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Career Counselling During Hard Times

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Abstract: Topicality of the research is given by migration processes that are going on in 2022 in Europe. Over 7 million of Ukrainian refugees registered in Europe since the war started in February 2022. All of these people have different situations and needs, but at some point, part of the refugees will face employment problem. The aim of the study was to try to understand how Ukrainian refugees in Latvia are trying to solve their employment situation, what they are hoping for, how they are comparing employment possibilities in Latvia and in Ukraine. Methodology includes theoretical research on the topic and small qualitative research which consists of four questions. The questions covering respondents plans towards job hunting, their view on comparison of job opportunities at home and in Latvia, their satisfaction with previous job. The results show that Ukrainian refugees are quite optimistic on their opportunities in job searching in Latvia. Theoretical research shows that refugees might have some problems with career adaptability and that is the case where career counsellor service might be needed.

Keywords: career counselling, career adaptability, resettlement, refugees, displaced persons, adult education

Introduction

2022 was the year that brought us a lot of uncertainty, broke our plans (again!); millions of people in Europe were displaced and were pushed to solve different problems that appeared in one night. Of course, career counselling is not a top priority when we speak about the possibility of losing life, needing shelter, food and safety. The First period of crisis will pass sooner or later and individuals (especially women with children, disabled people) will find it in a new place, will get access to some resources and will start to think how to move forward in life.

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, about 1% of all people have been forcibly displaced from their homes by persecution or war. Russian-Ukrainian crisis, unfortunately, is not first and last, so, we, as European community, should be able to provide help to people in need.

According to UNHCR more than 7 million refugees from Ukraine registered in Europe (as for September 2022) (UNHCR, 2022). All of these people need to find their place (temporary or permanent); we welcomed almost 40 thousand refugees (September 2022) which for small country like Latvia is quite a big number of people in Latvia.

Neither there was a top question about career counselling for those people – shelter, food, social security was first problems need to be solved. After some time, when all of us realised that it is going to last people (who were physically abled) started to look for a job in Latvia.

The Author of the article is working with Ukrainian refugees since early March 2022 as provider of social services in Riga Refugee Help center and is able to speak with clients about career topics as well. The Author decided to compare practical experience with theory and parts of conversations with refugees.

Ukrainian refugee crisis is not the first one and, probably, not the last one. Circumstances make all the difference every time. For Europe it was (and still is) challenging to help all the people in need. According to Latvia, then definitely, the country was not ready and had no previous experience in that topic but tried its best and mobilized all the possibilities and ways to help.

According to today's rapidly changing work and career possibilities should motivate individuals be ready to anything and still survive (Arthur et al., 1996), but you can't be ready to leave all your life in one night and just go search for a safer place.

It means that all of the refugees are dealing with some sort of trauma – more or less, but it is important to take it into consideration that some of the refugees won't be able to deal with it by themselves and before any kind of career counselling they need to get therapy. According to C.W. Rudolph it is important to maintain positive mindset that helps individuals to adapt into new reality (Rudolph et al, 2017) – that might be a key to career counselling – help to maintain positive mindset and motivate to accept changes.

Speaking about career, refugees and displaced people we definitely come across such terms as career adaptability and subjective resettlement success.

According to Savickas *career adaptability* is “the readiness to cope with the predictable tasks of preparing for and participating in the work role and with the unpredictable adjustments prompted by changes in work and working conditions” (Savickas, 1997).

What we often see among refugees (especially during big waves) that it is harder for them to adapt, mostly because during all these people were not planning to leave their homeland at least in those circumstances. They are not ready for changes, and everything depends on their individual capability to adapt and defend stress.

Resettlement success is a very subjective topic, but shortly and very simply it can be described as “back to normal” comparing with previous non-refugee life (Colic-Peisker et al., 2003). However, objective resettlement success is defined as the status of a current job relative to previous employment (also called occupational mobility, (Chiswick et al., 2005), pay, and opportunities for host country language growth. Research has consistently demonstrated that host country language ability is critical to career development and wage increases over time (Chiswick et al., 2002; Shields et al., 2002).

Speaking about employment for refugees in general, not particularly about Ukrainian, there are employers that need to be taken into consideration. Refugees, as any other vulnerable group, depend upon many obstacles, such as economic situation, political, employers' attitude and general society's attitude towards that national minority.

After the break down of the USSR quite a big diaspora of the Ukrainians stayed in Latvia. According to the data of Ukrainian Embassy in Latvia before war there have been around 60 000 of Ukrainians living in Latvia, around 30 000 particularly in Riga (Embassy of Ukraine, 2022). Incoming refugees might have some connection with Latvia due to friends and relatives living here and receive additional assistance and support from local Ukrainians.

