

Displaced Ukrainian Youth in Poland: **lived experiences** **two years on**

Youth Research Center,
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ABSTRACT

The report explores the experiences and challenges faced by Ukrainian young adult refugees in Poland, focusing on their integration, adaptation, and perspectives on post-war reconstruction in Ukraine. A qualitative study was conducted by the University SWPS in collaboration with partner institutions in the UK and Germany. This research draws on semi-structured interviews with 26 young Ukrainians aged 16 to 29.

The findings highlight a complex reality in which Ukrainian young adults navigate hardships like housing discrimination, educational adjustments, and social integration challenges while striving to maintain their cultural identity and connections to Ukraine. Despite these challenges, the study reveals a resilient and adaptive group, actively participating in their host community and nurturing visions of contributing to Ukraine's future.

Significantly, this research underscores the dual role of young adults from Ukraine as both recipients and agents of change. The study offers recommendations for policy changes aimed at enhancing the integration and wellbeing of Ukrainian refugees in Poland. These recommendations focus on addressing discrimination, improving educational and medical support, and fostering economic opportunities both within Poland and beyond.

ABBREVIATIONS

FRSI – Fundacja Rozwoju Społeczeństwa Informacyjnego (Information Society Development Foundation)

UNDP - United Nations Development Plan

KEY FINDINGS

LIVING CONDITIONS AND ADAPTATION CHALLENGES:

- Young Ukrainian refugees in Poland face high rental costs and a scarcity of accommodations, leading to overcrowded shared living spaces.
- Discrimination and limited access to housing are significant challenges for Ukrainians in Poland.
- Despite these issues, many refugees appreciate Warsaw's public transportation and urban infrastructure, reflecting a mix of struggles and satisfaction.

EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES:

- Young refugees face challenges adapting to the Polish educational system, which differs from the Ukrainian system in terms of language and teaching methodologies.
- Initial difficulties in integration and language barriers are common, yet many show resilience and a determination to succeed academically in Poland.

SOCIAL INTEGRATION AND RELATIONSHIPS:

- Social integration varies, with some young Ukrainians experiencing positive interactions with Polish locals, while others face isolation and discrimination.
- Maintaining relationships with family and friends in Ukraine is vital and acts as a crucial support system.

EMPLOYMENT AND ECONOMIC INTEGRATION:

- Employment opportunities in Poland are limited for young Ukrainian refugees, impacting their economic stability and community integration.
- Employment is the key challenge for young Ukrainians in Poland that prevents them from planning their future plans and visions.

PLANS AND ASPIRATIONS:

- Despite adversities, many young Ukrainians in Poland are optimistic about their future, though only one in four would like to return to Ukraine post-war, while the others feel uncertain or would like to stay in Poland or relocate to other countries based on job opportunities.

INTRODUCTION

The ongoing war in Ukraine caused by the brutal invasion of Russia, first in 2014 and later in February 2022, has resulted in one of the largest refugee migrations in Europe since World War II (UNHCR, 2024). As the country grapples with the devastation of war, the situation of Ukrainian refugees, particularly the youth, has taken centre stage. Among the countries offering refuge, Poland became a critical place for over 1.6 million Ukrainians (UNHCR, 2024) seeking safety, shelter, and a semblance of normalcy. The number of active registrations for temporary protection of Ukrainian refugees in Poland is 953 thousand (UNHCR, 2024¹). In 2022-2024, slightly more than 100 thousand young people aged 14-17 were granted temporary protection in Poland. The number of young adults aged 18-34 reached 340 thousand temporary protection decisions (Eurostat, 2024²).

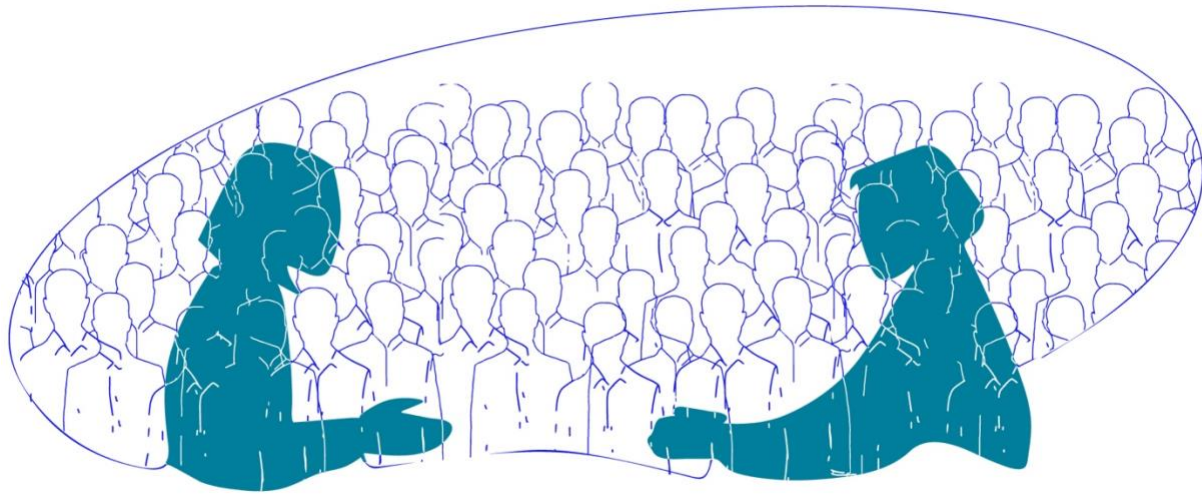
For many Ukrainian young people, leaving behind their homes, schools, and communities was not a choice, but a necessity dictated by the horrors of war. As they cross borders into Poland, they bring with them stories of loss and upheaval, yet also a determination to rebuild their lives. Within the context of this refugee crisis, Poland emerges as a crucial country in providing not only immediate shelter and aid but also a platform for long-term integration and support. Understanding how Ukrainian youth navigate this new terrain—learning a new language, adjusting to a different educational system, and assimilating into a foreign culture—provides insights into the resilience of these young adults.

