee's choices in finding a job matching their true skills and payment expectations (Bonfanti & Xenogiani 2014; Drosopoulos 2021). This social phenomenon affects young people at different phases of their lives and regardless of ethnic background. Either discussing with adolescents who had finished high-school in their country of origin, but could not enter university in the host country, or highly educated university graduates, many of the young people interviewed for the study would have difficulties in having their diplomas and degrees recognised and valued on host country labour markets.

### 3.2.1 Educational integration and recognition of academic or vocational titles: From challenges to practices

Different European initiatives have been launched with the goal of addressing this situation. For instance, the [ENIC-NARIC project for the recognition of qualifications](#) is one of them. The joint website of the ENIC (European Network of Information Centres) and NARIC (National Academic Recognition Information Centres in the European Union) Networks is a joint initiative of the [European Commission](#), the [Council of Europe](#) and [UNESCO](#), aimed at enhancing navigation to relevant online resources. This website has been set up to help interested organisations and individuals reach up-to-date information on current issues related with international academic and professional mobility, but also with procedures involved in the recognition of foreign qualifications. The initiative also includes a guide for credential evaluators on how to recognise academic qualifications held by refugees. This guide draws on results of EU (ERASMUS) co-funded projects .

Another initiative is the [Refugees and Recognition](#) project, funded by the ERASMUS+ programme. This project was launched in 2016 and its concrete output was a [toolkit for the recognition of refugees' qualifications](#). The follow-up project, called [REACT](#), ran between 2016-2018 and tested the toolkit as a supplement to ordinary

admission procedures. The '[REACT Q-Card for Admission Officers](#)' represents the main outcome of this project, providing recommendations for action at higher education institutions. The third branch of the project ran from 2020-2022 ([ARENA](#)) and further tested, upscaled and adjusted the toolkit. This involved further seminars and the development of e-learning materials.

Access to education and vocational training for all refugees and asylum seekers is safeguarded through the updated [Action plan on integration and inclusion 2021-2027](#). In this action plan, there are provisions<sup>10</sup> for 'inclusive education and training from early childhood to higher education, focusing on faster recognition of qualifications and language learning, with support from EU funds'.

Last but not least, one should not underestimate the support that European Academia has exhibited towards refugees and dislocated people in the form of scholarships. For instance, many young Ukrainians who have fled their country have already made use of scholarships provided by universities and as a result, have been granted student visas. As some interviewees have shared, this type of visa guarantees a longer stay in the EU than the temporary directive, which is an ephemeral measure. Figures covering the period between the outbreak of Russia's aggression in Ukraine until the first semester of 2022 indicate that 80 000 Ukrainians approximately are studying abroad, 'one-third of which in Poland and several thousands in other EU countries (e.g. Germany, the Czech Republic, the Slovak Republic, Austria)' (OECD 27.7.2022).

### 3.3 'A place of my own ': Access to decent housing

Having a roof over one's head is a basic need, but it might also be a personal battle won. Upon receiving refuge, young people are given a 'period of grace' during which they can remain in an accommodation center until they find a job and a place of their own. In this process, they are mainly helped by friends (who are usually compatriots), while they often resort to searching in online tools or social media groups. Having knowledge of the local context might mean having access to digital search tools used by the local population that are more reliable and effective.

Apparently, accessing decent housing at fair rates remains a great challenge for young refugees, regardless of ethnicity or country of residence. There are two main reasons for this: On the one hand, the soaring cost of rent all over Europe has made it hard for all young people in general to find affordable housing. On the other hand, instances of racism and xenophobia make it harder for landlords to trust their properties to refugees.

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<sup>10</sup> Country briefings are now available for Yemen, Sudan, Palestine, Burundi, Rwanda, Afghanistan, Eritrea, Iraq, Libya, Syria, Iran, Ethiopia, Somalia, Venezuela & DRC.