In Latvia's case almost all Ukrainians (some specific situation when person has double citizenship or other country issued visas were denied) that obtained to humanitarian visa got it together with the right to work without any restrictions. According to the August 2022 data 31257 refugees received that type of visa (Over 36.000 Ukrainian..., 2022). More than 30 thousand of refugees are living in Riga, so that should bring serious impact on job market in Latvia (Ukraine Response 2022..., 2022). According to International Organization for Migration report on displaced persons in Latvia situation is the following - most of the refugees in Latvia are women in age gap from 30 to 39 years (36%). According to employment situation more than half of respondents reported they were employed (60%) in Ukraine, 12 per cent were self-employed and 11 per cent were retired. Among respondents who were unemployed in Ukraine, five per cent were looking for a job while four per cent were not. In Latvia, respondents who were unemployed and looking for a job made up the biggest share (36%), followed by those employed (22%). Six per cent of respondents reported they were students in Ukraine; in Latvia, this dropped to 3 per cent (Ukraine Response 2022..., 2022).

Living in Latvia, obviously, asks for non-nationals to speak Latvian to be able to work, but for this crisis there were exception made and Ukrainian refugees were allowed to be employed without knowing the language. Many of them speaks Russian and many Latvian inhabitants speak Russian as well, so that was the primarily solution in order to allow refugees to start work faster and not to rely on social benefits.

Analysing waves of Ukrainian refugees there are some statements that between all the refugees, only about 50%-70% are able to work, but Latvian job market is not going to be emptied by Ukrainians. By

the end of July only 6000 of war replaced Ukrainians started their jobs in Latvia which is only 0.7% from all employed persons in Latvia (Grāvītis, 2022).

Conclusion can be made that there are enough job opportunities for Ukrainian refugees in Latvia, their special needs (according to language) are recognised and accepted. All refugees are provided with 120 days free housing opportunities, first three months they receive social benefits not taking into consideration their previous income and savings, they are provided with free language training, numerous amounts of humanitarian help (clothes, food, household items etc).

Methodology

The aim of the author was to understand how Ukrainian refugees in Latvia are trying to solve their employment problems and to move forward with their careers – get their feedback in order to realise what kind of services they might need or what kind of service we should improve.

A survey developed by the author consists of 4 questions which represent respondents' attitude toward themselves, their opportunities and reasons to get employed or staying unemployed and how they can measure and compare their new possible job to previous one. They were also asked to specify their gender, age, period of unemployment and level of education.

Questions respondents were asked to answer:

1. Are you planning to get a job in Latvia?
2. Were you satisfied with your job in Ukraine?
3. Were you planning to immigrate (before war started)?
4. According to your feelings – is this job going to be (is) better than your previous in Ukraine?

The current empirical research was carried out in Riga Help center for Ukrainian refugees between June and November 2022. 38 refugees from Ukraine took part in this research. The participants of research were the following: 38 females between the age of 22 to 62 (Mean (M) = 42.105, Standard Deviation (SD) = 11.36).

Results and Discussion

All conversations with refugees took part in Riga refugee help center, that is now located on Amatu street 4 (previously Riga Congress Hall and Kalku street 1). All of the respondents were women, mostly because the main wave of refugees are women, women with kids, seniors and persons with disabilities. All refugees were asked four questions, but conversation was carried out not in a strict manner in order to create more friendly atmosphere. Refugees were in different parts of their stages, but all of them already got their visa (permanent resident permit) and have been living in Latvia for at least three months, so the first shock should be gone by now and people should start to think and plan their future, arrange some income possibilities for themselves.

Replying to the first question all of the respondents mentioned that they would like to find a job in Latvia. There were a few most common reasons mentioned – it's not possible to live on social benefits (16), want to work, want to fulfil their day (12), need to help relatives that stayed in Ukraine (9), wish to be independent and to rely on benefits, state (8).

“I'm here [in Latvia] for almost five months, tried to work in Drogas [store chain] for one month, but the salary was so small, and they asked me to learn Latvian. I'm attending courses, but the language is very difficult. I have never been into languages. I used to have badge on my t-shirt that I'm from Ukraine and all customers were speaking Russian with me, sometimes they were negative. I don't know what to do – at home I've been a store manager, but here I need to start from the bottom and the salary is small, but I need to pay such a big rent and utilities. I think I will try for a few more months and if nothing works, I choose to go back home. I'm from Kiev.” Galina, 36.

Galina's case is quite common. Most of the refugees I have been speaking with were very active and positive while speaking about job possibilities, but much more pragmatic when they faced reality – even

if salary is not very small it is very hard to pay rent, utilities, buy food and cover all basic needs. Minimal wage in Latvia for 2022 was 500 euro, in 2023 it is 620 euro (Latvia National Minimum..., 2022).

First three months of their stay in Latvia refugees get full coverage on their rent and utilities, after three months, in case they wish to continue to receive social benefits they need to prove that their level of income is not enough to cover their needs. Basically, the more you earn the less you receive from the state. It is thought that during the first three months refugee is able to manage their basic functioning and start to be more independent.

