

Experiences about Arriving in Finland as a Ukrainian Trans Refugee

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Introduction

In this essay, we discuss the situation of Ukrainian transgender refugees relocating to Finland. Since the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, millions of people have left Ukraine and been recorded as refugees across Europe. By the end of 2022, over 44,000 Ukrainians had applied for temporary protection or asylum in Finland (Mikkonen 2022). By February 2023, this number had risen to over 50,000 (Migri 2023), and by July 2024, it exceeded 70,000 (Yle 2024). Among these refugees, there are likely many individuals belonging to LGBTQIA+ minorities, including both sexual and gender minorities, whether open or closeted. Reflecting on our own stories – as a Ukrainian and a Finn – in dialogue, we aim to highlight some of the factors that might influence a transgender (or other LGBTQIA+) person's decision to relocate to Finland, as well as the practical issues affecting their lives. Our goal is to make these points of interest more visible to people and organisations working on this topic, both in Finland and other countries.

In the first chapter of our essay, *Deciding Where to Live (Without Time to Think)*, we focus on how LGBTQIA+ Ukrainians choose their destination countries. We explore why some countries are chosen more often than

others, how decisions are made, and how information about different options is shared among LGBTQIA+ people. While the largest numbers of Ukrainian refugees within EU countries have been recorded in Poland and the Czech Republic, people have also fled to several other countries. In terms of the number of Ukrainian refugees recorded, Finland has similar numbers to other Scandinavian countries such as Norway, Sweden, and Denmark (Operational Data Portal 2024). This section is written collaboratively.

The second chapter of the essay, *Expectations vs. Reality: Before and After Moving*, is written by Mark from his perspective as a Ukrainian now living in Finland. In this section, assumptions and realities – before and after arriving in Finland – are compared: what appeared as expected and what might have been surprising.

The third chapter, *Collaboration and Passing in Finnish Society*, is written by Susi from the perspective of a Finn. This section focuses on the possible moments of collaboration between Finnish and Ukrainian LGBTQIA+ people. It highlights trans-specific issues that may arise during the process of adapting to a new place. We also point out when personal assistance from a Finnish person is needed to access necessary organisation-based

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services. Finally, after sharing our two viewpoints, we return to writing together in the *Conclusions* chapter.

Deciding where to live (without time to think)

For LGBTQIA+ individuals, migration has always been particularly challenging. Previous experiences of moving to EU countries and the USA have shown difficulties such as healthcare issues, problems with integration into the societies of destination countries, and a lack of financial support for refugees of different ages and pre-migration backgrounds (e.g., Munro et al. 2013; Yarwood et al. 2022). This is especially true for Ukrainian LGBTQIA+ people, who are currently even more vulnerable due to the ongoing warfare (Shevtsova 2023).

Some issues related to fleeing and migrating are particularly specific to transgender people. Currently, it is still nearly impossible for trans women to leave Ukraine, even with a changed gender marker and proof of an F64.0 diagnosis, which leaves them stuck in the country (Iryskina 2022). Moving can be very difficult for trans people in the middle of medical transition if their documents do not match their appearance or if ID document changes are still needed. For those who have not yet started their transition, one relevant question is the possibility of reaching a place where they can get help. This also raises the question of whether they can live openly or need to stay closeted in the destination country. All these issues influence trans people's decisions about which way to move and where to go, in addition to general conditions such as language knowledge, transportation issues, and financial situation.

For many people moving from Ukraine today, the lack of opportunities to get acquainted with a future place of residence is a challenge. It might be impossible for the displaced to have the time and resources to collect

the necessary information. Although some LGBTQIA+ refugees have to do this simultaneously with attempts to leave Ukraine, they still try to search for information and at least find out something regarding the attitude towards minorities. One of the main sources is the Internet. There are websites providing details on possible contact points, organisations offering guidance, housing, and help with medical treatments. Among these, information on safe places to move can be found (Ilga Europe 2022). Personal and indirect contacts with LGBTQIA+ activists are another important source, as people often rely on their opinions regarding other countries and non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Sometimes, the experiences of relatives or colleagues who have moved abroad are also considered useful information, but in the case of trans people, it is helpful if the person asked about the situation belongs to the LGBTQIA+ community themselves.