*Even before receiving asylum, I moved out of the camp as soon as I found a job. I wanted to live inside the city and close to my workplace, close to real life. Some local friends from work told me about this website where you could look at pictures of flats available and contact the owners directly. Well, for me it wasn't that simple. The moment that owners would see my name on messenger they would tell me that the flat is no longer available. I didn't speak the language, either, so this made things harder. In the end, I found a room in a shared apartment with two international students. The landlady said I looked like a decent guy. I would give her the biggest part of my salary: almost 600 euros per month in cash- no receipt. It took me almost a year to understand that I was overpaying and that for this amount of money, I could have rented the whole house, not just a room. I was overpaying the fact that I am from a different race.*

Rami, 24, asylum seeker from Northern Iraq, living in Greece

Instances of discrimination are not connected only with skin color. Discussions with Ukrainian refugees have shown that racism affects them too, despite being 'white', and that discrimination can happen even in places considered cosmopolitan and international:

*Finding a place of my own was so hard. At first, I tried through agencies. The moment I would tell them I am from Ukraine, I would hear their voice change. They assumed I was under temporary protection, like many Ukrainians arriving in the country, so they considered me unreliable.*

Jolanta, 23, Belgium

#### 3.4 'If only I could travel, like my friends do': Access to mobility

Young people who are awaiting an asylum-related decision do not have the right to travel. In contrast with the case of dislocated people from Ukraine who were given from the very beginning (and continue being given) temporary protection immediately, displaced people from other parts of the world, especially from Africa and the Middle East, do not enjoy the same benefits. A protection-related decision might take months to be issued and if it is negative, then it is usually followed by a series of appeals, which translate into the young people entering a long-term and bureaucratic process the outcome of which is costly and uncertain. During this time, asylum seekers are not allowed to exit the country. For the case of young people in the transition age, who have been the target of this research, this practically translates into having no access to transnational youth programmes held out of the host country, where all other young people can participate, including young Ukrainians. In this context, mobility under programmes of the European Commission under the wider

umbrella of Erasmus+, such as youth exchanges and seminars held abroad or voluntary services under European Solidarity Corps are out of reach. Young asylum seekers do not have the right to apply to scholarships abroad, either.

This situation inevitably creates a sense of inequality and different treatment of dislocated people, based on their geographical background. Given that one of the main purposes of the Erasmus+ programs is to bring forward the idea of wider European families and instil in young people with European values and ideals, the ones who could truly benefit from such opportunities are indeed young people coming from a different cultural background, who still wish to live and integrate in Europe. It is a paradox, in this sense, that such opportunities are not afforded to these young people to participate, even if it was under certain criteria.

The people interviewed have identified the deprivation of the right to mobility as their daily reminder that even if they get a job, even if they manage to enter a course in the host country, in practical terms, they are not autonomous, as, for them, the cornerstone of autonomy is having access to mobility and all rights connected to it, such as having a travel document, being able to be granted a visa, taking driving lessons, owning a car, going on a holiday with friends or participating in a training course abroad.

## PART 2

### 4. The contribution of the youth sector

#### 4.1 Civil society supporting refugees

In 2020, the [The European Economic and Social Committee \(EESC\)](#) released a project summary report on '[The role of civil society organisations in ensuring the integration of migrants and refugees](#)', based on evidence collected in fact-finding missions in five EU countries, 3 of which (Germany, Bulgaria and Greece) are also examined in this study. The report's main findings highlight the important role that CSOs play in migrant and refugee integration in all the countries visited:

*They carry out valuable work assisting or even substituting for governments by providing guidance and support in integration processes. However, their involvement in the design of integration policies and integration activities does not always correspond to the importance of their role.*

(EESC 2020: 3)

The findings of this study underline the important contribution of civil society organisations in the migration context, focusing especially on their role in supporting young people on the transition to adulthood. Given that the study counts significantly on testimonies of young people themselves, it is worth sharing that all of the young people interviewed and/or observed have admitted that their interaction with civil society organisations, especially those working at a grassroots, community level, has been a source of help. Nevertheless, the type, quality and amount of help offered and received has varied greatly. Some young people have emphasised the organisations' assistance with respect to basic needs through the provision of goods, housing or access to medical services; some have appreciated guidance provided with respect to legal issues and asylum-related procedures, while others have made great use of opportunities to enter education and employment. All of these services and possibilities offered contribute to young refugees' autonomy.