Speaking about the second question *“Were you satisfied with your job in Ukraine?”* – 29 persons replied positively, 6 were not employed before in Ukraine (at least 6 months before 24th February of 2022) and three persons were not happy with their previous job (one of them sale assistant in grocery store, second manager in veterinary clinic and third one sale representative of coffee and warm beverages). Most of the respondents were satisfied, so it gives them previous positive experience in employment in general and gives a good start to find a job in Latvia, at least they should feel what they do like about working and what will be not acceptable in terms of employment.

“At home [in Ukraine] it felt different, even if a job was not so good – low salary, long hours it still was at home. Everything around is known, people, system, language. Family close, friends. It felt different. Now my job is “better” comparing with Ukrainian one, but it is not home and things are hard today.” Alla, 45.

Replying to the third question *“Were you planning to immigrate (before the war started)?”* only one person replied that she and her family were considering moving to Latvia, because some of the close relatives did it before and their experience was successful. Other 37 respondents replied that they were not thinking about migration before the war.

It is not possible to compare immigration and being a refugee, but people who, at least, considered moving might be more ready to accept challenges.

There might be some differences between skills and education of refugees. For example, very successful case of medical workers that have been employed in Latvia passed required professional certification. So, that might be the case that highly skilled individuals are required by the market more

than not educated and skilled enough (Mehra et al., 2022).

Last question *“According to your feelings – is this job going to be (is) better than your previous in Ukraine?”* is quite controversial because it is hard to measure feeling and for everyone *better* might be very different, but respondents were really active answering this question and willing to discuss and compare.

“At home [in Ukraine] a lot of people are thinking that when you leave in Europe you are fully covered. Let’s say, somehow people considering that everything is better, grass is greener, sun shines warmer, but it’s not. Maybe salaries are higher, but it comes together with higher prices for everything – food, transportation, utilities. I’m working as sales assistant, my salary “on paper” is 900 euro. After taxes I receive around 650. It is quite a lot for Ukraine, for similar job in Ukraine my salary was 500 “on paper”. I’m living with my sister, who was living here before the war, so I don’t need to pay for rent and that it is ok for me. I, even, send 150 euro to my mom in Ukraine.” Olena, 32.

As we know everything is relative, for one person 900 is a descent amount of money for the other it is not enough. Speaking with respondents from time to time there was that idea from them – in Europe life is better, everything is better. Again, in some ways probably it is better, but you need to work hard to get it, especially, when you are a refugee and need to start from the begging being not so young anymore, not having enough resources, help and many other factors.

Economy and employment market can rise because of skilled immigration, which is not the case for 2022 in Europe since many of the refugees are disabled, seniors, women with young kids. So Latvian market is taking what it can from this situation. Anyhow, huge waves of immigration always give a shock to the local systems and slowly change them in a way (Mazzotta, 2022).

That's why it is important to provide decent amount of service and assistance for refugees in order to avoid their constant presence in receiving social benefits. Many Ukrainian refugees are migrating between EU countries in order to find the best place for living and working or trying to return back home if in their region situation becomes safe.

“It is horrible how war impacted all of us. I was never thinking about leaving home, because I have two kids. We left Kiev on 25th of February, because I was too afraid to stay. My friend helped us, we were together in her car. Driving for 4 days. My friend's brother is living in Riga, so I came here as well because I have no friends or relatives abroad. It is 8 months now. My kids both are in pre-school, it is fine, they like it. We are renting, getting a bit of help from social service. I'm a pharmacist, working in local drugstore. It is hard, especially language. I'm not into languages at all, but I try. I hope the war will end and we will be able to come back. Riga is nice, Latvians are treating us good, but it is not home.” Hanna, 36.

In every system there might be a gap and it is not possible to create services that will meet all the needs, there will be always some problems, but, definitely, one thing that can't be solved that refugees want to come home and try to continue to live their life as closest it can be to previous version as possible.

Generally, all respondents were quite optimistic about their job (even in case they haven't got one yet) and hoping that job will be better than the previous one or were planning to get a better job (in case they are already employed, but not satisfied). It is needed to be mentioned, that 17 respondents are planning to return home as soon as possible.

Conclusions

- Europe is facing another refugee crisis in 2022, but for Latvia it is the first-time experience when huge amount of people is entering the country and are in need of shelter, food, assistance;
- Most of the refugees are women, women (alone or with children/s), senior and disabled persons. The most vulnerable group of people who face difficulties with employment and social security even during the times of peace;
- All of the respondents were optimistic about their future employment possibilities – all respondents are willing to find a job, because it is not possible to survive only with social benefits and they want to fulfil themselves by working, earning money and giving back to society that helped them;
- Most of the respondents (29) were satisfied with their job in Ukraine, six were not employed and three were not satisfied. As one of the respondents mentioned that at home everything feels different, but you can recognize and appreciate it only losing it;
- Only one respondent was planning immigration before the war started, so for the rest of the respondents it was a double shock, since they weren't considering even an idea of moving abroad;
- Respondents are hoping for their better and brighter future in Latvia, even if it is hard to maintain their usual life, create safe space for themselves and relatives, they are not giving up and trying their best to achieve their desired level of life, but still want to go back home to Ukraine whenever it will be possible.

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