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How to welcome Ukrainian refugees

Europe is experiencing its largest refugee movement since World War II. We should heed the lessons of Sweden's experience with integration

Europe is experiencing its largest refugee movement since World War II: the United Nations high commissioner for refugees expects more than four million from Ukraine will need shelter in the European Union. Its member states need to brace themselves for not only a gigantic logistical endeavour but also an unprecedented integration challenge.

Luckily, there are experiences on which to build. All crises are specific but several lessons from previous episodes — and from Sweden in particular — can be drawn.

Not all, but many are here to stay: refugees always hope to return but they often end up staying. Migration is costly, including emotionally, and once forcefully uprooted many families will hesitate to pull up the budding roots of their children and move back to their home country. Even in the best-case scenario, where hostilities end quickly and Ukrainian independence and democracy are reinstated, refugees will probably not be able to return in the near future.

In many places, there will be nothing much to which *to* return. All over Ukraine, infrastructure has already been badly damaged: bridges have been bombed, roads destroyed, schools shattered. In Kyiv, Kharkiv, and Mariupol, whole housing blocks have been turned into soot-black skeletons.

Integration is an investment: having recognised migration will not be temporary, the challenge is to treat integration as a long-term investment. There is no virtue in the highly skilled wasting their competences on the first available job, while the not-yet-skilled remain unemployed.

Each refugee should be enabled to deploy her skills, learning the domestic language and acquiring whatever knowledge is needed for labour-market participation. Investing in skills will pay off, regardless of whether the

individual remains or returns: Ukraine is our neighbour, its wealth will be our welfare and its democracy a defence for ours.

Think big, build big: in 2016, Paul Romer, chief economist of the World Bank and Nobel prizewinner, suggested that Sweden – one of Europe's least densely populated countries – should set aside a piece of land to host the many refugees fleeing Syria, Afghanistan, and the horn of Africa. A city such as Hong Kong, he argued, didn't need many square kilometres to thrive.

Why not? Let's take the opportunity to build the zero-emissions, self-sustaining cities of which we dream, with feminist city planning and equality-boosting social housing — albeit not, as in Romer's scheme, sealed off from the surrounding society: Europe needs fewer borders, not more.

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Regardless, most integration will still happen in quite ordinary neighbourhoods, in existing cities and towns — with their existing challenges. Progressive integration policies must ensure the arrival of refugees doesn't deepen the housing crisis, increase school segregation, or put additional strain on healthcare systems. This will require conscious choice and a long-term perspective.

Do away with damaging dichotomies: the fact that many Ukrainians will not return does not mean they will not remain Ukrainians. They will, in heart and soul, but they will also become Parisians and devoted Dutch, they will feel at home in Lappland and settle on Sicily. It is possible to be Ukrainian and Swedish (and much else), at the same time.

The study of transnationalism indicates that identities are in constant change and multiple, and seldom mutually exclusive. My father's family hail from the Baltic island of Gotland, my mother's from Stockholm and I feel equally at home in both places — as I do in Uppsala, where I was born and raised. A part of me belongs to Managua in Nicaragua, where I also lived as a child, but my capital city will forever be 'red Vienna', my home for more than a decade. After a formative year as an exchange student at Queen's University Belfast, the rain-soaked streets of this northern Irish town will always be part of who I am too.

I share the experience of multiple identities with countless Europeans and new identities are forged all the time, as people meet and mate, mix and blend. Indeed we need a Europe built on the power of diversity and

an ethos of hospitality.

Beware of the backlash: while there is solidarity now, there will be a backlash later. Refugees, migrants, anyone who can be labelled 'the other' have always been scapegoats for society's ills. Ukrainians will be victims of this too. Just as in the past, it is important relentlessly to reaffirm that municipalities in all parts of Europe — their politicians, civil servants and activists — provide daily proof that it is possible to build welcoming communities.