The study has also identified the importance of personal initiative when it comes to understanding and making the best possible use of opportunities offered. Many young interviewees have observed that being open to learning, challenging oneself and accepting support is also a matter of personal willingness and responsibility.

Case study: Berlin, Germany

The case of the [Syrian Youth Assembly \(SYA\)](#) in Berlin is a characteristic example of young refugees self-organizing in a host environment to support each other and then, establishing a formal structure out of this initiative.

SYA started in 2016 as a group of Syrian refugees living in Germany who wanted to help each other access education and jobs; since then, this youth-led group has turned into a non-governmental organization that has reached more than 130.000 young people, present in Syria and different places around the world. SYA is also an example of digital mobilization of the diaspora of a nation at war, aimed to provide educational opportunities to compatriots both in the host country and back home.

The organization uses mainly online tools, such as educational material in the refugees' mother tongue available on Coursera, a platform which turned out to be extremely useful for young Syrian refugees on the transition to adolescence.

In the last two years, SYA has been having projects welcoming not only young refugees from Syria, but generally, Arab-speaking young refugees living all over Europe.

Case study: Lagkadikia, Greece

The [IHA \(Inter-european Humanitarian Aid association\)](#) was founded in September 2015 by a group of humanitarian workers providing first-aid to asylum seekers arriving to Greece. The initial idea was to create a platform which would serve in coordinating volunteer efforts to collect aid (either in the form of goods (donations) or pro-bono services) and then, channel them to meet humanitarian emergencies across the Balkan route. Gradually, IHA developed into a volunteer-based organisation with a focus on Northern Greece, and particularly, in the rural region of Lagkadikia, which hosts a refugee camp.

What is interesting about the organisation is how it made good use of the young asylum seekers it had already trained. The IHA started by organising free courses, seminars and mentoring sessions for young asylum seekers, especially those on the transition to adulthood. All courses would be labour market-oriented, answering to real needs that young people had expressed through personal interviews and peer-to-peer sessions. Moreover, practical assistance would be provided with regards to accessing the job market and dealing with bureaucracy. As the organisation grew, they started employing in key positions young asylum seekers whom they had trained and who now had the legal right to work in Greece. Be it in the role of 'mentors', 'cultural mediators' or 'project assistants', IHA staff coming from the neighbouring refugee camp became 'success stories' among the Lagkadikia community; their living example motivates and empowers younger or newly arrived asylum seekers, who see in them

people from their own culture and community, who have managed to make a difference and integrate in the host society, despite facing similar challenges.

In January 2024, to meet growing needs, the IHA rented from the Municipality of Lagkadikia an abandoned space which used to be a school. This space had remained empty for years, given that most young people and families had left that small village to pursue better opportunities in neighbouring urban centres. With the help of volunteers, staff and camp residents, the abandoned school turned it into a [Community Centre](#), open and free for everyone.

What is also worth commenting is the way through which this development affected the surrounding local community and economy: Local businesses such as mini-markets, cafes and canteens started working again, while new stores (such as delis selling products from the Middle East) appeared to meet emerging needs.

#### Main take-aways: Initiative and leadership

The two case studies featured in this chapter are different in terms of geography and modus operandi. The first one is based in a big and cosmopolitan urban centre, Berlin, while the second one is situated in a remote village in Northern Greece, where opportunities for young people used to be non-existent. The first case is an example of youth-led community engagement, while the second one is a practice showcasing the impact of peer-to-peer training and investing in a disadvantaged community. Both cases, however, are indicative of how young people exhibiting a leadership role can encourage and guide other members of a community in finding their way.