This briefing paper explores the challenges and opportunities encountered by Ukrainian refugee young adults (aged 16-29) in Poland, examining the profound implications of their experiences for the future reconstruction of Ukraine. It presents a narrative that underscores resilience and adaptation strategies during the insecurity and uncertainty. Through interviews with Ukrainian youth and stakeholders, this study seeks to shed light on the untold stories of Ukrainian refugee youth in Poland. It aims to amplify their voices, understand their needs, and envision a future where they can contribute meaningfully to both the host country and their homeland.

The research contributes to a broader project that includes the UK, Poland, and Germany, and is led by the University of Birmingham and underpinned by the necessity to evaluate the measures in supporting Ukrainian refugees. The project, based on a participatory approach with displaced young Ukrainians in three countries, provides both an understanding of how the current states' measures respond to the needs of the Ukrainian refugee youth and their visions of the future of Ukraine and their aspirations to return. Within the project, separate reports for Poland, the UK, and Germany are produced, employing the same methodology. Additionally, we prepared a briefing paper on how Ukrainian youth envision the future of their country and their role in it.

1 UNHCR. (2024). Ukraine Refugee Situation. Poland. <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/ukraine/location/10781>

2 Eurostat. (2024). Decisions granting temporary protection by citizenship, age and sex - quarterly data. https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/migr_asytpfg_custom_12287532/default/table?lang=en



METHODOLOGY

A qualitative-methods approach was employed across the project's different stages, including desk research and semi-structured interviews with young people (16-29 years old) conducted by the young Ukrainian young researchers working on the project (26 interviews in Poland, 30 in Germany, and 30 in the UK).

The interviews were conducted from September 2023 to January 2024 in Warsaw by five Community Researchers (CRs), who were previously trained according to the Community Practitioner Research Programme (CPRP)³. CRs were provided with the necessary methodological and ethical knowledge on running the participatory research with vulnerable groups. The interviews were conducted in Ukrainian, Russian, and Polish (with the stakeholders). The team of community researchers in Poland was composed of Sofia Horova, Anastasiia Mykhailova, Andrii Pysarevskyi, Rostyslav Sheichenko, and Nensi Som. The research project was approved by the ethics committee of the University of Birmingham before the study was conducted.

Data analysis was carried out by the Principal Investigator and the Community Researchers following their training in data analysis. Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006⁴) was conducted after the interviews were transcribed and coded. Both inductive and deductive coding approaches were applied, leading to the identification of the emergent themes, which are presented below.

³ <https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/research/superdiversity-institute/practitioner-research-programme>

⁴ Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77-101.

Research participants

The sample for this research (see Table 1 in Annex 1) consisted of 26 participants, comprising 7 males and 19 females. In terms of age distribution, 5 participants were between the ages of 16-17, 11 were aged 18-25 years old, and 10 participants, fell into the 26-29 age range.

Regarding educational backgrounds, the participants varied, with 16 having completed secondary education, 5 holding a Bachelor's degree (BA), and another 5 having obtained a Master's degree (MA). Among them, 9 were currently enrolled in university, 4 were attending school, and 13 were not students. In terms of employment status in Poland, 6 participants were employed while 20 were not currently working. The participants originated from different regions of Ukraine: 9 participants came from the Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson, Zaporizhzhia, and Kharkiv oblasts, and 17 from other oblasts of Ukraine.

The participants' migration experiences varied, with 16 migrating with close relatives (such as parents, siblings, or spouses), 1 with other relatives (such as aunts, uncles, or cousins), and 9 migrating alone. Regarding living arrangements, 9 participants were living with their parents, 3 with siblings or cousins, 4 with other family members, 4 with friends, and 6 were living alone.

The interviews (N=5) with the stakeholders were held. The sample included the representatives of the institutions and foundations, which have contact with and/or support Ukrainian youth in Poland. The institutions included the Ukrainian House, Information Society Development Foundation (FRSI), GPAS Praga (Grupa Pedagogiki i Animacji Społecznej Praga Północ), University SWPS, and Warsaw University.