When choosing a place to move, trans people in Ukraine often start by analysing the legislation of the country of interest. Ukraine has quite ambiguous legislation regarding name changes and gender transition (Iryskina 2019), but it seems less complicated compared to neighbouring countries. This is why countries where sterilisation is required to change the gender marker or where psychiatric supervision can last more than a year are usually less preferable for migration. On the other hand, countries like Germany, Belgium, and Luxembourg, where name or gender marker changes are allowed a couple of years after moving and the procedure seems straightforward from outside the country, are usually the planned final destinations. The same considerations apply to gender-affirming therapy and obtaining hormones for hormone replacement therapy (HRT). Although information about long queues at trans clinics is available, the quality of care and reduced risk of harm by doctors are generally seen as better in many European countries.

Another important factor is the existence of networks of LGBTQIA+ organisations providing help to refugees (in general or specifically to Ukrainians), and whether they share information in Ukrainian or simple English. Financial support is also more often expected from activists than from the government; conditions for receiving living allowances are also considered important. Some refugees were in a difficult financial situation before the war started and may now need additional support before arriving at their destination.

For these reasons, some countries are chosen by LGBTQIA+ refugees more often due to seemingly easier migration processes and high expectations before arrival. One such country is Germany, where seemingly simple legislation on gender marker changes can be found. Germany also has several LGBTQIA+ organisations with contact information in Ukrainian, one of which is Munich Kyiv Queer. This organisation consists of people from different countries, including Ukraine, and was formed in 2012 to help protect the rights of Ukrainian LGBTQIA+ people (Munich Kyiv Queer, n.d.). The support of activists is expected, and the presence of Ukrainian LGBTQIA+ communities offers hope for communication with people facing similar issues. This is another reason to seek out LGBTQIA+ communities (both Ukrainian and those formed by citizens of the destination country), as they are perceived as safer environments than general Ukrainian refugee communities abroad, which may be homophobic or transphobic.

Even though some LGBTQIA+ people from Ukraine reach their desired countries, they might return to Ukraine or neighbouring countries quite soon after. This often happens due to a lack of money or difficulties adapting to the social environment. Thus, Poland is another country with many LGBTQIA+ Ukrainians, who either went to Germany through Poland and returned because they were not used to the language and

bureaucracy (Wonderzine 2022), or decided to stay in Poland once they arrived. Although attitudes towards LGBTQIA+ people are more negative in Poland than in many other European countries, the presence of a large Ukrainian community formed by migrant workers before the war, among which minorities could also be found, and the support from LGBTQIA+ groups (Fajt 2022) make it a viable option. It is also easy to reach Poland from Ukraine, and the cost of living is affordable for those moving there. Slovakia and Hungary, as neighbouring countries, are often chosen for similar reasons.

Shevtsova, a Ukrainian LGBTQIA+ activist, collected interviews from Ukrainian LGBTQIA+ refugees in Slovakia, Poland, and Hungary. These interviews highlight a couple of points. Firstly, many Ukrainians did not plan to stay in the countries where they ended up. This is especially relevant for Poland, as already mentioned, and Hungary, which was also seen as a transit country initially but turned out to be a final destination for those who were unable to leave or stay in other places (Shevtsova 2023).

Finland is not among the countries usually reached by LGBTQIA+ Ukrainians, particularly transgender people. They do not typically aim to reach Finland, and the reasons for this can be understood from within Ukraine but not from Finland. Many of these reasons are mentioned in the next section, with further comparison on how it turned out for a trans person fleeing to Finland during the fall of 2022. Although it might appear from the discussion here and further that there is time to consider various options before fleeing, this is often not the case, and decisions are made very rapidly based on the current situation – or just by chance.

Expectations vs. reality: before and after moving

This part is based on my personal experience of fleeing from Ukraine to Finland at the end of October 2022. At that time, I was a pre-transition trans man. Before fleeing Ukraine, I had only been abroad a couple of times as a tourist and knew little about migration in practice. My ideas about moving to another country were mostly based on information available within the Ukrainian information space.