The young people whose stories have been featured here lived in environments where personal initiative would not be particularly encouraged. Refugee centres are usually far outside big cities and often detached from real life. It has been observed, throughout the course of field research, that due to their seclusion, beneficiaries are unable to integrate and find opportunities for themselves; what is more, being far away from local life and its people leads to refugees' shaping a distorted image of the dominant society and lifestyle, an image which is usually fragmented and negative.

Sometimes, young people who wish to change their fate are often surrounded by ethnic peers who have accepted the 'system' and spent months, if not years, in secluded and controlled places, surviving on external aid. In this sense, claiming their autonomy means overcoming not only personal fears and limitations, but also defying preconceptions and norms that have become popular amid the surrounding community.

A problematic aspect of humanitarian work is that, in some situations, cultivates relations of dependence and eventually disempowers the group targeted (Syrri 2020:10, Heinrich Böll Stiftung 2021). Provided with free shelter and food for several months or years, yet without getting equipped with skills and attitudes to face life in Europe, beneficiaries often forget how to 'fetch for themselves' once aid is no longer available. This justifies the phenomenon of refugees finding it hard to leave camps and shelters and in some cases, 'touring' Europe with their families, having new asylum claims issued once provision of support is interrupted in a certain country.

## 4.2 The contribution of the Council of Europe Quality Label Youth Centres

### 4.2.1 The added value of holding the Quality Label

Youth centres are dynamic spaces where young people can develop skills and values for life. In some EU countries, youth centres have been contributing significantly to the emergency support and socioeconomic integration of young refugees for the last years. The examples featured below are recent ones referring to support provided to dislocated persons from Ukraine, focusing on the case of youth centres holding the Quality Label of the Council of Europe. Before proceeding, however, it is important to provide some further information about the Quality Label, in order to understand mission, values and context.

Back in 2008, The [European Steering Committee for Youth](#) (CDEJ) had agreed on launching a project aimed at promoting the [European Youth Centres of the Council of Europe](#) in Budapest and Strasbourg, respectively, as standard-setting instruments and examples of good practice for youth policy. The principal idea was to provide inspiration, motivation and guidance to youth centres all over Europe which aspired to become pioneers in the promotion of youth work and youth policy in their region. To do so, the project encouraged these Europe-based youth centres to i) join a pan-European network, designed to facilitate knowledge sharing and support regarding youth work and youth-policy oriented practices; undertake necessary actions to meet a certain number of quality criteria that would enable them to enhance their role as providers of youth work and strengthen their capacity to serve young people and the youth sector, overall.

In a few words, the [Council of Europe Quality Label for Youth Centres](#) is a dynamic, flexible and constantly evolving project, which, according to the programme's [web page](#), consists of three main elements:

- ✓ a set of quality criteria that youth centres need to meet to be awarded the Label;



- ✓ an annual meeting of the [European Platform of Youth Centres](#) to ensure networking among centres recognised with the Label and those aspiring to its acquisition;
- ✓ an [annual training course](#) for the educational staff of the youth centres

#### 4.2.2 Discussing priorities, competences and dilemmas

Following the eruption of conflict in Ukraine, some EU countries received a large number of dislocated persons. These countries were not necessarily prepared to handle the large masses of people arriving. In some cases, due to lack of space and resources, governments used public spaces, such as sports centres, university premises and youth centres to accommodate displaced persons but also families, the majority of which would be young students travelling either alone or with elder relatives, but also, young mothers arriving with their small children. Moreover, governments supported NGOs and youth centres so that they could organise activities with displaced people to help them integrate and deal with emotional traumata.

