

Well-meaning efforts fall short of establishing a way to get skilled Ukrainians into the workforce

Canada should do more to help Ukrainian refugees

By Sergio Karas
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Russia's invasion of Ukraine has left over three million Ukrainians displaced thus far. With no foreseeable end to this tragedy, they are not only leaving their homes, but also family to find safety in other countries around the world, including Canada.

To provide support to them during this unfortunate time, Immigration Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) has introduced new immigration streams for them to obtain temporary or permanent residency.

IRCC has created the Canada-Ukraine Authorization for Emergency Travel (CUAET) for individuals fleeing Ukraine. Under this emergency program, Ukrainian nationals can apply to enter Canada temporarily and obtain open work permits or, have immediate family members who are Canadian citizens or permanent residents sponsor them.

By obtaining an open work permit, they may be able to remain in Canada for at least three years and all applications will be prioritized regardless of the immigration program they are applying under. The program covers spouses and dependants. Not even a passport is required. Canada will issue a one-way travel document to those who do not have passports. The creation of these programs raises various concerns.

IRCC claims that it will be vetting Ukrainians before allowing them to obtain open work permits. However, it fails to be transparent with this approach. It is unknown how long the process of conducting background checks and security screening will take after the travellers arrive, given the current situation in Ukraine and the inability to obtain clearances.

IRCC should establish application and processing centres in countries that they are transiting, like Poland, Romania, and Moldova, and only allow those who are thoroughly vetted to enter Canada in an orderly manner.

The current approach taken by IRCC is well-intentioned but falls short of establishing a pathway to integrate skilled Ukrainians into the labour force. While IRCC has created the two emergency immigration avenues, it should consider a comprehensive approach to assist Ukrainians to find employment to support themselves and minimize any potential costs to social assistance. In 2021, job vacancies in Canada increased significantly.

Statistics Canada reported approximately 62,000 job vacancies in construction, and more than 84,000 vacancies in retail trade. The European Training Foundation Working Paper claims that in 2019, approximately 23% of the Ukrainian population was employed in wholesale and retail trade, making it the largest employed population, and more than 4% were employed in construction.

To tackle the labour shortages in Canada and provide Ukrainians with employment, IRCC should create training incentives for Canadian employers looking to fill these vacancies, while at the same time helping new arrivals find employment as soon as possible. The process could involve having applicants fill in their employment history and match them with employers looking for those with similar experience and skill. Employers could then potentially sponsor them for permanent residency after a probationary period has elapsed.

This program should not be created for the purpose of scoring political points by favouring subgroups. All applicants should be considered equally and without favouritism, on a first come first serve basis. Applications could be segregated from other immigration programs to ensure that applicants do not apply to multiple programs and that their profiles are not lost in a larger pool of worldwide applicants. This will allow employers to fill job vacancies in a timely manner, without having to incur the significant costs of Labour Market Impact Assessments, and lengthy delays in the temporary foreign worker program.

Under the new program, IRCC may grant open work permits for a period of three years.

However, IRCC is currently dealing with a large processing backlog because of Covid-19. Prioritizing Ukrainian applications will create another logistical issue for IRCC to tackle, in addition to other programs such as the resettlement of Afghans.

Considering the disastrous situation in Ukraine and the remote possibility that refugees will be able to return to their home – if it is still standing – any time soon, IRCC should consider creating a path to residency based on humanitarian and compassionate grounds that will be separate from the normal application process. This will provide these refugees with a greater sense of security, and at the same time, alleviate the need to apply for extensions that will create anxiety and clog the immigration system further.

The strategy would also relieve IRCC of the immense pressure to grant thousands of Ukrainians residency under a strict deadline and ensure that they do not lose their work permit and will allow more time to vet applicants without taking shortcuts. Obtaining documents required for residence will be a logistical nightmare for many individuals, and given IRCC's inefficiencies and current backlogs, lengthy delays will be common.

Immediate family members who are Canadian citizens or permanent residents should not be the only individuals sponsoring Ukrainians. As another alternative, IRCC should consider expanding the Private Sponsorship of Refugees Program. This would allow various groups like incorporated organizations that have signed a formal sponsorship agreement with IRCC, community sponsors and more, to submit private sponsorship applications and provide Ukrainians with care, lodging, settlement assistance and support for the duration of the sponsorship period and allow them more time to apply for permanent residency. While this may seem like a lengthy process, it will nonetheless provide them with more opportunity to start a life in Canada.

Another question to be considered should be housing for those arriving. Given that Canada's largest cities have no affordable housing available, it would be wise to enlist the assistance of less populated provinces where housing costs are lower to provide at least temporary accommodation to the new arrival. This should be an essential element of any resettlement plan given the current housing crisis.

As Russia's invasion continues, IRCC should not only think about providing a safe passage to Ukrainians, but it must also implement measures and programs to give them the opportunity to support themselves, while at the same time, ensuring that visa officers are not further burdened with more applications.

The author recognizes the significant contributions of Reeve Goel, Student-at-Law

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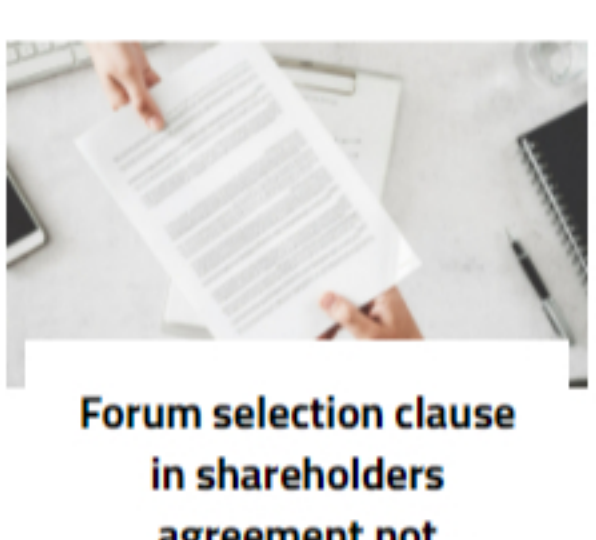
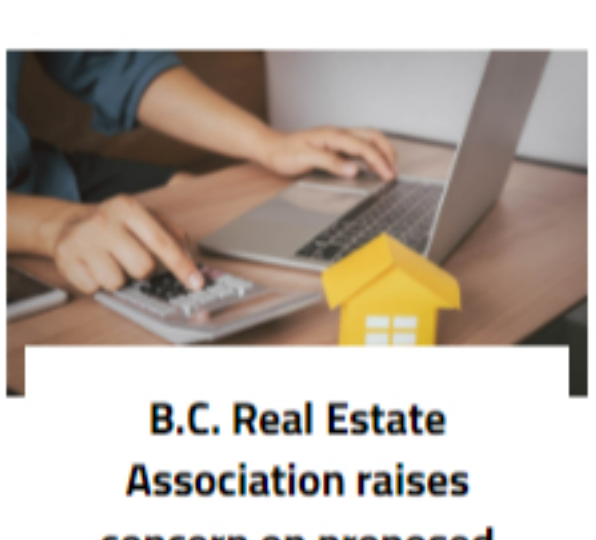
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