

In France, as in many countries, the reception of people fleeing from Ukraine has raised important questions about the treatment of refugees from other countries. Pierre-Baptiste Cordier Simonneau, Communication Director in the Salvation Army, explores the issue in this article, recognising the commendable achievements that have been accomplished for refugees coming from Ukraine and raising the question why this is not the standard for everyone.

FRANCE'S RECEPTION OF REFUGEES: CAUGHT BETWEEN SOLIDARITY AND DIFFERENTIAL TREATMENT



By **Pierre-Baptiste Cordier Simonneau**, Communication Director, Armée du Salut

One of the main consequences of the war in Ukraine has been the displacement of millions of people who have had to flee their country to escape the conflict. According to the French Interior Ministry, 57,578 displaced people were identified to have entered the country between 24 February and 25 May 2022.¹ A significant number of them were in transit on the way to other countries. Of its own accord, as well as in response to calls from the government, the French voluntary sector has put in place lots of initiatives in order to give these refugees a proper and unconditional welcome, whether that be through accommodation or through food aid. As a reminder, “according to the 1951 Geneva Convention, the term ‘refugee’ applies to anyone who is unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion. But in reality, this is an ambiguous text that each country interprets differently depending on the nationality of asylum applicants and above all depending on the political climate at the time.”² Within this context, the French Salvation Army Foundation has served more than 1000 meals every day to people from Ukraine, and the Foundation’s accommodation services have offered almost 10,000 nightly placements every week.

1 <https://www.interieur.gouv.fr/actualites/dossiers/situation-en-ukraine/foire-aux-questions-accueil-des-refugies-ukrainiens>

2 Karen Akoka : « Le statut de réfugié en dit plus sur ceux qui l'attribuent que sur ceux qu'il désigne » (Refugee status says more about those who grant it than those it applies to) https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2021/08/30/karen-akoka-le-statut-de-refugie-en-dit-plus-sur-ceux-qui-l-attribuent-que-sur-ceux-qu-il-designe_6092733_3210.html

REFUGEES COMPETING FOR ACCOMMODATION SPACES – A WORRY THAT HAS NOT YET BECOME REALITY

The fact that the French system cannot offer a roof over the head of every asylum seeker, despite the authorities’ best efforts, has given rise among some in the voluntary sector to the worry that accommodating people coming from Ukraine will be at the expense of people who are already accommodated. So far, this has thankfully not been the case.

What has happened, though, is that the situation is more difficult for asylum seekers from other countries, for whom things have not improved in this time. The new work stemming from the conflict in Ukraine has come at a challenging time for the French accommodation system: it is struggling to deal with the successive arrivals of migrants in the country and the social consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, which have pushed a greater number of people into poverty.

THE DELICATE QUESTION OF ACCESS TO RIGHTS

Like the other stakeholders in the social sector, the Salvation Army Foundation supports people who cannot return to their country of origin in its accommodation services and in its day centres. Before they can be allocated a space in these services, these people often sleep in tents put up in squats. What we do is to offer these people a service to support them in their applications to the authorities or to help them access medical care. These asylum seekers are often from Syria, Afghanistan, Sudan or Eritrea. They have fled difficult

experiences in their countries, risking their lives and the lives of their families, in pursuit of a future free from violence. Being forced to leave their countries has caused some of them a deterioration in their mental health. This means the teams have to employ a great deal of flexibility and professionalism in order to work with these people and help them with their day-to-day undertakings, especially when it comes to their asylum claim. This is rendered even more difficult by the fact that these displaced people do not necessarily have access to all the information they need.³ They have to fulfil criteria, but these are not necessarily understandable or clear to everyone, and this is true for the people who apply as well as for the professionals. In the same vein, the procedures and rights are different depending on whether someone is an asylum seeker or has refugee status.⁴ For people fleeing from Ukraine who have Ukrainian nationality, the situation is much simpler given that there is, for the most part, a direct route for them. It is, thus, easy for them to access their rights. This difference in circumstances creates tensions. Even though everyone, service users and professionals, want to welcome people fleeing war, many cannot understand why people are treated differently by the authorities when their situations are the same or almost the same.

