Social adaptation of syrian refugees in the European Union countries: Psychological aspects of the issue

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Abstract. An increasingly relevant issue for the European Union policies is the constant increase in both irregular migrant, refugee, and legal migrant flows, which has a significant impact on the economic and political situation of these states. Such processes provoke an escalation of conflict within the country between the native population and migrants, which as a result negatively affects their social adaptation and psychological state and leads to a deterioration of the criminal situation in the respective territories and the spread of acts of intolerance. The purpose of the study is to analyse current European Union approaches to refugees, in particular those of Syrian origin, in the context of their social adaptation and psychological development. To achieve this goal, the study uses various scientific and methodological tools that allowed to fully disclose the issue under study and establish its main features. Thus, functional, and systematic methodological approaches were used in the study, along with logical methods of scientific research, such as the method of analysis and synthesis, the method of comparison, the method of deduction, the method of analysis of scientific literature. The main findings obtained from the research are the theoretical and practical foundations of the issue of the social adaptation of Syrian refugees in the European Union. The study has thus covered both the theoretical component, consisting of an interpretation of the basic concepts of the topic under investigation, along with their attributes and characteristics and the practical component, reflecting the dynamics of the increasing number of Syrian refugees, in particular, establishing the main reasons for this displacement and identifying the relevant measures taken by European Union governments to implement the social adaptation of such people. In subsequent developments on this subject, it would be useful to model effective means to support and socially develop refugees in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. The practical value of this study lies in its potential to be used both in the development of different kinds of programmes for the social adaptation of refugees, and directly by ordinary citizens to encourage them to participate in voluntary organisations

Keywords: social adaptation, refugees, psychological state, stress, migrants

INTRODUCTION

The intensification of international migrations, which is a natural consequence and simultaneously a driving force of globalisation, has been more frequently observed on the European continent. Thus, out of 232 million people or 3% of the world population living in countries other than where they were born, i.e., as migrants, the majority are located in Europe, namely 72.4, while this number is constantly growing. As a result of such relocations, the continent's population becomes more diverse and similar to that of traditional immigrant countries, such as the US, Canada and Australia [1].

A significant role in the demographic situation of many EU countries was played by the events of the Arab Spring, namely the war in Syria, which, in turn, caused additional flows of refugees to Europe. Thus, the number of applications for international protection filed in the EU at that time amounted to 425,000 people. In 2013, there were 1000 more asylum seekers than in the previous year – 534,160,000,
which is not the maximum figure for this century. As a result, the largest number of asylum seekers came from Syria – 50,500, as a result of the long-term military confrontation in this country [2].

All these phenomena, which can be called irregular migration, constitute perhaps the greatest challenge for European countries in the regulation of migration processes. Thus, according to the estimates of the European Commission, there are as many as 6 to 8 million foreigners on EU territory without regular legal status. At the same time, according to the European border agency Frontex, 207,000 irregular migrants were detained during an attempt to illegally enter the EU in 2018, that is, more than in the previous period (which is more than in the previous period (104,600 apprehensions in 2013, 104,000 in 2015, 172,500 in 2016)). This was certainly driven by the large number of refugees from Syria heading for Europe in search of asylum, along with the consistently strong illegal migration flow from the Middle East and North Africa across the Mediterranean, mainly from Libyan and Egyptian ports. However, almost a quarter of those detained at the border were Syrians [3].

For a comprehensive examination of the issue under study, it is first necessary to define the essence of the refugee concept to establish its characteristics and consider ways for social adaptation. Refugees are persons who had fled their country as a result of external aggression, occupation, foreign domination, events that seriously disrupted public order in the country as a whole or its parts, natural disasters, the destruction of the material basis of their existence, along with the presence of objective risk of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political or religious beliefs [4].

Based on this definition and the statistics given on the number of Syrian refugees, it should be established that the study of the criteria and factors of their social adaptation should focus on the assessment of life orientations, value aspirations, determining the dynamics of behaviour in the labour market, determining their social advantages and possible means of self-protection, identifying attitudes to a certain model of social behaviour. Thus, adaptive behaviour is formed in two categories of people, which depends on how refugees and internally displaced persons assess their economic situation, the conditions at the new settlement site and in the host country, and by which means they ensure the survival and development of themselves and their families, the degree of their internality and an externality [5].

Considering the above, the main purpose of the study is to analyse the current number of Syrian refugees in the EU countries, and to determine the main measures applied to them in the context of implementing social adaptation and psychological support. Consequently, the main tasks are: to establish the content of the main concepts of the issue under study, to determine the social factors influencing the appearance of Syrian refugees in the EU countries, and to analyse the effectiveness of approaches used in these countries for the social adaptation of refugees [6].