Among the European youth centres that either hosted or designed activities for Ukrainian dislocated people were one centre in Bulgaria and one in Finland, both holding the Quality Label of the Council of Europe. Their experience was shared throughout several conversations and interviews that were conducted during field visits in both countries. Several challenges and dilemmas emerged for both organisations and practitioners working with displaced people; at the same time, the experience and knowledge accumulated has been indispensable. It is worth referring to some of the adversities that youth centres had to face, but also lessons learnt and milestones accomplished.

Among the first challenges identified by practitioners interviewed has been the necessity to swiftly adjust an organisation's educational programme and modus operandi to the needs of the target beneficiaries. There were situations where youth centres would not necessarily have the capacity -in terms of human resources or even financial means- to fully address an emergency situation in limited time.

Moreover, responding to this new mandate has proven to be challenging in terms of competences and know-how. As many youth workers shared, from the beginning of their interaction with dislocated people, they would often realise that many of the methods, tools and resources that they had become experts in, would not necessarily be useful or appropriate in this new context. There would often be a mismatching of local youth workers' skills and expertise with the type of experience, knowledge and competences that would be required to i) manage cultural differences, ii) overcome linguistic barriers, especially in situations where parties involved would speak only

their maternal tongue; iii) assist people who had suffered the trauma of war, loss and separation.

Similar challenges had been documented in research previously published by the Council of Europe, focusing on countries such as Greece, Turkey and Italy (Özerim & Kalem 2016, Drosopulos 2016), that had suddenly received a large number of refugees, many of whom were children. Evidence had shown that the youth sector had managed to overcome initial adversities stemming from the lack of know-how and infrastructure and had come out stronger, having built importance experience in the so-called emergency youth work (Georgescu 2018; Drosopulos 2017).

Another important question identified was over the type and duration of support that had to be provided. For some of these organisations involved, dilemmas had emerged over 'how' and 'for how long' to support refugees without rendering them dependent on assistance provided by civil society and governments, but also, without depriving local young people of having access to the facilities and programs of the youth centre.

The following case studies illustrate how two very different -in terms of geography, activity and profile- youth centres addressed this emergency situation and how holding the quality label enabled them to receive guidance, but also share lessons and practices within a wider network, so that this knowledge can provide support and inspiration to other european organisations.

#### Case study: Stara Zagora Youth Centre, Bulgaria

In Bulgaria, a country that has received a large number of displaced persons from Ukraine, the youth sector played a vital role in addressing this emergency situation. The local youth sector went so far in providing support to the newly arrived dislocated people, that provisions and services targeting other vulnerable groups of young people got disrupted.

Bulgaria is the only country in its geographical region that has established two residential youth centres, in Plovdiv and Stara Zagora, respectively, according to the standards of the Quality Label of the Council of Europe. The [International Youth Centre in Stara Zagora](#) (IYC) has been the first centre in Bulgaria to be awarded the Council of Europe Quality Label for Youth Centres in 2017. Working with vulnerable youth is at the core of the Centre's activities. The Bulgarian Ministry of Youth is also quite active in working together with local municipalities and CSOs (Council of Europe Quality Label Report 2022).

Following the outbreak of war, a significant number of Ukrainian refugees arrived on site, as part of a national emergency plan. This development happened at a point in

time when the Centre was trying to go back to its normal pace of work after a long period of isolation from the international youth community, because of traveling and meeting restrictions imposed due to the covid-19 pandemic.

In coordination with the local Municipality, both the Youth Centre and the local community embraced displaced people, who consisted exclusively of young women with small children: They were offered full accommodation at the Centre's facilities, got involved in Bulgarian language lessons, while Ukrainian children attended public school. Local NGOs cooperated with the IYC, organizing activities promoting intercultural understanding, dialogue and mental well-being. The local municipality, which had been monitoring the housing process, supported the refugees' social and economic integration to the local community.