RESULTS

Legalisation Status of Ukrainian Refugees in Poland: An Overview of Temporary Protection

The legalisation status of Ukrainian refugees in Poland is primarily governed by the European Union's temporary protection mechanism. This mechanism, initially established by an EU directive in 2001 following the displacement crises in the Western Balkans, is designed to respond to mass-influx situations by offering collective protection. The directive aims not only to provide immediate refuge but also to alleviate pressures on the national asylum systems across EU member states.

In response to the unprecedented crisis following the outbreak of conflict in Ukraine, the EU activated this temporary protection mechanism in March 2022. As a result, Ukrainian refugees have been granted a legal status that shields them from the usual asylum process complexities, streamlining their acceptance and integration into host countries, including Poland. This mechanism has been extended until March 4, 2026, reflecting the ongoing instability and the continued need for protection. By extending this protection mechanism, the EU and Poland acknowledge the prolonged nature of displacement for Ukrainians and continue to commit to providing a safe place.

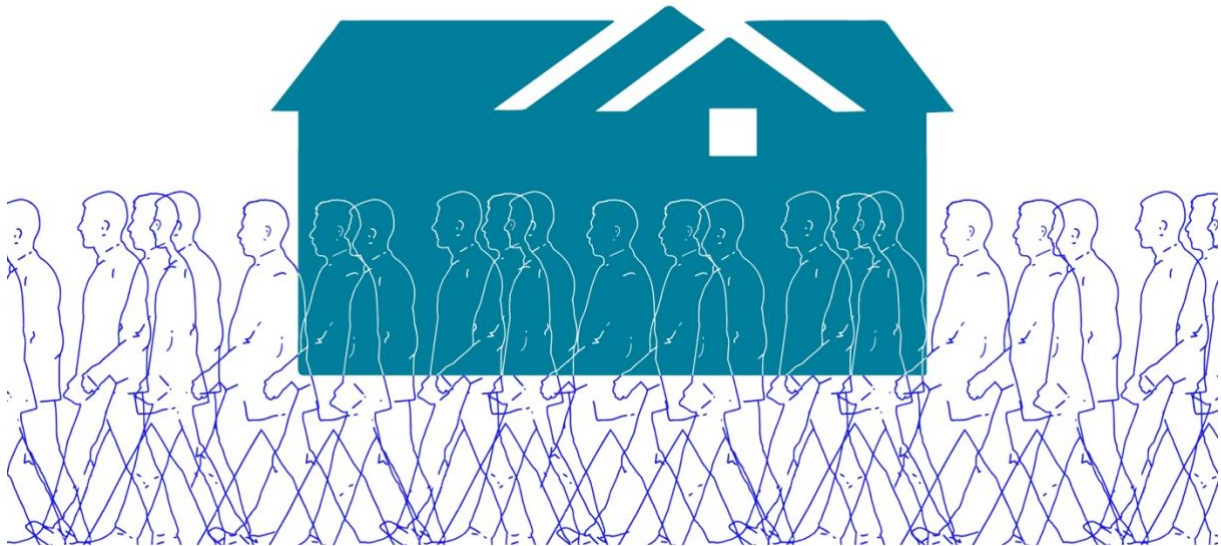
As of the latest data (UNHCR, 2024), Poland hosts about 957 thousand Ukrainian refugees under this scheme, positioning it as the second-largest host country in the EU after Germany. The temporary protection status in Poland, and broadly in the EU, covers a diverse group of beneficiaries:

- Ukrainian nationals and their family members who were residents in Ukraine as of February 24, 2022.
- Non-Ukrainian nationals and stateless persons who were availing of international protection in Ukraine, along with their families.
- Individuals holding a permanent residence permit in Ukraine but unable to safely return to their countries of origin.

Furthermore, the scope of this protection extends to several other categories, including Ukrainian nationals who had to flee shortly before the specified date and those already present on EU territory for reasons such as tourism or employment when the conflict escalated.

The temporary protection offers a range of rights and services to its beneficiaries, such as access to the labour market, accommodation, healthcare, and education, significantly aiding in their temporary resettlement and reducing immediate burdens on Poland's asylum system. This approach not only facilitates a humanitarian response to a crisis of massive scale but

also allows for a structured integration process, giving refugees a semblance of stability in times of extreme uncertainty.



Accommodation situation of Ukrainian Refugees in Poland

An examination of the living standards of young forced migrants offers a crucial framework to scrutinise their adaptation to the new environment and assess their overall wellbeing. This section of the report focuses primarily on the accommodation and interpersonal dynamics with property vendors and flat sharers, delving into the myriad of experiences and challenges, including financial burdens, crowding, and instances of racial intolerance. Despite adversities and discrimination, Ukrainians demonstrate resistance and persistence in seeking stable and affordable accommodation, while generally being satisfied with Warsaw's transport and infrastructure.

Since the onset of the conflict in Ukraine, Poland has seen a substantial influx of refugees seeking safety and stability. Initially, the response was characterised by rapid mobilisation within the Polish community and significant contributions from various sectors, including major corporations like Airbnb. These efforts provided immediate temporary accommodations using various spaces such as trade halls, shopping centres, hotels, and other facilities. However, as the conflict has persisted, the necessity for more permanent housing solutions has become increasingly urgent.