Finland was not a well-thought-out choice, and the decision to flee here was almost accidental. My first option was Germany; however, I did not want to lose my progress in academia (I started working at a Ukrainian university in 2016, received a teaching position in 2021, and began my PhD studies there in 2021). I contacted the Munich Kyiv Queer organisation to ask if they could help me contact any German university, but unfortunately, it was beyond their capabilities. I also knew many Ukrainians in academia who had not found proper jobs in Germany in their fields of research. Thus, I searched for other options and, at some point, tried to reach out to scholars I had met during an online seminar a couple of months earlier.

I had no established view of Finland as a destination country. I had some information about the culture, brief mentions of the political situation, details on help provided to Ukrainians since the Russian invasion, the weather, and some university programs I was interested in applying to. When I discussed Finland as a possible place to migrate to with an LGBTQIA+ activist, they warned me about potential difficulties with trans laws and society in Finland in general. The things I heard were repeated in the information I later found on the Internet.

It appeared that not much information was available regarding Finland in Ukraine or among Ukrainian LGBTQIA+ people. Most easily accessible sources did not go into detail about migrants' and refugees' trans rights.

Sources in English provided some overall ideas, while those in Ukrainian were very limited in terms of information about Finland and trans people.

In global works by NGOs, Finland was mentioned only briefly, with some small cases pointing out difficulties with trans legislation. In their report on trans families, published in 2020, NGO Insight mentioned Finnish legislation mostly from the perspective of its limitations. It stated that there were both direct and indirect limitations in gender marker changes and receiving gender-affirming therapy, although gender equality and diversity in education were mentioned positively (Iryskina 2020a; Iryskina 2020b).

The Ukrainian translation of “Legal Gender Recognition in Europe: Toolkit” (Iryskina 2020a), similar to the original document (Köhler et al. 2016), mentioned Finland a couple of times regarding the requirements for sterilisation and divorce to get treatment and gender marker changes, as did some other sources (Iryskina 2018). Although the laws are currently quite different, including the requirements for sterilisation in gender transition and the gender marker change process, the whole process is still considered more complicated than the procedure in Ukraine.

There were also no details on social attitudes towards LGBTQIA+ people in Finland. Assumptions I heard from other Ukrainians were rather negative. When I had the opportunity to ask directly from people in Finland, I decided to describe my situation openly before arriving. The answer I received was a great relief: although people with negative attitudes can be found in any country, Finnish society was generally described as tolerant. From that point, I started using my real name and pronouns in communication with future colleagues in Finnish academia.

For some time, I tried to find a place to stay in Finland via the Internet. Wanting to start openly as a trans person, I faced a challenge not directly connected to LGBTQ+ issues: the amount of living allowance given after

receiving temporary protection. This is important because it is dangerous for trans people to stay in refugee camps for long periods. If there is no special shelter for LGBTQIA+ individuals or other friendly environments, having a separate place to live is necessary. For pre-transition trans people, this poses even more questions, such as whether to stay silent when living with someone or in a dormitory, or to take the risk of coming out and facing possible dangerous consequences. There is also the fear of further difficulties in finding accommodation, which would be expected in Ukraine.

I started as a guest researcher at the University of Jyväskylä and was provided temporary accommodation, which solved the housing issue for a couple of months. Then, I had to rent an apartment in Tampere. Initially renting shared apartments, I was unsure if I needed to disclose my situation to neighbours and had no experience talking openly about LGBTQIA+ related issues. Fortunately, I received contacts from a person in Finnish academia who was willing to help and had lots of information about LGBTQIA+ issues in Finland. We became friends, and I received a lot of support with challenges I had not anticipated. I could freely ask about social differences, making it easier to navigate everyday communication.

Another challenge faced at the very beginning was related to granting temporary protection, which is different from refugee status and the asylum-seeking procedure. While applying for temporary protection, I had no opportunity to mention that I was trans and needed help with further steps regarding gender transition. This made the situation worse, especially since I had just left a country where it might have been unsafe even to raise this question. I managed to disclose my situation only when I reached Tampere and went to The Red Cross centre there, and I had to initiate this conversation, which was quite stressful. I was also fortunate to meet people comfortable with English, and I knew I could ask for a

translator from Ukrainian to Finnish at least there. However, as I later learned, not every place had English-speaking employees. So, language was another barrier that worked differently from what I expected: I was able to navigate with my English in most places, but healthcare services and banks required additional efforts or help from people in Finland. In my case, healthcare was the most difficult area, since I had to come out to every person and ask uncomfortable questions.

