



UNHCR
The UN Refugee Agency



REFUGEE VOICES ON INTEGRATION IN ESTONIA, LATVIA AND LITHUANIA

The UNHCR Survey Results at a Glance

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Layout & design: BakOS DESIGN

1. BACKGROUND

At the end of 2019, UNHCR carried out a targeted survey to gain a better understand of the views of refugees¹ living in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania on their integration experiences in their respective host countries: what challenges they have encountered and what opportunities they see to improve integration.

This refugee survey further builds on and complements existing research² and the findings of the earlier UNHCR mapping of integration efforts in Lithuania³ (2013), Latvia⁴ (2015) and Estonia⁵ (2016) which also used an age, gender and diversity based participatory approach to reflect the views of refugees. Over the past years, all three countries have adopted and implemented important targeted measures to strengthen refugee integration policies. In particular, the participation of the three countries in the European Emergency Relocation Schemes (ECERS) from 2015 to 2017 led to new institutional and legislative developments but also revealed new challenges.

“ My life back at home was normal - I had everything I needed. When I arrived, everything was different. It takes a long time for me to get used to this community, I think my career has suddenly stopped. I feel like I have lost my aims. I live now without any aims... I just look at my kids - I want them to feel comfortable here”

Refugee from the Middle East⁶

1.1 Characteristics of respondents covered by the survey

The survey has reached 272 refugees⁷ with due attention to ensure a proper reflection of diversity with regard to citizenship, age group, gender, type of protection, means of arrival, family status and education (see *graphs below*). As 26 refugees did not provide consent to participate in the survey (marked as ‘blank’), data analysis covers 246 refugees (more detailed information on respondents’ characteristics is available in the [survey report](#)⁸).

“ I have many friends <...> there is also a cultural programme with volunteers. They are very helpful in every way, especially my wife goes to different activities with them and to different places. She attends a women’s group. I used to attend cultural programmes, we went to different museums with them, to a water park, to different activities. We also organise football matches, all volunteers we have met through them, they are now my contacts and we are friends in WhatsApp group. So, I am well-connected”

Pakistani refugee

¹ For simplicity, the term ‘refugee’ is used in this report to cover both Convention refugees and other beneficiaries of international protection.

² NIEM project ‘Measuring and improving integration of beneficiaries of international protection’ in Latvia and Lithuania; available at: <http://www.forintegration.eu/>; Adaptation of newly-arrived migrants in Estonia; available at: <https://bit.ly/3t7Mvrm>

³ UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), Integration of refugees in Lithuania: Participation and Empowerment, October – November 2013, available at: <https://www.refworld.org/pdfid/58a486e34.pdf>

⁴ UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), Integration of refugees in Latvia: Participation and Empowerment, June 2015, available at: <https://www.refworld.org/docid/58a4877c4.html>

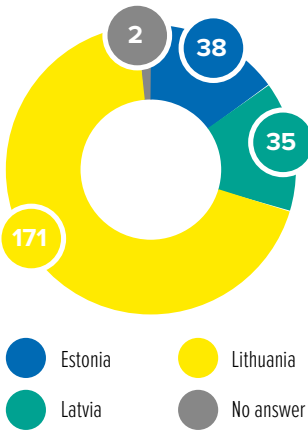
⁵ UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), Integration of refugees in Estonia - Participation and Empowerment, December 2016, available at: <https://www.refworld.org/docid/586e251d4.html>

⁶ Due to the potential identification of the individual, the report does not provide such social and demographic characteristics of respondents as age and gender.