Data suggests that about 30% of the Ukrainian refugees in Poland plan to stay for at least a year, necessitating a transition from temporary to more stable, long-term housing solutions. The rental market, however, has presented challenges. Landlords exhibit significant

reluctance to rent to refugees, driven by fears of potential eviction complications and a general lack of awareness concerning the legal protections and rights both parties hold. It is estimated that around 200,000 apartments⁵ are currently rented under market conditions, predominantly in larger cities where the demand for affordable housing was already high before the crisis.

The “40+” programme, initiated to alleviate some of these pressures, provides financial support to hosts accommodating refugees for up to 120 days. Although this has offered some relief, it is not a sustainable solution to the ongoing housing crisis faced by many refugees. The programme's temporary nature means that after the financial support ends, many are left without long-term housing options, increasing the risk of homelessness among the refugee population. Moreover, the pressure on local housing markets has been exacerbated by rising rental prices, with significant increases reported in major cities like Warsaw, Krakow, and Łódź. This situation has further limited the availability of affordable housing for both locals and refugees alike, complicating integration efforts and straining social services⁶.

The housing dilemma is also marked by a socio-legal challenge, as many refugees face discrimination on the rental market. Reports indicate a widespread hesitancy among landlords to rent to Ukrainians, often based on misconceptions about legal risks and financial liabilities. This has left a substantial portion of the refugee population dependent on temporary housing solutions that offer little security and stability⁷.

Our study shows that securing suitable housing emerges as a critical challenge for Ukrainian refugees relocating to Poland. The arrival of refugees has sharply increased demand, consequently driving up housing costs and leading to a scarcity of affordable rental options. Many refugees, unable to afford individual apartments, find themselves in overcrowded shared accommodations, lacking personal space and privacy. Violetta, a 27-year-old respondent, captures this sentiment:

I lack having my own room. It's probably the only thing. Because apartments are really expensive, renting is very costly. And because of it, we rent only one room. Sometimes I really want to have some personal space, just to be there.

One of the interviewees shared her experience living in a Poles' home, as it was among the common accommodation possibilities in Poland in 2022/23. Despite decent physical living conditions, the speaker reported dissatisfaction with the landlords' behaviour. They felt insulted and used because the landlord failed to provide clear terms for living and made unreasonable requests. This caused discomfort and a feeling of being treated as inferior, as illustrated by instances in which the speaker was requested to perform menial activities.

5 Amnesty International. (2023). Podsumowanie rocznego projektu badawczego "Uchodźcy z Ukrainy w Polsce". Accessed from: [chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://www.amnesty.org.pl/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Podsumowanie-rocznego-projektu-badawczego-Uchodzcy-z-Ukrainy-w-Polsce.pdf](https://www.amnesty.org.pl/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Podsumowanie-rocznego-projektu-badawczego-Uchodzcy-z-Ukrainy-w-Polsce.pdf)

6 Ibid

7 Amnesty International. (2023). "Ukraińcom nie chcą wynajmować". Najnowsze badania Amnesty International. Accessed from: <https://www.amnesty.org.pl/ukraincom-nie-chca-wynajmowac-najnowsze-badania-amnesty-international/>

We understood that we can be asked to leave literally any day. And they used it. I mean they... At first everything was nice, but it became clear really fast, that we are just ... Not that we are not respected, but we are treated like inferior (Chloe, 19)

In terms of living arrangements, roughly one-third of respondents live with their parents, often their moms, while others share a home with friends or roommates. The rest live with grandparents, partners, or other individuals. It is clear that relatively few respondents live in single-person households, which is probably influenced by the factors discussed above.

Despite these challenges, some participants note positive changes, such as improved living conditions and better heating systems compared to those in Ukraine, where many apartments require significant repairs. The proximity to work and educational institutions, facilitated by efficient transportation in Poland, enhances their overall comfort and experience.

However, the process of finding accommodation is fraught with difficulties. Many refugees undergo multiple relocations in search of better living conditions. They rely heavily on social networks and online platforms like OLX or Domiporta to navigate the competitive rental market. This proactive approach often involves blending traditional and modern methods to secure housing, though high costs and limited availability remain significant obstacles.

Discrimination further complicates the housing search for many Ukrainians. Instances of landlords ignoring inquiries from Ukrainian tenants are common, with some respondents attributing this to their nationality, leading to a pervasive sense of bias in the housing market. Oksana, 20 years old, explains:

The problem is, they just did not respond to us. We ask, and they do not reply. Because they see that we are from Ukraine, and that's it. Maybe it is not really because we are Ukrainians, yet I feel like it is linked to the fact that we are from Ukraine, and this is why they do not want to reply to us. (Oksana, 20)

She also notes a general reluctance among landlords to rent to Ukrainians due to fears of instability and financial risk.