Asking questions about this is additionally stressful for someone who has spent their life in a transphobic environment, so it might be hard to assume how many closeted trans people left Ukraine with the need to silently adapt to a new environment. I heard from several people living in Finland that not many LGBTQIA+ Ukrainians moved here, and that could probably be the reason. If there are supporting organisations, their contact persons may be the ones to reach out to for help. However, Finnish organisations supporting LGBTQIA+ individuals seem unfamiliar to Ukrainians due to the language barrier, and therefore this information channel may not be available. Probably because of that, some things had to be searched for when I asked if it would be possible to start my transition here: we checked my eligibility for healthcare with an LGBTQIA+ organisation in Jyväskylä called Jyväskylän SETA ry, then provided the details to The Red Cross centre in Tampere, and I was able to ask for more support from there.

As I had not started the document change process back in Ukraine, using the correct name was one of the biggest difficulties in official interactions (and continues to be a challenge after a year of attempts to figure things out). The procedure for a name change takes at least six months from abroad and is quite complicated, so when I arrived, I had to use my ID documents with my birth name. It took some time for the name to be changed in the university IT system, which was important for my work and PhD studies. With my experience from Ukraine, I would not have raised

these questions myself at all, since the opportunity to do so contradicts my experience of working at a Ukrainian university. However, here it is possible, which practically embodies the ideas of diversity and equality for me.

Regarding social differences, the only thing I noticed as awkward was the attempts by almost all Finns to connect me with other Ukrainians. I had not expected that – for me, it was uncomfortable to seek communication with potentially transphobic people since my experience taught me that, in most cases, our shared nationality would be less important to them than the fact that I was trans. So, I was prepared to avoid communities of Ukrainians whenever possible until I could determine their attitude towards LGBTQIA+ individuals. It surprised me that I had to explain this, sometimes in detail, while for me it was perceived as obvious.

All in all, the information I got from the Internet and other Ukrainians was different from the reality. The reality is different from how Finland is perceived from the sources available in Ukraine; it is possible to find support here as a trans person with the help of other people from Finland. The lack of language knowledge, as well as the lack of understanding of how society and state systems work, required time and effort to understand, and doing it on one's own could have been much harder.

Collaboration and passing in Finnish society

As a Finn I, Susi, had the chance to gain new perspectives on my country's culture by becoming friends with a Ukrainian academic. My friend and colleague contacted me in late 2022 and asked me to help “a new guy at the university” who had just arrived from Ukraine and was a trans man – like myself. My colleague hoped that I could easily provide the newcomer with information about trans-specific services and share silent knowledge

about the topic in the Finnish context. Some of these questions were more discussed in Finnish society, but others – such as migrating as both trans and Ukrainian – had remained more invisible. Here, I will try to point out some situations where passing within Finnish society was made difficult or almost impossible without the help of a Finnish person (or someone who had lived here for a longer time).

When I first heard from my new Ukrainian friend about how Finland is not among the best countries to move to, I was kind of disappointed. Equality is a strongly important part of Finnish values and even our national identity, so this felt challenging. On the other hand, I was very well aware of the problems with Finnish trans legislation and the political discussions about it during the early 2020s. Somehow, it had been difficult for me to notice that these problems could affect how Finland was seen from the outside. As the trans legislation was discussed in the Finnish media, it felt like the whole case was only inside Finland, but of course, it was seen from other countries too. Becoming aware of the attitude Ukrainians might have towards so-called equal Finland made me realise how connected we are even when apparently discussing within one country. Especially LGBTQIA+ people, whose safety often needs special care, share their knowledge through unofficial channels and social media.

The issues of housing and living openly in shared apartments or refugee reception centres are common knowledge both in Finland and internationally. Throughout Europe, it is estimated that one-third of trans youth have experienced homelessness, and it is recognized that these individuals have a risk of avoiding services, even when they would be helpful to them (Stakelum 2021). In Finland, the organisation Vailla Vakinaista Asuntoa (an organisation for homeless people) published a statement during Pride month 2021 on the diversity of homeless people in Finland. They demanded statistics on LGBTQIA+ people among the

homeless and better recognition of the special threats and needs for them when designing equal services (VVARY 2021). From the viewpoint of refugees, addressing potential issues in safe housing is something to be considered much more carefully in our society, so that decisions wouldn't be made without proper knowledge of risks or safety.