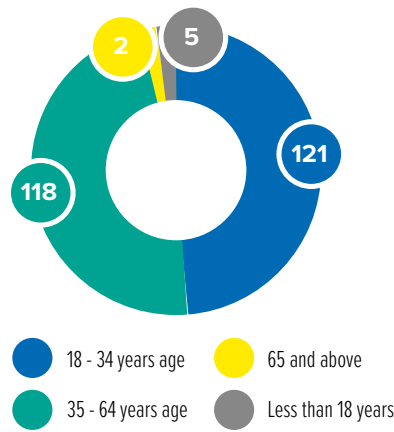
⁷ Additionally, the survey has covered approximately 240 children of those adult refugees who participated in the survey. Refugee children were not the subject of the questionnaire, with the exception of 5 persons (16-18 years of age) who participated in the survey with the consent of their parents. The number of children is indicative as due to data collection challenges a statistical mistake is possible.

⁸ The general report incorporates detailed and country specific suggestions. It is hoped that data collected will help to identify integration areas which Governments, NGO and UNHCR will prioritize and address through targeted integration policies, initiatives and advocacy to further improve integration of refugees in the three Baltic Countries.

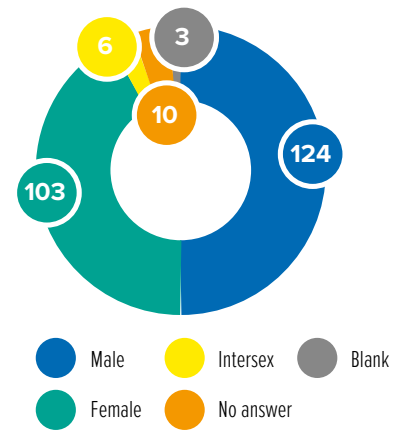
Graph 1: The number of respondents who completed the survey



Graph 2: The number of respondents by age group



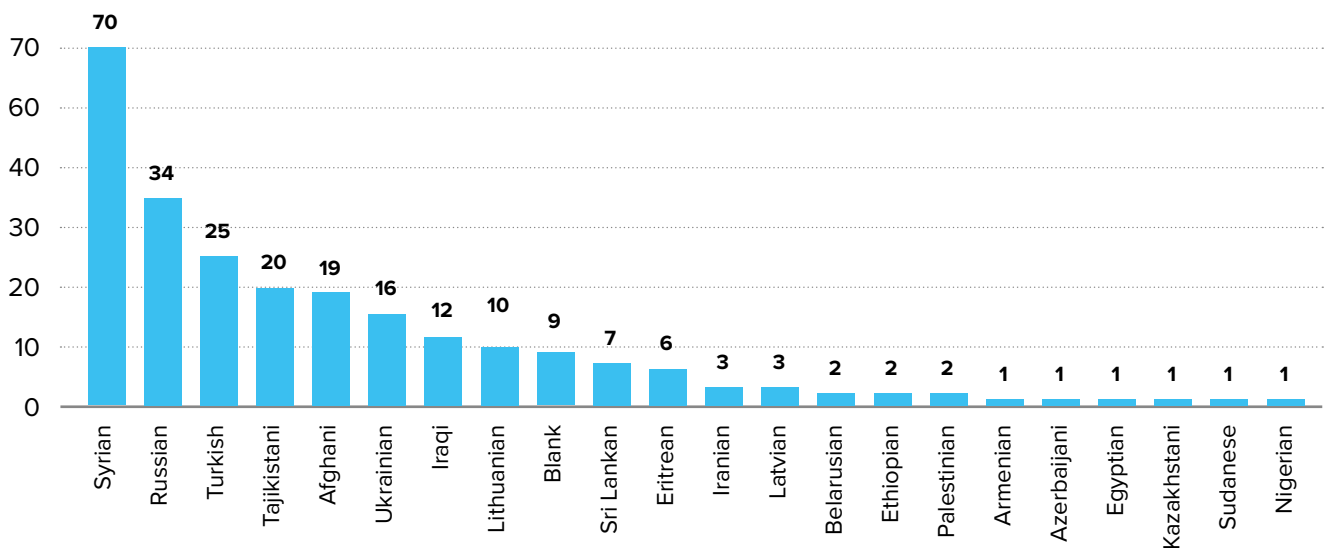
Graph 3: The number of respondents by gender



1.2 Data collection

The data collection was carried out in cooperation with UNHCR’s partner NGOs⁹ in each country that facilitated data collection by allocating social workers, mentors and other practitioners who assisted refugees to fill the questionnaire. Targeted sampling was used to reflect and mirror characteristics of the refugee population in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. The survey was linked to the individual level, where every single respondent’s opinion was equally important. In addition to survey responses, in-depth interviews with refugees were carried out to deepen the knowledge and provide context on integration challenges.