In June 2022, an expert group in the Council of Europe Quality Label for Youth Centres programme conducted [an end of term visit to the Stara Zagora Youth Centre](#). Given the completion of the initial labelled period of three years, the aim of this follow up review was to consider the renewal of the Quality Label for the specific youth centre by assessing the progress achieved in terms of maintaining and further developing the standards foreseen by the [quality criteria](#). At the time of the visit, all the accommodation rooms of the Centre were occupied by dislocated families from Ukraine, therefore, facilities had remained for a long time unavailable for local young people and interregional activities.

The results of the visit were very encouraging and the expert team finally made a recommendation to the European Steering Committee for Youth (CDEJ) to prolong the Quality Label for the Stara Zagora Youth Centre. The visit, however, triggered a constructive discussion over the prolonged presence of dislocated people at a youth centre and the implications of this not only on local youth, but also on refugees' path towards autonomy. While an emergency response was necessary in the first months following the outbreak of conflict, the continuous provision of protected shelter to people who were already being assisted with accessing education and labour could possibly be doing more harm than good in terms of empowerment and self-sufficiency. Moreover, the ongoing unavailability of accommodation in the Centre had obviously become a barrier to delivering Residential Youth Work, which is a priority in the European Youth Centre Quality Label criteria.

## Case study: Martinnen Youth Centre, Finland

The Martinnen Youth Centre, situated on the homonymous island, a few kilometres away from the city of Virrat, is in a relatively isolated geographical space of unique natural beauty. There is scarce transport to the youth centre, which is known for its 'nature activities' with organized groups, consisting mainly of school students.

Following the arrival of dislocated people from Ukraine, the youth centre was appointed to supporting Ukrainian families by organising activities. At this point, it is worth providing some background information. In recent years, a significant part of youth work in Finland has been focused on mental health and well-being. This has its roots to a social phenomenon, identified especially among young people, which has become known as "[eco-anxiety](#)" or "climate anxiety" (Sangervo et. al 2022). It refers to young people's concerns over climate change and sustainability (Burenby et.al 2021; Hickman et.al 2021). Although eco-anxiety was reportedly further aggravated during the pandemic (Sangervo et. al 2022), it is a phenomenon that had manifested itself months before the covid-19 health crisis and had led to massive, youth-led protests and campaigns, such as 'Fridays for Future', which started from a Nordic country, Sweden, and expanded fast in neighbouring countries. As per findings of field visits in schools and other youth centres in Finland in March 2023, but also [additional interviews](#) with Finnish practitioners (Drosopulos 2024), local young people are preoccupied with the impact of unsustainable living on global future and express these concerns by protesting and shifting in daily life to more sustainable practices. As a result, local youth practitioners have responded by modifying their working methods to enrich their already consolidated experience in nature activities with a 'well-being and mental health-oriented' approach.

In this context, the Martinnen youth centre started organizing in spring 2023 activities with Ukrainian families, combining nature education with the mental health component. The aforementioned challenges of human resources, capacity and 'mismatching' of skills were initially point of concern. The Martinnen team responded by welcoming new youth workers, who had the expertise to address the new needs that had emerged. At the time of the field visit, a specialised practitioner had been employed for this purpose. Furthermore, local youth workers expressed their interest in developing the intercultural aspect of their work, as well as learning how to support through youth work people suffering the trauma of war and separation.

## Main take-aways : The value of peer-learning and guidance

The case studies featured are reinforcing the argument over the importance of countries investing in the youth sector. Youth centres, in particular, can play a great role in empowering young people in different geographical and social settings, displaying versatility, innovation and readiness to meet different social needs and respond to developments stemming from rapid and abrupt geopolitical developments.

Youth centres holding the Quality Label have been affected by such developments and have responded using different approaches and projecting different resources. The experience accumulated through the process of receiving and maintaining the Quality Label has been indispensable. Apart from the guidance provided from CoE experts, joining a wider network of centres has meant receiving support by sharing know-how and tools, but also motivating each other to overcome obstacles and find viable solutions.