**MATERIALS AND METHODS**

Considering that the issue under study, namely the social adaptation of Syrian refugees in the EU countries, is extremely relevant, it has several features that play an important role in its study. Therefore, to consider all the properties and social factors affecting the dynamic movement of Syrian refugees to EU countries, a number of scientific tools have been used to conduct the study.

One of these is the functional methodological approach, based on which the study plan was developed, and the purpose and tasks in the study were divided into separate stages. Thus, research and study of the main aspects of the addressed issue were organised through this approach. The systematic methodological approach was fundamental in the investigation, as all methods and approaches used in the study were linked to one another and allowed the theoretical and practical part of the subject to be explored.

Equally important was the method of analysis, since on its basis the general issue, namely the social adaptation of Syrian refugees in the EU countries, was divided into separate systemic parts, such as Syrian refugees, the policy of EU countries regarding refugees, social factors affecting the arrival of refugees. Thus, this step allowed each element of the broad scope of the research topic to be considered, resulting in solid findings. The opposite of the previous is the synthesis method, as its essence consists in the cooperation of the parts isolated in the analysis. This process is extremely important, because it allows establishing connections between all parts of the issue under study and, accordingly, allows the total volume of the issue to be explored.

The method of deduction, which consists of revealing and presenting information from the general to the specific is responsible for the logical component of the study. Therefore, the essence of such general concepts as refugee, adaptation, social adaptation, and psychological development was defined at the beginning of the study. Specific elements of the issue under study were directly identified in the practical part of the study.

An important role in the investigation, especially theoretical, was played by the method of analysing scientific literature, since it allowed to get acquainted

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with the beliefs and views of various scientists on the topic under study and to consider various pieces of research, such as articles, dissertations, monographs, theses.

It should be noted that the research process consists of several stages, namely:

1) the first stage, which covers the organisation of work and consists of the formation of a plan, goals, and objectives. In addition, it examined the main theoretical aspects of the social adaptation of Syrian refugees in EU countries;

2) the second stage, where the practical foundations of the topic under study were determined, in particular, the causes, properties, dynamics of the process of displacement of persons from Syria to the EU countries were established;

3) the third stage, which determined the main results of the study and formed concise conclusions on their basis, along with directions for future studies on this topic.

**RESULTS**

To implement the study of the social adaptation of refugees from Syria to the EU countries, it is first necessary to consider the theoretical component of this issue to understand the essential content of these elements. Therefore, it is necessary to first establish what is meant by the concept of adaptation, as it is the basis of the whole conceptual system of the issue under study. Thus, this definition of adaptation is understood as a process of adaptation of the individual to specific conditions of the social environment, involving the formation of an adequate system of relations with social objects, role plasticity of behaviour, integration of the individual into social groups, along with assimilation of stable social conditions associated with the adoption of certain norms and values of the new social environment and forms of social interaction.

As for the migration of persons, this phenomenon consists in the movement of a group of people from their permanent place of residence, which is associated with the crossing of certain borders, such as cities, districts, regions, countries, continents. Thus, before analysing the adaptation processes of refugees in the modern world and their psycho-emotional state, it is necessary to interpret such concepts as refugee and social adaptation and to determine the criteria and features of their social adaptation [7].

Notably, one of the aspects of the phenomenon of migration is the process of the necessary adaptation of refugees to their new living conditions. It is therefore driven by a significant range of socio-economic, political, and cultural factors. Based on this, it can be established that the social adaptation of refugees is a complex and multidimensional process, the implementation of which is influenced by a number of social factors. Accordingly, in modern sociological and psychological literature, such movements of persons are classified: by class, type, form, and cause.

The causes of migration deserve particular attention, as they allow for the formation of a psychological profile of the displaced person. Thus, scientific doctrine distinguishes migration as: voluntary migration, which should be understood as the movement of people who voluntarily leave their place of permanent residence and move to a new place of residence within the same or another state; forced migration, which consists in the movement of people to seek asylum, which is characteristic of refugees from Syria [8].

When it comes to the subjects of forced migration, attention should be drawn to their division into several categories. Thus, one of these categories is political, which includes persons seeking political asylum. The next category of refugees who are not citizens of the country to which they moved. Another category is temporarily displaced persons, that is, from war zones, migrants from environmental disaster zones. There is also a category of internal migrants relocating within the same country, usually from rural areas [9].