Graph 4: The number of respondents by current citizenship



⁹ Including Estonian Refugee Council, International House Tartu, ‘I want to Help Refugees’, Latvian Red Cross, Lithuanian Red Cross, Vilnius Archdiocese Caritas and ‘Artscape’

1.3 Limitations

The same methodology, research instruments and sampling procedures in the three countries gave the opportunity to analyse and compare the views of refugees on various aspects of integration. However, considering the different integration contexts, the limited number and divergent profiles of refugees reached in each country, any comparison should be done with these reservations in mind.

As responses from refugees were collected at the end of 2019, this survey does not reflect the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on refugee communities in the three countries. However, some of the challenges which have been revealed by the survey have become even more pronounced in the context of the pandemic.

2. OVERVIEW OF THE FINDINGS

2.1 Views on integration experiences

The majority (70%) of refugees in Estonia agreed that they have adapted well to life in the hosting country, comparing to significantly smaller proportion of refugees in Lithuania (45%) and Latvia (21%) agreeing on the same statement (see *graph 5*). The same trend has been revealed by overall refugees' experiences since the arrival to a new country: 64% of respondents in Estonia and 59% in Lithuania agreed that their overall experience has improved since the arrival to a new country, comparing to 36% in Latvia (more detailed analysis is available in the [survey report¹⁰](#)).

Refugees in all three countries shared more positive than negative views and experiences in relation to such integration aspects as mental and psychological health, management of legal documentation and education of children. In contrast, employment, housing, recognition of qualifications and societal attitudes towards refugees are areas, where refugees shared more negative than positive views. However, the extent of existing challenges and obstacles is country-specific: from being significant in Latvia to modest in Estonia.

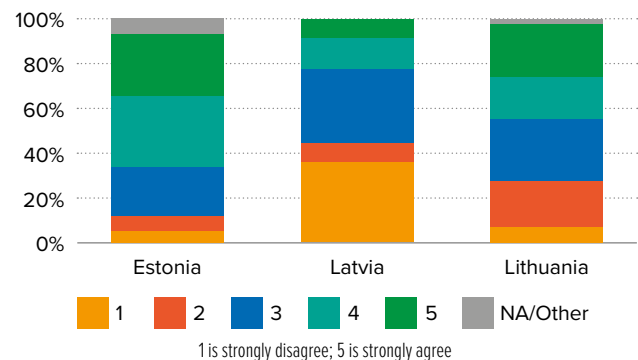
“First impressions after arrival were very positive. First of all, it was safe here, we were not persecuted anymore, but later we realised that we don't know the language and that we are a bit isolated and communicating just with our family and just with school of my daughter as well as one refugee family... We discovered that we need to adapt, we need to learn the language... but six first months we did not speak the language, we had very limited contacts. Then we started to participate in refugee programme... then our circle of contacts became wider”

Tadjik refugee

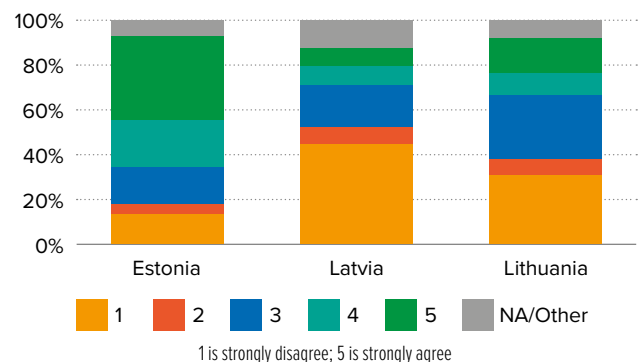
2.2 Integration support and self-reliance

