



# Arrival of the fittest: Asylum seekers from Ukraine transecting temporary accommodation in Norway

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Are John Knudsen (Chr. Michelsen Institute)

## Summary

This policy brief examines the response in Norway to the mass displacement of Ukrainians following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Over 6.2 million Ukrainians have fled to Europe, prompting the EU to trigger the Temporary Protection Directive, which grants refugees access to services like healthcare, work, and education. By September 2024, Norway has received over 85,000 Ukrainian asylum seekers, with streamlined processes for registration and asylum in arrival and asylum reception centers, operated under contract by commercial hospitality providers (such as HERO and LINK).

The asylum procedures have been adapted to handle large numbers of refugees efficiently, likening it to a production chain and an example of a “logistification of arrival”. Despite efficiency improvements, the system is under strain, particularly on staff and asylum center capacities. Ukrainian refugees benefit from temporary collective protection, enabling them to bypass individual asylum procedures. However, as the war continues and costs rise, Norway has progressively reduced benefits to deter new arrivals, aligning policies with other Nordic countries.

The policy brief is based on interviews with asylum seekers, staff, and managers in three Norwegian arrival and asylum reception centers. It highlights the specific challenges faced by Ukrainians, their motivations for leaving, and the complexities of their asylum journeys. The long-term integration prospects, such as language skills and employment, are impacted by shorter asylum stays, reduced benefits, and Norway's evolving asylum policies.

## Main points

- Ukraine's war has triggered mass displacement, leading to the activation of the EU's Temporary Protection Directive (TPD).
- Norway's streamlined asylum processes for Ukrainian refugees aim for efficiency.
- Benefits and reception conditions have gradually been reduced to limit further arrivals.

## Background

The Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 22, 2022, resulted in the displacement of approximately 6.2 million Ukrainians across Europe. The majority fled to neighboring countries, particularly Poland, the Czech Republic, and Germany, which alone hosted nearly 1.2 million refugees by 2023. To address this mass displacement, the Council of the European Union invoked the Temporary Protection Directive (TPD) on March 4, 2022. This directive grants Ukrainian refugees temporary rights to reception, medical care, work, and education across all EU member states, allowing them to move freely within Europe and apply for asylum in their chosen EU or Schengen country. Non-EU countries such as Norway also adopted similar protections at the national level. The TPD has been extended until March 4, 2026, to continue supporting Ukrainian refugees amidst the ongoing conflict.

The Ukrainian refugees granted temporary asylum in Norway have received group protection and are exempt from proving individual claims of persecution. The Ukrainians arriving in Norway are generally young, healthy, educated and skilled individuals and "fitting" the refugee convention's legal criteria (Rytter 2024). However, the demographic of Ukrainian refugees has evolved over time, with the initial wave primarily consisting of women and children.

Due to compulsory military service for men aged 18–60 in Ukraine, many men were initially unable to leave the country. However, over time, more men and individuals and families with urgent health needs joined the refugee population in Norway. This shift reflects the changing nature of displacement from Ukraine, with later arrivals representing a broader cross-section of Ukrainian society. Research on Ukrainian refugees in Europe and Norway continues to explore their experiences and the challenges faced in their temporary protection and asylum processes. These refugees' journeys and integration into European societies are shaped by legal frameworks, social support mechanisms, and the evolving humanitarian needs resulting from the ongoing war in Ukraine

## Logistification of reception

The mass migration seen in Europe over the past decade has led to significant changes in how countries manage refugee reception, with a focus on efficiency and speed. The "logistification of reception", as coined by Vianelli (2021), describes this process where the handling of asylum seekers is streamlined using methods typical of logistics operations. This approach treats asylum seekers like goods to be processed efficiently, involving centralized reception infrastructures, co-location of services, and technological tools for faster registration and processing. The goal is to reduce the pressure on asylum systems and manage the influx of refugees while adhering to national and EU regulations.

The concept of "supply-chain humanitarianism" (Pascucci 2021) describes how asylum centers are increasingly managed like production chains, with a focus on throughput and efficiency. Sweden, for example, implemented a "Shorter wait" (Kortare väntan) model in 2009 to reduce asylum processing times and public spending, with the help of management consultants like McKinsey & Company. Norway has also streamlined its asylum procedures, though the ongoing influx of Ukrainian refugees continues to test the limits of these systems.