Since the object of this study is precisely the category of refugees, including those who left Syria and moved to EU countries, it would be advisable to establish the meaning of the concept of refugee. Therefore, this term should be understood as a person who owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of their nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail themselves of the protection of that country, or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of their former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it. It should be noted that “refugee” is an international legal term of universal character, introduced by the UN Convention of 1951 and the UN Protocol of 1966 [10].

As for the psycho-emotional state of such persons, it is certainly disturbed and to some extent defiled since it is not easy to get used to other living conditions at once. As in any unfamiliar environment, it takes time to adapt, especially when it comes to such a concept as the social adaptation of refugees. Thus, it is notable that the successful social adaptation of displaced persons, i.e., refugees, contributes significantly to the development of the economy, social relations, culture, and political stability, reduces social tension in society, and mitigates the depopulation effect of the indigenous population. Even though the concentration of refugees,
namely Syrian, is quite different across the subjects of the EU countries, the issue of their social adaptation remains relevant for all regions of the continent and the entire European society [11].

Given the above, it must be acknowledged that the social adaptation of refugees is defined as the process of establishing optimal relations of internally displaced persons, in this case, Syrian refugees, with social organisations, groups and authorities in the territory of their residence, in particular in EU countries. In addition, this process provides for the consolidation of certain trends in establishing partnerships with other groups, which is carried out by equalising the indicators of their social and economic conditions. Furthermore, as a result of the implementation of various measures aimed at the social adaptation of refugees, their moral and psychological well-being is normalised, in particular through the identification of a sense of belonging to local groups, and awareness and acceptance of values, beliefs and social and legal norms existing there [12].

Considering the above trends and features of such a process as the social adaptation of refugees, it is necessary to identify a number of criteria and factors affecting it. Therefore, when implementing measures for the social adaptation of refugees, it is necessary to remember that the success of this process does not consist in the rejection of displaced persons from their cultural values and acceptance of another culture, since in this case, it is more about assimilation than adaptation, and the ability to combine different values in a way that allows them to learn and adopt new cultural norms and rules, while still maintaining their own identities. In addition, an important factor is that the lack of appropriate conditions for the self-realisation of a refugee in some cases is a less important obstacle to successful social adaptation than in situations of dissatisfaction with material needs. Attention should also be paid to the fact that in the absence of full and unhindered communication and interaction of a refugee with the local population, the refugee has a feeling of alienation, uselessness, and abandonment, which is reflected in their psycho-emotional situation [13].

An important process, especially in the context of refugee social adaptation, is the gradual formation of a sense of affiliation to a particular social group in the refugee's consciousness, which is correspondingly new to them and allows them to relate to it, i.e., a process of new self-identification takes place. In addition, a significant role in the course of social adaptation of refugees is played by such factors as: the nature of their adaptive activities; the period of such adaptation; interest and conscientiousness in work, a conscientious attitude to work, proactive involvement in work, striving for the maximum realisation of one's potential; the social status of the individual in the new place of the settlement, its level. At the same time, it should always be remembered that the psychological satisfaction of a refugee in the event of a violation of their social adaptation may be accompanied by a state of depression, anxiety, anxiousness, a feeling of inability to cope and to adapt to the situation [14].

**DISCUSSION**

Having analysed the general theoretical part of the study, it is necessary to consider its practical component relying on the concepts studied in the article. Therefore, based on all of the above criteria, it is advisable to combine them into five groups to fully reveal the content of the phenomenon of social adaptation of refugees. Accordingly, these include: the social well-being of the individual; the identification of the refugee with the new environment; the degree of realisation of the internal potential of the displaced person; the nature of relations with the environment; the ability to enhance the culture of the adapting environment. In addition, as noted earlier, the issue of social adaptation of Syrian refugees to EU countries is extremely acute today. This is naturally driven by the increasing pace of change – political and economic, cultural, social, and other – which, as a result, requires the individual to be proficient in various adaptation strategies. Given the above, it is worth noting that the dynamics of society's development today is such that these migration processes are becoming more widespread every day around the world [15].

As already noted, the main purpose of the study is to analyse programmes that are currently being actively applied in the EU countries in dealing with internally displaced persons, in this case, Syrian refugees, and are being introduced by various non-governmental organisations in other countries of the world. Consequently, a study of such programmes provides a strong basis for distinguishing between those that are common and those that are specific. Thus, the general programmes should include those directly related to the existing conditions, that is, representation of interests, outreach work, humanitarian aid, healthcare, improvement of existing living conditions. They also include programmes aimed at studying and analysing the previous experience of Syrian refugees, namely through trauma counselling, psychological rehabilitation, and support, along with the implementation of social and recreational programmes. An important place among the general programmes belongs to those concerning the situation in a particular group, that is, by organising self-help, developing society, building pleasant relationships in society. Particularly relevant is the category of programmes that aim to support and develop future needs in Syrian refugees,
i.e., such as education, development of various skills and community development, and the formation of the next generations in the camps.