Survey revealed both similarities and differences in terms of refugees' views and experiences. For example, experiences on the extent of social support has been evaluated by refugees differently in all three countries: 59% of refugees in Estonia agreed that current level of integration support is sufficient to take care of themselves and their families, comparing to only 24% in Lithuania and 16% in Latvia (see *graph 6*). The same trend has been revealed by refugees' experiences of being self-reliant: 71% of surveyed refugees in Estonia indicated feeling self-reliant when participating in integration programme, comparing to 51% in Lithuania and only 33% in Latvia.

Graph 5: Survey question: Overall, I feel that I have adapted well to life in this country

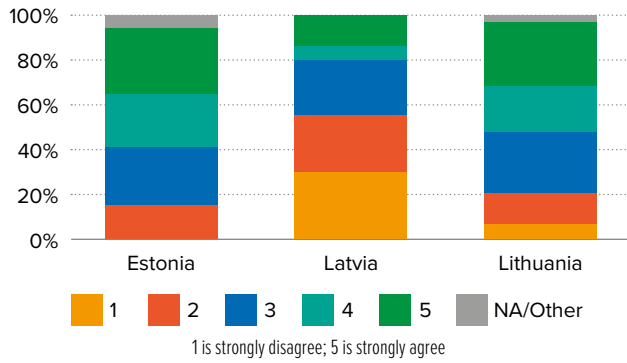


Graph 6: Survey question: The current level of integration support provided is sufficient to take care of myself and my family



¹⁰ Full report is available at: https://www.unhcr.org/neu/wp-content/uploads/sites/15/2021/06/2021-UNHCR-Refugee-Profiles-Full_Report-screen.pdf

Graph 7: Survey question: Public attitudes towards refugees are generally welcoming



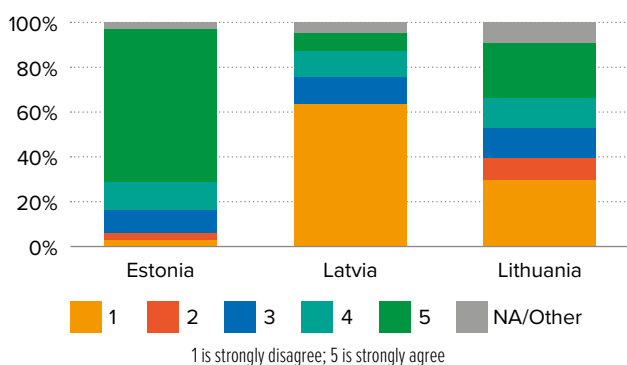
2.3 Welcoming environment and sociocultural activities

Refugees in Estonia and Lithuania shared similar views on welcoming environment: 52% of refugees in Estonia and 46% in Lithuania agreed that public attitudes towards refugees are generally welcoming, in a comparison to only 21% in Latvia (see graph 7). Societal attitudes towards refugees are cross-cutting and directly linked to housing challenges as, according to survey findings, many refugees quite often (on a daily or weekly basis) face negative reactions/attitudes from landlords. According to refugees' views, housing is one of many areas (additionally to public transportation, supermarket, police, social work, neighbourhood) where refugees are experiencing negative reactions.

“ I have some contacts with local people, mostly with the neighbours. But they work and are often busy, so we don't meet often. But we and neighbours want to see each other more often. I think if there is such practice to meet more often that might work out, it only needs a bit of initiative’

Refugee from the Russian Federation

Graph 8: Survey question: Social support was provided for a sufficient duration



Social, cultural and recreational activities can help to build bridges between refugees and local population, and thus, address prevailing stereotypes and prejudices. The majority (84%) of refugees in Estonia agreed that such activities are available, while in Latvia and Lithuania the share of those who agreed is significantly smaller – respectively 33% and 45%.