We soon found out that most of the information regarding LGBTQIA+ topics and migration was in Finnish. There was variance between different organisations; the Finnish organisation Seta ry had published some information in English, but not very much. Some of the information, for example about peer support groups in English, was hidden behind several links on the web pages, making it difficult to navigate as a non-Finnish-speaking person. This is what happened in our case: as I was asked to help “the Ukrainian newcomer” regarding trans-specific topics, I began searching for information on the web pages and found it in Finnish.

One of the most important organisations for getting information about Finnish society in the case of refugees is The Red Cross. I knew that their work is directed by Finnish law, which is very strict about equality and discrimination, and assumed that the workers in that organisation understood the importance of this. That was why I, from my viewpoint, believed that coming out would be safe in the refugee services of the Red Cross (of course depending on the persons who happened to work there). I pointed out that the waiting room of the office had a Pride flag among their other leaflets and posters. I know that in public services in Finland, this often is a silent sign that you are allowed to talk about yourself, for example in schools, youth services, or healthcare. Later, I heard that coming out was not made easy in practice because there wasn't necessarily a suitable space or ways of talking offered to the customer. Discussing this later left us both thinking: how to address sensitive topics and who should mention them first? How could you actively give space and safety for such topics?

This is a good question, especially when working with people from very different backgrounds and struggles.

In the case of an LGBTQIA+ refugee coming to Finland, they would need someone both for personal mentoring about societal norms and for finding information. Living at the intersection of being trans and under temporary protection didn't make it easy to get all the practical information needed. It could be pinpointed that to reach truly equal service for people applying for refugee status (or being under temporary protection), it is crucial to produce this kind of intersection-specific information. It was not enough to get information about being trans or being on temporary protection status because both of these aspects were activated together. There must have been many other transgender refugees in Finland before, too, and people in the helping organisations have probably learned a lot about the issues they might encounter. Reporting these past issues and communicating with other professionals about them – which is probably already done at some level – would make it easier for people in the same situation in the future.

Altogether, the information from the organisations did exist but was not easily found or might have been quite mixed. This might appear as a bottleneck for a person trying to get help: there was actually support available once you found it, but how to find information about its location at first? This was where a contact person who could help mattered quite a lot.

Conclusions

In this essay, we have gathered our experiences of arriving in Finland as a Ukrainian trans refugee, from the viewpoints of a Ukrainian and a Finn. As we discussed different situations, both positive and negative, we wanted

to highlight some factors that could significantly affect a person's life in a similar situation.

We found that finding information, both before arriving in the country and while already here, and learning cultural codes and attitudes were very important. Additionally, the importance of an intersectional approach in preparing materials and services for incoming people was one of our main points of interest. People arriving in Finland could find information about refugee status-related topics in English or even in Ukrainian, but not about living at the intersection of being a refugee and LGBTQIA+. It seemed that information about being LGBTQIA+ was mainly for Finnish-speaking people, and Ukrainians were perhaps seen only as Ukrainians (or Ukrainian refugees), without necessarily considering other aspects of their lives.

In our case, the skills or lack thereof in the English language were an important factor. Finding information about Finnish society, LGBTQIA+ topics, or anything else would have been quite different without English fluency. As we raised the question of the need for more accessible information regarding the intersection of refugees/temporary protection and LGBTQIA+, we also noticed that many people within this group cannot communicate in English.

Finnish public services have produced a lot of information about living in the society, from healthcare and the school system to news in Ukrainian, when it has been deemed important. We think it might be that we still tend to see only one category at a time: for refugees, it is assumed that you only need refugee-related information, and other personal life-related topics come after that. But in reality, some personal factors, such as being LGBTQIA+, might be the first category to focus on while integrating into Finnish society. This category might be a significant factor when it comes to basic needs such as housing and safety – it should not be approached as something that relates only to secondary needs or Pride events.

That is why we suggest that these categories should not be considered separately anymore: a person relocating to a foreign country is living through both of them simultaneously. If we want more positive stories of people integrating into Finland and feeling a sense of belonging here, it is important to focus on producing accessible information and creating space for safely discussing LGBTQIA+ related topics for refugees as well.

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