In summary, Ukrainian refugees in Poland face a complex housing situation characterised by high demand and costs, limited availability, and discrimination. These factors necessitate enhanced efforts to ensure equitable access to housing, acknowledging the dual challenges of financial constraints and systemic discrimination in the rental market.

Educational Experiences of Ukrainian Forced Migrant Youth in Poland

Enrolment to Higher Education for Ukrainian Refugees in Poland

According to the Higher Education and Science Act, each university in Poland establishes its own procedures for admitting students. These procedures include verifying the learning outcomes based on the standards set by the university authorities.

For Ukrainian citizens, whose stay in Poland is legally recognised under the Act on Assistance to Ukrainian Citizens dated March 12, 2022, specific provisions apply. If they were enrolled as students at a Ukrainian university on February 24, 2022, and can declare their student status on that date without possessing the usual documentation (such as transcripts, exam results, or internship records), Polish universities can recognise their prior periods of study. This recognition is based on verification of their learning outcomes.



Support for Ukrainian Refugee Students Across Polish Universities

Polish universities use various measures to support Ukrainian students and integrate them into the Polish academic community. For instance, the University of Warsaw has established a comprehensive support system. The Crisis Management Team was set up to coordinate

research, teaching, and social initiatives specifically for Ukrainian students. UW also created additional enrolment slots for Ukrainian students, with a separate admission process to ensure their opportunities do not impact local applicants. Extensive Polish language programmes were introduced to meet educational requirements and facilitate integration. Additionally, collaborative programs with Ukrainian universities were established to ensure the continuation of academic and research activities securely despite the conflict⁸.

Similarly, other universities⁹ have emphasised social support for Ukrainian students, including waivers for accommodation fees and tuition for those facing financial difficulties. UPP offers comprehensive social scholarships, demonstrating a flexible approach to meet the diverse needs of refugee students. They have facilitated applications for financial aid and housing relief, underscoring their commitment to providing practical and immediate support.

Some universities have also actively supported Ukrainian mothers and children who have taken refuge at the university. They have been collecting essential items such as food and hygiene products, addressing immediate basic needs alongside educational support. This initiative highlights a community-focused response, ensuring that the refugees receive comprehensive care.

Language and cultural orientation have also been integral to these support systems. Polish universities have implemented extensive language training programs, crucial for academic success and daily life integration. Cultural orientation workshops help students adjust to new social norms and expectations, easing their transition. Financial and legal assistance has been another critical area of support. Adjusted financial aid regulations allow for more accessible scholarship opportunities and emergency financial assistance. Legal assistance programs help students navigate residency laws and university regulations, providing much-needed stability.

Health and wellbeing initiatives have also been a priority. Health checks and psychological support address the immediate and ongoing wellness needs of the refugee population. For example, University SWPS¹⁰ has leveraged the resources to provide essential psychological support and consultations.

Our study also shows that the educational experiences of Ukrainian forced migrant youth in Poland constitute a pivotal aspect of their integration into a new societal and cultural context. This report demonstrates how Ukrainian refugee youth have been dealing with challenges such as language barriers, educational system differences, and the balancing of work and study commitments.

⁸ Warsaw University. <https://www.uw.edu.pl/solidarni-z-ukraina-2/>

⁹ University of Life Sciences in Poznań. <https://puls.edu.pl/wsparcie-socjalne-dla-student-w-z-ukrainy>

¹⁰ University SWPS. <https://swps.pl/my-universytet/aktualnosci/aktualnosci/32068-klinika-terapii-poznawczo-behawioralnej-universytetu-swps-udziela-bezplatnej-pomocy-psychologicznej-uchodzcom-z-ukrainy>

The Role of Education in Navigating Displacement and Uncertainty

The shift to the Polish educational system introduced students to new pedagogical methods, emphasising practical application and critical thinking, which, while enriching, required adjustments. Some participants of this study indicated that their education had been interrupted during their forced migration experiences, not only physically but also mentally. The insecurity and instability forced them to pause or give up education, as it was considered less important or burdensome in times of war and transition.

For others, education provided stability and routine in times of uncertainty. The testimony of Elena underscores the broader significance of education for displaced youth in Poland. Her experience highlights education as a catalyst for new beginnings and personal growth, extending beyond academic achievement to offer stability and security amidst uncertainty. Such insights affirm the critical role of educational environments in fostering a sense of normalcy and safety for those navigating the challenges of displacement.

Beyond academics, studying in Poland represented a fresh start for me. It was about pursuing my dreams in a place that offered not just educational opportunities but also a sense of security and stability. (Elena, 19)

Participants who underwent the transition within educational frameworks reported encountering challenges associated with the dual burdens imposed by participation in both Ukrainian and Polish educational systems. Therefore, Ukrainian students faced challenges adapting to the Polish educational system, which significantly differs from the Ukrainian one. Language barriers, unfamiliar teaching methods, and curriculum differences pose significant hurdles to effective learning and integration.