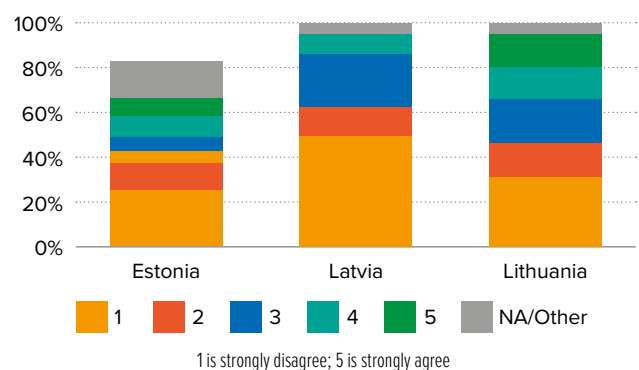
2.4 Duration of social support and financial assistance

In Estonia, more than 80% agreed that social support was provided for a sufficient duration (see graph 8). At the same time, 34% of refugees agreed that financial assistance/benefits are enough to take care of themselves and their families. On a contrary, only a small share of refugees in Latvia agreed that social support was provided for a sufficient duration (20%) and financial assistance was sufficient to take care of themselves and their families (4%). As a common feature for this survey, experiences of refugees in Lithuania lie in the middle or between Estonia and Latvia with 39% of refugees agreeing on sufficiency of financial assistance and 25% - on the duration of social support.

2.5 Housing

Looking at experiences in accessing housing market, refugees shared less positive and more negative experiences in all three countries. Significantly bigger proportion of respondents disagreed than agreed with the statement that it was relatively easy to find housing (see graph 9). Big proportion of surveyed refugees agreed that finding or changing housing is a priority to improve integration (49% in EST, 41% in LVA, 36% in LTU). At the same time, significant proportion of respondents tend to agree with the statement that they have already found good housing (55% in EST, 29% in LVA and 43% in LTU).

Graph 9: It was relatively easy to find housing



2.6 Employment

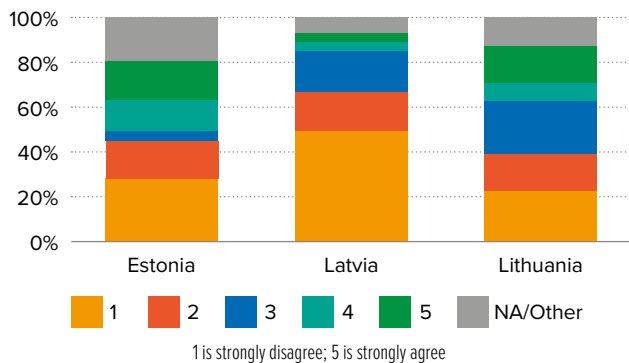
Looking at experiences in participation in the labour market, refugees also shared less positive and more negative experiences as significantly bigger proportion of respondents disagreed than agreed with the statement that it was relatively easy to find employment (see *graph 10*).

Many refugees see employment as a priority to improve their integration (71% in EST, 74% in LVA and 56% in LTU). However, significant proportion of surveyed refugees disagreed with the statement that they have already found a good job that allows to support themselves and their families (37% in EST, 40% in LVA, 39% in LTU).