As for specific programmes that are actively applied in different EU member states in the context of the implementation of social assistance to Syrian refugees, these are directly targeted and address the family or individual members of the family. As a rule, they are used as educational and psychosocial programmes for children, or as essential services for women or families, along with programmes for family reunification, including family tracing, during which country-specific programmes are applied. The specific needs of persons, such as repatriation and reintegation, integration, human rights protection, orientation in the normative field, also have a special place among this category of programmes for the social adaptation of refugees.

Special attention should be paid to one of the most effective tools for overcoming refugee problems, namely global needs assessment. At the moment, it is one of the tools that the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (hereinafter referred to as UNHCR) uses to obtain complete information about emerging issues related to the legal protection of persons under UNHCR’s care. It should be noted that it is created primarily for the implementation of the legal protection of refugees, in particular Syrian, with the involvement of citizens, and the creation of recommendations to overcome existing issues associated with migrants. The essential content of such a general assessment consists directly in the fact that this tool covers different age groups of refugee men, women, and children, i.e., it addresses all factors and needs of different categories of the population [16].

It should be noted that during 2015, the EU experienced an unprecedented phenomenon, namely, a humanitarian catastrophe caused by a massive influx of migrants from war-torn countries in Africa and the Middle East. This is the biggest migration crisis in Europe since the Second World War. In 2015, the UN provided data on maritime migration to Europe. Since the beginning of 2015, more than 365,000 people have crossed the Mediterranean Sea to reach EU countries and seek asylum. It should be noted that the main recipient countries of refugees in the EU were Germany, Sweden, Italy, France, and Hungary, in which 91% of all applications were registered. When analysing the nationality of migrants who arrived in Europe in 2021, it should be noted that Syrian refugees make up more than half of all migrants, i.e., 1.3 million [17]. As for other countries, 15% are Libyans, 10% are Iraqis, 8% are Afghans, 17% are citizens of Middle Eastern and African countries (Fig. 1).

![Figure 1. Percentage of the national composition of migrants arriving in Europe in 2021](image)

On this basis, it can be agreed that Europe is a challenging case study to explore international experience in addressing the implementation of refugee resettlement. In addition, it is reasonable to agree that during the aforementioned humanitarian crisis in Europe, the settlement of refugees, including Syrian refugees, was based on the ties between the former metropolises and colonies, labour relations that emerged after World War II, i.e., South-North and, at the present stage, East-West. However, it should be noted, that the policy of accepting humanitarian migrants is, in part, incentive-based, as refugee flows to EU countries are constantly confronted with high standards of assistance and standards of living in those countries. Particular attention among displaced persons belongs to the countries of Northern Europe since this region is characterised by a well-established system of social protection, attractiveness for people seeking new places of residence to gain peace, work, and social comfort.

To date, in many EU countries, the social adaptation of Syrian refugees to the new socio-cultural
society has been accompanied by numerous problems and contradictions. This process should be understood as to some extent dependent on such social factors as the duration of residence in the new place, the nature of settlement and the number of immigrants, their level of development and education, their socio-economic situation, the religious basis of the ethnic community and the level of unemployment among foreigners. That is why there are many positive practices actively implemented in European countries in the process of developing measures for the integration of Syrian refugees. It is also important that the Council of Europe and the European Union have adopted a number of standards, programmes and initiatives to combat racism and xenophobia and to promote intercultural dialogue.

While specifically referring to the subject matter of this study, namely the socio-cultural adaptation of refugees from Syria to the EU, it should be noted that the general features of the social process are mainly refracted, as it is aimed at acquiring a fully independent status for this social group in the new environment, cultural compatibility based on the mutual transformation of the parties. Thus, as noted earlier, the process of social adaptation of refugees to the new socio-cultural environment is influenced by many social and personal factors. On the one hand, the process of adaptation depends precisely on the individual characteristics of the person, i.e., the adaptor, and on the other hand, on the nature of the environment, conditions and specific factors. Thus, the main prerequisites for the social adaptation of a refugee, which ultimately determine the main content of this process, are objective, i.e., external conditions, namely: the socio-cultural state of the local territorial community, the type of society, the degree of its economic development. Furthermore, it is necessary to come to terms with the fact that the fundamental factors in the context of social adaptation are the social characteristics and social potential of refugees that emerge in the process of accumulating social capital, in particular education, training, qualifications [18].