Well, let's start with what's really ... well, different, everything is different. The approach of the professors, there are many students attending lectures, and the lessons are online as well, where, for example, 150 students might be present, and the professor simply proceeds with their topic, just, let's say, talking and talking and talking, finishes, and that's it, goodbye. Also, part-time studies here take place on weekends, and this was a surprise for me already after I enrolled. (Marianna, 26)

I arrived at the university—or, more specifically, the construction department—and was amused by how much it reminded me of both Warsaw Polytechnic and Lviv Polytechnic. I discovered numerous similarities among these institutions. There's roughly a year's difference in their founding dates, but overall, they are quite alike. Despite differences in the structuring of schedules, the emphasis placed on ECTS points, and other aspects of the educational process, it wasn't vastly different. Yet, the quality of education is perceivably higher. It's evident in the greater expectations for students to engage in self-study. It could be

said that such emphasis is almost entirely overlooked by us. Naturally, this makes it more challenging. (Sergii, 19)

The sense of resilience and adaptability of Ukrainian students also appear in their narratives. Despite the initial hurdles, many have found ways to overcome these challenges, demonstrating a strong commitment to their education. “I’ve been studying extra hard to catch up with my Polish classmates” (David, 26), exemplifies the determination and adaptability of these students.

Access to Education and Support Services

Access to education and support services emerged as a critical theme, with many respondents appreciating the availability of language courses and academic support. However, there were also concerns about the adequacy and accessibility of these services. The participants also mentioned financial assistance provided by Polish educational institutions and the EU, aimed at supporting Ukrainian students financially during their studies.

Language courses, some standard scholarship was allocated by the European Union specifically for Ukrainian refugees. (Sergii, 19)

Another student shared her experience in a Polish lyceum and the warm reception from some Polish students during a school exchange, suggesting moments of successful social integration and mutual respect.

In the Polish lyceum, generally, teachers ... We had a very nice teacher. He even taught ‘Red Viburnum’ [a Ukrainian folk song]. Overall, teachers treated us well. (Liza, 16)

Support Services and Language Barriers

Many Ukrainian students struggle with the Polish language, which directly impacts their academic performance and social integration within schools. One respondent discussed attending Polish language courses to improve their language skills, highlighting the ongoing struggle to overcome the language barrier for better integration into the Polish educational system and society. This effort reflects the broader experience of Ukrainian students striving to adapt academically and socially through language acquisition.

I attended Polish language courses, but sometimes it feels like it's not enough. (Elena, 18)

The stress related to classroom participation, particularly in activities like group work and presentations, was mentioned by students who feel overwhelmed due to limited Polish language proficiency. This scenario underscores the direct impact of language barriers on students' academic performance and their sense of belonging within the school environment.

I feel stressed during group work and presentations because of my language skills. (Nathan, 18)

A recurring theme is the struggle with social integration and developing a sense of belonging within Polish schools. Ukrainian students also often feel isolated due to language barriers and cultural differences. A respondent reflected on their initial experiences:

I found it hard to make friends at first because everything was so new and different. (Violeta, 27)

The language barrier not only affects academic performance but also hinders everyday social interactions. One respondent shared their strategy of immediately informing new acquaintances about their limited Polish language skills, which, although initially intended to lower expectations, eventually led to more understanding and support from peers.

Social integration appears as another important theme facing Ukrainian refugees in Poland, with students facing difficulties in establishing connections with Polish peers. One of the participants shared her struggle of being isolated by her Polish counterparts, who often do not include Ukrainians in their social circles.

Well, again the language. But to be honest, I don't see it as my biggest problem now. At school, Polish teenagers isolate Ukrainian teenagers. They don't let them into their circle usually. And they don't want to. It's not like I'm just so super cool and don't let anyone near me. It's just that no one comes close enough not to let you in. (Katarina, 17)

This excerpt illustrates the social barriers that extend beyond language, encompassing cultural and social differences.

Educational Aspirations and Future Prospects

Despite the challenges, many young Ukrainians remain optimistic about their educational and career prospects in Poland. They view the Polish educational system as an opportunity for growth and development. *I see a lot of opportunities here in Poland, especially since it's*

part of the EU (Yulia, 17), said a teen, indicating a positive outlook towards her future in a new country.

Reflecting on education in Poland, the respondents see it as providing slightly better prospects than in Ukraine. This acknowledges the perceived quality of Polish education while also expressing an affinity towards their homeland, illustrating the complex interplay between educational opportunities among Ukrainian students in Poland.

I: Do you see a greater perspective for yourself in Poland or in Ukraine?

R: Probably, there are slightly better prospects here. Although I will not say that they are much larger than in Ukraine. (Elena, 18)

Consequently, upon assessing the obstacles and prospects delineated by numerous participants, it becomes evident that they underscore the enhanced opportunities for constructing a future career trajectory and achieving success subsequent to their academic pursuits in Polish universities.

The educational experiences of Ukrainian forced migrant youth in Poland are marked by significant challenges and adaptability as they integrate into a new educational system amidst displacement. These students face hurdles such as language barriers, different pedagogical approaches, and the necessity to adjust to the unfamiliar curriculum and teaching methods of the Polish education system. The transition requires substantial effort to adapt, with many experiencing a sense of alienation and struggle to keep pace academically and socially within their new environment.