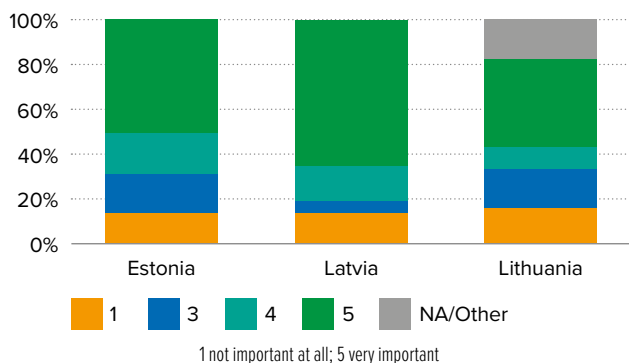
“ I struggle with managing my life - my food, my education, job. But I thank Estonia for the peace. It is so rich for peace and quiet. The calm has come to my soul. I am now in peace...>”

Syrian refugee

Graph 10: It was relatively easy to find a job



Graph 11: What do you consider your most important priorities to promote or improve your integration?
Seek citizenship



2.7 Future plans and long-term settlement

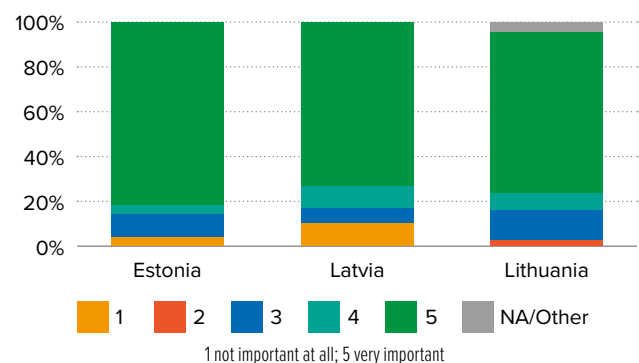
Refugee experiences and views revealed big potential for long-term settlement in all three countries. The majority of respondents indicated strong attitudes towards obtaining citizenships of hosting countries (see *graph 11*). This potential is strongly supported by another indicator – refugees’ willingness to stay in hosting countries, rather than moving to another country.

In addition, long-term settlement could be illustrated by refugees’ attitudes towards learning the language and familiarising with the local culture. Vast majority of respondents indicated that knowledge of local language is (very) important to improve their integration (86% in EST, 83% in LVA, 81% in LTU, see *graph 12*). However, significant proportion of refugees disagreed with the statement that they have already improved the knowledge of the language (27% in EST, 39% in LVA and 30% in LTU). Moreover, self-evaluation of language skills shows that refugees in all three countries have not developed neither writing and reading, nor listening and speaking skills.

“ For the moment we do not expect very much. My wife has difficulties finding a job because of language barrier, and they offer very simple jobs with very low salaries, and I do not think that we will improve our life, and we will become independent soon. It is painful to depend on the government, living in the country and also, when you are working and learning... the language, at the same time, is very difficult to learn”

Tadjik refugee

Graph 12: What do you consider your most important priorities to promote or improve your integration?
Improve my knowledge of the local language



3. CONCLUDING REMARKS

- ➔ While on one hand the survey revealed willingness to stay in hosting countries and obtain citizenship, which shows a strong intention among refugees to build a new life respectively either in Estonia, Latvia or Lithuania, rather than to move somewhere else. On the other hand, motivation to stay in the country can decrease due to numerous reasons indicated in this survey report, such as employment, housing and limited welcoming environment. This means that overall positive attitude towards long-term settlement might be outweighed by more structural integration challenges, which are crucial for the decision to stay or leave the country.
- ➔ Survey revealed that refugees in Estonia seem to experience fewer challenges in almost all integration areas, comparing to Latvia and Lithuania. On the contrary, refugees in Latvia are experiencing much more challenges, comparing to refugees in Estonia and Lithuania. Such trend coincides with UNHCR mapping of integration efforts in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania (2013–2016) as well as with recent observations based on extensive consultations with partners, integration stakeholders and refugees.
- ➔ According to survey's findings, refugees' perceptions on integration are not just about long- and short-term expectations or permanent/temporary residence in the country; it is about fostering a strong sense of belonging to the hosting country and society by learning language, culture and social norms, building bridges with local institutions and societies in the grassroots level. This momentum should be used by creating and implementing holistic socioeconomic inclusion policies for everybody.