Valuable experiences

Only second to Luxembourg, Sweden hosts the largest share of migrants in the EU: 19.5 per cent of Swedes — one in five — were born abroad. Many came to Sweden as labourers from Finland and former Yugoslavia in the 1950s and 60s, others as refugees from Latin America in the 70s and the Middle East in the 80s and 90s.

The largest numbers of refugees arrived from Bosnia-Herzegovina and other Balkan countries in the 90s and from Syria, Afghanistan and the horn of Africa in and around 2015. That year, Germany took in the largest number of asylum-seekers but Sweden absorbed the most relative to population. Indeed, Sweden was among the top ten refugee-receiving countries globally, adjusted for population, in the decade 2011-20. Valuable experiences remain relevant today.

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A defining lesson from the large reception of refugees in the 90s was the 'knowledge lift' (*kunskapslyftet*) — conceived by the current European commissioner for home affairs, Ylva Johansson, who was then Swedish education minister. Adult education was massively expanded to counter the deep economic crisis Sweden had undergone during that decade. The opportunity to enrol in high-school courses preparing for higher education as well as vocational training was opened to anyone on unemployment benefit, whether they be native Swedes with limited education or newcomer refugees.

Part of the success of the initiative was that it was not labelled integration as such, so its quite substantial costs were not perceived as 'spending money on migrants'. The expansion of adult education however made a decisive contribution to the integration of refugees from Bosnia and

other parts of former Yugoslavia. Tens of thousands spent their first years in Sweden at school instead of on the dole, and were well equipped to take up employment when the labour market revived.

The refugees from ex-Yugoslavia had come to a Sweden in severe crisis, with huge public-spending cuts and soaring unemployment. The first few years were difficult but, with time, the refugees found a foothold in society. Their integration was not quick but it was successful. This is particularly true for those who were children when they arrived — three decades later, they enjoy practically the same standards of housing and income as their native peers.

Not so burdensome

Some 90,000 sought shelter in Sweden in the 90s. This number was matched in 2014 and almost doubled in 2015, when 163,000 filed an asylum application. In a recent book, Peo Hansen, professor of politics at the Institute for Research on Migration, Ethnicity and Society at Linkoping University, analyses what happened to the economy when Sweden had to 'bear the burden' (as it was often put) of the refugees who arrived during the last major influx.

His conclusions are clear: the 'refugee crisis' was a boon for the Swedish economy. Their reception not only greatly benefited towns and villages across Sweden whose empty rental housing blocks and vacating schools were now filled up — the labour market too received a boost.

The refugees from Bosnia were hosted in tents. Another former Swedish education minister, Aida Hadžialić — a top-notch student and talented politician — was one of them.

Hansen challenges the accountants' view, in which immigrants' contribution to the economy can be measured by their tax contributions minus welfare benefits. This fails to take into account the contribution of refugees to the real economy, with their talents, entrepreneurship, and labour.

Particularly if they are employed in the low-wage sector — as immigrants initially often are — their contribution to the economy cannot be measured by the small taxes they pay on too-small wages. Today, not only are 60 per cent of Swedish cleaners and half of the country's taxi drivers immigrants; so too are one in seven nurses and one in three doctors. Care in Sweden couldn't do without the carers from Syria and Somalia.

Rain on the roof

Receiving millions of refugees is no doubt a daunting logistical challenge. In Sweden, the minister of migration just announced that warehouses, sports halls, and tents will be used to host the Ukrainian refugees.

The refugees from Bosnia were hosted in tents. Another former Swedish education minister, Aida Hadžialić — a top-notch student and talented politician — was one of them. Aida's first memory of Sweden was the sound of rain on the roof of the tent in which she and her family initially slept. Other children, from other parts of Europe, will now spend their first nights in a tent, maybe listening to the sound of raindrops falling on the canvas.

Hopefully they will also, as did the Bosnian refugees of that time, co-write another chapter of successful integration.

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