Overall, the experiences of Ukrainian forced migrant youth in Poland underscore the complex interplay between the challenges of adapting to a new educational system and the opportunities it presents for growth and integration. Their journey is characterised by a mix of resilience, adaptability, and optimism towards their educational and future career prospects in Poland. This narrative reflects the broader implications of forced migration on education and integration, showcasing the critical role of support systems in facilitating the academic and social incorporation of displaced youth.

Social Relations of Ukrainian Forced Migrant Youth in Poland

The adaptation and prosperity of Ukrainian forced migrant youth in Poland are inextricably linked to their environment and social interactions. Thus, the role of the environment in the adaptation process proves to be critical. First, it is essential to consider that Ukrainians are compelled to master local norms of behaviour and values, necessitating active interaction with the local population. Consequently, a positive and receptive environment can facilitate faster adaptation by providing support and understanding.

My social circle changed drastically since the beginning of the war. I had friends, very close people to me. And when I moved, of course, my environment here changed dramatically. Here, I interacted with completely different people, with very different characters. I had to adjust to them to get used to communicating with them. Later, well, it took a whole year to get used to these people. (Vika, 16)

Social contacts with locals and other migrants can become **a vital source** of information about **the labour market, education, housing, and other aspects of daily life**. Active participation in various groups and communities can aid in developing a social network and provide necessary support in challenging situations. In many cases, **Poles have demonstrated considerable tolerance and openness towards Ukrainian migrants**. This often manifested in readiness to assist in adaptation to new conditions, in education and work, by offering advice on education or employment, and a curiosity about Ukrainian cultural peculiarities and mutual exchange of experiences.

Poles have also shown **understanding towards the difficulties encountered by Ukrainian migrants**, including language difficulties, cultural shock, and uncertainty in a new environment. This has contributed to creating a positive climate for the adaptation and integration of migrants into Polish society. Examples of such understanding and warmth from Polish colleagues and peers often become a significant factor in shaping migrants' positive attitudes towards the new country, helping them feel welcomed and supported in their new environment.

Because almost everyone I met was positively inclined. Everyone somehow helped. Everyone at the integration exit, exactly. Everyone helped somehow. They said don't worry, smile there, let's talk, we'll dance something, even sometimes, girls approached you, if something is unclear to you, if you have, even, problems with cases, with 'conjugations', come I will help you. Also, in the first course, we communicated more or less normally. There were often many hangouts, events, which I always went to. Then still without girls from Ukraine, I went alone. And we actively, cool, hung out. (Oksana, 20)

Despite generally positive relations and a favourable attitude of most Poles towards Ukrainian migrants, **some Ukrainians still encountered manifestations of discrimination**

in the new social environment. Discrimination can take various forms, including **refusal to hire based on origin, language or cultural barriers, or negative stereotypes about Ukrainians**. In some cases, Ukrainians may be subjected to oppression **or unpleasant comments in public spaces**. Such discrimination can impact the wellbeing and self-perception of migrants, complicate their adaptation, and affect their social interactions and opportunities. However, it is important to note that discrimination is an individual phenomenon and is not representative of the entire Polish society. A certain number of Polish citizens demonstrate tolerance and understanding towards migrants and make efforts to ensure their integration and mutual understanding.

Well, Poles are more, if in a managerial position, more lenient towards Poles than towards Ukrainians. (...) it was noticeable the difference, why I could not sit so long on one job, because I felt that there are privileges among me and Poles. Because I somewhere something spoiled then I, somewhere something broke, then I. Changes to take from you, but you wanted more? No, here Maria wants more shifts for herself. You messed up there, so I'll take shifts from you. I say, and what am I to live on, sorry. I also want more shifts, to work. And, this is my decision, this week you will have, like, a maximum of 1500 zlotys. (Veronika, 21)



Maintaining Relationships with Those Left Behind in Ukraine

Even while residing in a new country, a number of Ukrainian migrants maintain contact with those who remain in Ukraine. For many, communication with family, friends, and their community remains an important element of their social life and provides support in the new environment. Ukrainians use various communication tools such as telephone calls, video

connections, social networks, and messaging to stay in touch with their loved ones and friends in Ukraine. This helps them feel supported and maintain ties with their native culture.

We correspond and it's quite systematic, and recently I even remember coming to Ukraine for a week or two and we just missed each other so much, I don't know one without the other, that literally after three days they came to visit me in Warsaw. (Anna, 20)

Yes, a lot. Like, acquaintances, people, twenty-thirty. Friends—eight, plus relatives. Moreover, when I came here, I had a big argument with my father. And ... And so on. I have a lot of people there in general. There literally is my life. (David, 19)

Communicating with those who remain in Ukraine can also be a way to help them stay connected with events and developments in their homeland, as well as maintain important social and cultural connections. Thus, even in a new environment, Ukrainian migrants find ways to maintain communication with those who have stayed in Ukraine, helping them preserve their identity, maintain social connections, and provide psychological support in their new lives.