The streamlined asylum process, while designed for efficiency, places considerable strain on staff and facilities. Asylum reception centers must complete mandatory procedures, training, and information dissemination in a few weeks to meet the requirements for Ukrainian refugees who, on average, stay for only a short time and therefore quickly pass through the asylum centers. This creates operational challenges, as the system designed for slower-paced asylum processes is now tasked with managing a much larger flow of applicants. Staff at these centers must handle

mandatory procedures, including ID checks, asylum and settlement interviews, as well as health screenings, within a condensed timeframe, leading to “friction” (Tsing 2005) as they try to balance the need for speed with maintaining professional and ethical standards.

This pressure is further exacerbated by the influx of Ukrainian refugees, who are subject to different regulations than other asylum seekers, such as Syrians, who arrived in Norway during the 2015-16 Mediterranean migration crisis. The Ukrainian refugees have been welcomed as victims of Russian aggression and receive temporary protection across Europe, including Norway. However, Norway’s efforts to limit new arrivals have resulted in a reduction of benefits and a shift towards tighter asylum regulations, partly to reduce the “pull factor” of its generous asylum and integration programs. By September 2024, Norway had received over 85,000 Ukrainian asylum seekers, far more than its Nordic neighbors (Regjeringen 2024).

## Housing and asylum reception centers

Norway’s asylum reception centers have undergone significant changes since 2001, when the government began privatizing their operations. These centers, contracted by the Norwegian Directorate of Immigration (UDI), and run by commercial hospitality providers (such as HERO and LINK) offer a range of services to asylum seekers, from temporary shelter to integration support. Some centers have long-term staff and established relationships with local communities, while others operate on short-term contracts, offering hotel-quality accommodation but lacking deeper integration into municipal services. The Syrian refugee crisis in 2015-16 led to a massive increase in reception centers, but by December 2022, only 18 centers remained active, reflecting the fluctuating nature of asylum demand.

Many asylum centers in Norway are repurposed buildings with low living standards, often crowded and with shared facilities, which can increase tensions among residents. The long waiting periods for asylum decisions have been criticized as a form of “temporal injustice” (Thorshaug and Brun 2019), contributing to stress and uncertainty for residents. However, longer stays can also benefit integration efforts by giving asylum seekers time to learn Norwegian and adapt to local cultural norms. The impact of the length of stay on future integration remains a topic of ongoing research (Weiss et al. 2017).

For Ukrainian asylum seekers, the situation is somewhat different. Due to their collective protection status, they spend significantly less time in reception centers – on average, only 54 days – before being settled in municipalities. The streamlined process for Ukrainians contrasts sharply with the experiences of other asylum seekers, who face longer waiting times and more stringent procedures. The influx of Ukrainian refugees has also increased waiting times for asylum interviews for other nationalities, from 103 days in 2021 to 230 days by 2024.

Norway’s asylum system includes both large national arrival centers, such as the National Arrival Centre located at Råde outside Oslo, as well as smaller, regional reception centers, as those examined as part of this study, in Bergen and Stord (Vestland county). The Råde center, which serves as a centralized facility for processing new arrivals, handles registration, ID checks, health screenings, and asylum interviews with staff from the Directorate of Integration and Diversity (IMDi), the Police Immigration Unit (Politiets utlendingsenhet, PU), and the Norwegian Directorate of Immigration (Utlendingsdirektoratet, UDI). The co-location of various agencies has improved efficiency, but the high volume of asylum seekers continues to place pressure on the system and staff trying to maintain a steady flow of arrivals through the asylum process and onto settlement in municipalities.

## Lessons learned

- Norway’s asylum system emphasizes speed and efficiency in processing Ukrainian refugees.
- Reduced benefits aim to curb the pull factor of Norway’s generous asylum policies.
- Collective protection status simplifies Ukrainian asylum seekers' asylum experiences compared to other groups.

## Policy recommendations

- Norway’s reduction of asylum benefits impacts both new arrivals and long-term integration.
- The efficient, centralized asylum process places significant strain on staff and facilities.
- Temporary protection policies will need revision as the war prolongs and EU protection expires in 2026.

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## General contact information

The recommendations in this Policy Brief is based on results from the research project INFLUX, with funds from NORDFORSK (ref.no 161678). Collaborators in INFLUX are shown in the bottom line.

### Contact info Influx:

Project Leader: Professor Liv Osland, liv.osland@hvl.no

Co-Project Leader: Researcher Cathrine Talleraas, cathrine.talleras@cmi.no

Project websites: <https://www.hvl.no/en/research/prosjekt/influx/>  
<https://www.cmi.no/projects/2953-influx>

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