Finally, for the local youth workers involved, addressing this emergency situation encouraged them to become more flexible, resilient and open to change. For many interviewees, the arrival of dislocated people motivated them to upgrade or expand their skills and competences, while youth centre managers understood the value of investing in the ongoing capacity-building of their staff and welcoming new experts in the team to meet new needs and demands.

## Final conclusions

The notion of autonomy is a multidimensional, and fluid term. It involves a dynamic process, consisting of various phases, each one symbolizing different milestones in a person's life. In the case of refugees, reaching autonomy is a challenging process that comes with gaining gradual access to fundamental rights that local young people have immediate access to and therefore, tend to take for granted.

Young people's interpretations of autonomy vary from person to person, based on one's background, idiosyncrasy, level of integration, but also the status and sociopolitical situation of their country of origin. Autonomy is connected with access to financial and material assets coming from securing a job and a place to live; it is also intertwined with the feeling of social acceptance and belongingness that comes with developing social networks and finding one's niche in a European society.

Young refugees' autonomy in Europe today is driven and supported by acts of leadership and solidarity coming mainly from e-diaspora communities and civil society working with youth. Personal initiative and networking have been identified as critical factors. Young dislocated people are often not aware of services and opportunities for them; the contribution of digital diasporas and online groups is crucial in spreading information and linking them with the youth sector and/or public services.

Since the 2015-2016 refugee crisis', some countries such as Germany, Austria, Sweden and Belgium- to indicatively name a few-that have had having a longer tradition in welcoming migrants throughout their contemporary history, have managed to establish and maintain more solid structures of support compared with less experienced states. Solidarity with refugees has also meant developing better advocacy and communication channels among different sectors.

The so-called 'transit' countries, such as Greece, have developed regional and local mechanisms designed to address situations of emergency, but often lack an integral system based on holistic, cross-sectoral collaboration among distinct actors taking care of refugees. Since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, countries such as Poland, Moldova and Bulgaria, that did not belong to either of the aforementioned categories, have experienced the shock of receiving large waves of displaced people, whose profile differs significantly from those of previous refugee crises, as it consists mainly of young women and children. In such cases, the youth sector, civil society but also academia, initiatives have contributed significantly by providing first forms of aid, despite limited availability of funds, public mechanisms or even a culture of aiding and integrating refugees.

All over the EU, there are ongoing gaps in policy and practice regarding the empowerment of young refugees on the transition to adulthood. Upon turning 18, services treat all adult refugees as one homogeneous age group. Few organizations target directly young people; even fewer can claim to have projects with a genuine impact on young refugees and surrounding communities. Most services run projects covering basic needs, such as humanitarian help in the form of providing shelters, food, medical supplies and clothes. In this sense, their principal aim is not to support refugees' autonomy, but rather daily survival.

In many cases, the work of civil society organizations makes up for deficiencies in public services and mechanisms with respect to young refugees. Civil society actors support them by providing language courses, organizing sports activities, conducting workshops related with employability and intercultural dialogue and matching young refugees' skills with the local labour market. Once again, personal initiative is a factor that drives some young refugees to stand out, develop themselves and help other young people in similar situations. Youth-led and youth-driven initiatives are of particular importance, especially when they have a multiplier effect.

There is a strong need for more services and initiatives for young people on the transition to adulthood. Moreover, these should be also in peripheral or rural areas, where opportunities for young people are much scarcer. They should be designed in a way that empowers young people to become independent, rather than 'teaching' them to survive on aid provided.

Projects for young refugees that have been identified as having a high impact on people and communities are those exhibiting certain key characteristics, among which: Inclusivity; flexibility; meaningful youth participation; relevance with the labour market; youth-led, youth-driven, participatory character; viability and potential for a multiplier effect.

Finally, there is added value in sharing expertise, practices and research-based knowledge among actors working with young refugees at a European level, so as to transfer know-how from more experienced states (or organisations) into less experienced ones, especially with regards to organising cross-sectoral systems of support, as well as efficient advocacy and communication channels.

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IHA [www.iha.help](http://www.iha.help)

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