3 [Les oubliés du droit d'asile – enquête sur les conditions de vie et l'accès aux droits des exilés fréquentant 5 structures d'accueil à Paris](#) (Those that the right to asylum forgot – inquiry into the living conditions and access to rights of migrants using 5 homelessness services in Paris)

4 <https://www.amnesty.org/fr/what-we-do/refugees-asylum-seekers-and-migrants/>

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ACCESS TO RIGHTS IS USUALLY A CHALLENGE

For people who live in France, it is not easy to meet all the necessary prerequisites that allow them to access their rights, even in normal times. This is due to people's journeys that have often not been straightforward and the complexity of the application procedures they must follow, which are often online. The *Défenseur des Droits*⁵ (rights ombudsman), an independent body tasked with protecting

5 <https://defenseurdesdroits.fr/fr/institution/organisation/defenseur>

people whose rights are not respected and making sure everyone has equal access to their rights, raised this in 2022 when he said: “The move towards digital-only services is only justifiable if it is part of a wider and more sophisticated ambition to create authorities that are fully accessible to all and committed to their duty of allowing everyone access to their rights.”⁶

The COVID-19 health emergency was particularly disastrous for people’s access to their rights. Public services were not open to the public and, as a result, everything had to be done virtually. This meant people found themselves “with additional barriers to accessing public agencies”, as highlighted by the day centre team in Dunkirk in northern France, for example. We should say that this digital access to public services is nothing new. Paradoxically, offering this more modern and seemingly more accessible system could actually be part of the reason why people do not access services: often, they do not have access to a computer or find it difficult to understand the forms they have to fill in. And things are even more complicated for people who have fled persecution or war. When these people arrive in France, they have to ring a telephone service that will give them the right to make an application at the *préfecture* (district office). This starts off a laborious and complicated procedure which will determine their “immigration status” (refugee, right to asylum) and, therefore, which rights they can enjoy and whether they can stay in the country. Professionals support the people using their service to make this application but also give them emotional support during the whole process.

6 <https://www.defenseurdesdroits.fr/sites/default/files/atoms/files/dp-demat-press-28.03.22.pdf>

Refugees from Ukraine have not had to follow this complicated application process. Since 3 March 2022, they have had “temporary protected status”.⁷ Specific offices have been set up to process their applications in the places where they arrive in the country. This has considerably sped up processing times – which is a great achievement.

THE CRUCIAL ROLE OF HOUSING IN WELCOMING REFUGEES

The discrepancy between the experience of people coming from Ukraine and those from other countries has also become apparent in their access to accommodation. There are many reasons why people experiencing homelessness are accommodated by the Salvation Army’s services. These include family breakdown for financial reasons that have pushed people into addiction, low income that makes it difficult to access even social housing, or a migration background.

Thankfully, people who flee the war in Ukraine can currently access housing. However, social workers are concerned for those who wish to stay in France. These people will have to integrate into the country through employment and the creation of social ties. This aspect of integration receives public funding in France, but additional private investment is needed too. One solution that has been decided on to help solve the housing issue is to disperse people to areas where it is

7 <https://www.service-public.fr/particuliers/vosdroits/F299>

easier to find housing than in big cities. However, this raises questions around the resources available to help them learn the language, which is a necessary part of entering the labour market. Likewise, children have to be able to go to school. On 24 May, there were 17,677 Ukrainian children in primary and secondary schools and sixth form colleges.⁸ This begs the question of whether these schools have the capacity to take on students and whether they are able to help the children settle in. Having to change schools can cause additional trauma on top of that of having to leave their country as a result of the war. For some children, starting school, especially in big cities, has been a positive experience as they have been able to connect with people in their area. We need to find the fairest and best way to help these people settle into their communities and set them up for the future, giving them dignity and allowing them the time they need.

⁸ <https://www.education.gouv.fr/accueil-des-enfants-ukrainiens-l-ecole-point-de-situation-au-27-mai-2022-341378>

KEEPING FRATERNITY ALIVE

Throughout the Ukraine crisis, the staff of the Salvation Army Foundation and others in the voluntary sector have stayed faithful to the values of unconditional access for those affected by the refugee crisis and for people sleeping rough, despite an already very difficult context where tensions are high. This unprecedented situation has meant we have had to rely on the public authorities to be flexible and adaptable. We are pleased that they have been able to live up to this. Samuel Coppens, Salvation Army Foundation spokesperson, reminds us that “the resources put in place and the way they were rolled out to welcome people coming from Ukraine should be the norm all the time and not the exception. France has shown it can fully uphold the values of the republic, in particular the value of *Fraternité* (fraternity). We welcome this and are prepared to continue to keep the values alive each and every day through our actions that help make sure there is a space in society for everyone.”

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