As for the psychological adaptation of Syrian refugees displaced into another culture, it is directly related to a series of stressful life changes, which in turn require the mobilisation of the individual's adaptive resources and an obligatory response. Thus, this approach determines a separate choice of factors, included in the process of studying the psychological adaptation of refugees. The direct expectation of refugees is also an equally important factor that can hinder or, on the contrary, facilitate the implementation of the adaptation process. Considering the experience of the EU countries, it is necessary to establish that realistic expectations simplify the future process of intercultural adaptation to a certain extent, while erroneous assumptions can only provoke more issues and add stress [19].

In addition, the degree to which expectations do not correspond to actual experience needs to be addressed when examining and forecasting refugee expectations. The results of studies in this area mainly suggest that lowered expectations, i.e., when experiences are more positive than expectations, provoke higher levels of life satisfaction among refugees and contribute to successful role adaptation of displaced persons. Thus, it is necessary to pay attention to the common four strategies for coping with stress that also affect the psychological adaptation of refugees, these are: offensive; avoidance; acceptance; seeking social support [20].

In this context, attention should also be paid to the main indicators of psychological health, i.e., the psychological well-being of refugees, namely the ability to cope with stressful situations, absence of depression, i.e., normal emotional state and mood; the presence of goals, ways to achieve them, prospects, opportunities for professional and personal growth. Thus, for the psychological well-being of refugees, including the Syrian ones, social support is extremely necessary, including informational, emotional, and instrumental support. It should be noted that among these types of support for the successful preservation and development of the psychological health of a refugee, the most important is the establishment of informal contacts with relatives, friends, close acquaintances, that is, emotional support. Given the above, social adaptation of refugees should be understood as a process of normalisation of the moral and psychological state of the individual, particularly based on a sense of belonging to social institutions, the social structure in the chosen territory of residence [21].

Furthermore, given the above, it should be established that the dynamics of refugee adaptation behaviour factors fully depend on the structure of the socio-cultural space of the region in which they are seeking asylum. Thus, the socio-cultural environment acted as a full-fledged element of the socio-cultural space of the region, in which different kinds of objects function accordingly, which in turn are able to influence the refugee and orient them towards certain goals. Accordingly, the level of success of the social adaptation of refugees depends entirely on a number of internal and external factors. Therefore, internal factors should include the degree of actualisation of the refugee's needs, in particular in positive social ties, self-actualisation and self-realisation in activities. As for external factors, it is the degree of acceptance of the problems of internally displaced persons by the host society, that is, the EU countries
and its ability to provide the necessary support and assistance in the process of the refugee’s, in this case, Syrian, adaptation to the new living conditions.

Thus, it is necessary to agree that migration is a constant movement, implemented and developing throughout the existence of mankind. Accordingly, migration processes have certainly played an important role in the history of mankind, since they are associated with the processes of settlement, land development, development of productive forces, the mixing of races, languages, and peoples.

**CONCLUSIONS**

As a result of the conducted research, it was found that the issue of social adaptation of refugees, including from Syria, is quite relevant in the EU countries. The main historical cases that influenced the abrupt movement of the inhabitants of Syria to the European continent were analysed in the study. In addition, an important component in the investigation is the analysis and definition of such concepts as refugee, adaptation, social adaptation. According to the statistics for the last decade, Syrian refugees constitute the largest percentage of the total number of migrants. The study reviewed the main types of migration and subjects, thereby fully revealing the specificities of the issue under investigation. Furthermore, the article explored all possible criteria affecting the process of social adaptation of refugees. It was found that this process depends not only on external factors but also on the intrapersonal qualities of a displaced person. Consequently, social adjustment is closely linked to, and to some extent dependent on, the psychological adjustment of refugees. Thus, the study revealed a number of tools and approaches used in the EU countries to ensure the normal development of displaced persons, in particular Syrian refugees.

Apart from this, the study provides examples of current and prioritised ways to help accelerate the social adaptation of refugees while also restoring their psychological well-being. It was found that refugees are people who are seeking asylum and, in some cases, full-fledged rescue, which is why the process of their adaptation is somewhat complicated and requires a long time. Thus, in future studies on the subject, it would be particularly interesting and important to investigate the likely measures and tools that helped realise the process of social and psychological adaptation of refugees in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

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Social adaptation of syrian refugees...

12