Immigration and war have had a significant impact on the breakdown of some connections between Ukrainian migrants and those who remained in Ukraine. The danger and instability associated with conflicts and wars can lead to loss of connection due to limited access to communication means or, as Veronika and Elena explain, a worsening psychological state.

I was left with one acquaintance. So, the war put all the dots on the i's. Who was your friend, who was, so to speak, by your side, and who left and abandoned you. (Veronika, 21)

A few connections were lost due to relocation. Generally, the people I've been friends with all my life, I still talk to them. Of course, because I'm here now studying, I have a job, and they are studying too, we don't have as much opportunity to talk. But I try to call at least once, twice a week and tell them what's new. (Elena, 18)

In many cases, the breakdown of connections is a result of complex circumstances caused by instability and risks associated with moving, war, or life in general. Therefore, immigration and war can affect connections, making them more complex or even leading to disruption due to physical and psychological danger and instability.

Experience with the Polish Health System

Ukrainian forced migrant youth residing in Poland encounter various aspects of the country's medical system. For many young Ukrainians, access to quality healthcare and maintaining health are priorities while staying abroad. The Polish medical system is known for its high quality of services and modern technologies; however, it may present distinct challenges and complexities for Ukrainian migrants.

One of the main aspects of the Ukrainian migrant youth experience in the Polish medical sector is the issue of language barriers and understanding the Polish medical system. Many may require assistance or an interpreter to comprehend medical procedures, prescriptions, and diagnoses.

Sometimes, when additional questions arise, as she is not very familiar with all these medical processes, which tests are needed by which doctor and so forth, they explain things differently, simply in another language. And this sometimes creates problems, but after two years, we've gotten used to it. (Sergii, 19)

Ukrainian migrants also face queues for doctor appointments, medical examinations, prescription fulfilments, or any other medical procedures, just like Poles themselves. Waiting times can vary significantly depending on the type of medical facility, its location, time of day, and other factors, from several days to several months.

And she said the earliest was the beginning of January. It's like waiting several months. Like, almost four months of waiting. (Katerian, 17)

The healthcare here, of course, cannot really be compared to our own. Because to see a doctor, you need to book in advance. And that's a month or two in advance. Maybe even a year, depending. It depends on the doctor. Because my mother needed to have a tooth extracted. It was a wisdom tooth. She was able to book because we have a Ukrainian PESEL and it was free. But if you need urgent care, you still have to book a week or maybe two with a private doctor and pay a considerable amount. She booked with the state service. We came, we waited about a month and a half, it seemed very long, yes. And it hurt her all that time. We came and he says that I can't see you right now, I can't do the extraction now, book again. We thought he might take us in a week or two. Then my mother waited another two months. It was a very long wait. (Weronika, 19)

Furthermore, financial aspects can also pose a problem as some medical services in Poland can be expensive for migrants, especially if they do not have insurance or if their coverage is limited. After some time using the Polish medical system, among the Ukrainian forced migrant youth and their families in Poland we found a significant number of dissatisfied individuals. Despite some positive aspects, some migrants expressed their disappointment

due to the long queues they experienced when making appointments, the quality of the medical services received, and obtaining prescriptions for medications.

I came to Poland, and I started having stomach issues. I don't know why. Maybe some food, I don't know, because this never happened in Ukraine. And we went to doctors, but it didn't help. At first, some treatment, it didn't help. So, we went to Zaporizhzhia, there I got treatment, took some pills for two weeks, and that's it. Nothing has hurt in my stomach since then, well, since the year I got treated, but before that, it could hurt every day for a month, then stop, then start again. But I got treated. I mean, the Polish doctors prescribed some medication, I got treated, and then we went to Zaporizhzhia, the doctors prescribed medication, I got treated. So, now nothing, everything is fine. (Myroslava, 17)

Yes, there was, but I am not satisfied. What exactly did I not like? It's probably that I didn't notice any great desire to help in Polish doctors. For example, if you go to a specific doctor, he won't tell you a word more about your health. He'll just say so and so, and then go on to another doctor. And that's somehow unacceptable, because in Ukraine you go to one doctor, and he might give you advice about your general health condition, but here you won't get more information. (Olena, 26)

Summarising the experience of Ukrainian forced migrant youth in the Polish medical sector, it can be noted that a significant number of migrants faced various challenges and problems. Long queues, high costs, communication difficulties, and cultural differences have led to dissatisfaction among a significant portion of the migrant community. Despite certain positive aspects such as the quality of medical services and the availability of certain procedures, shortcomings in the healthcare provision system create significant difficulties for migrants seeking medical assistance in Poland.

Financial Independence and Employment

One of the most significant processes during youth is achieving independence from families, particularly financial independence. The research shows that most participants have a primary goal of achieving complete or partial financial independence from their families. Employment also served as a facilitator to learn the Polish language and enhance social integration.

Usually, Ukrainian youth take part-time jobs as general workers, for example, working in factories or as waiters. The transition to the Polish job market often requires Ukrainian migrants to adapt to roles that may not align with their previous specialisations in Ukraine. Some of the participants reflected on not only a change in profession but also finding informal routes to acquiring the necessary skills for their current job and being flexible and adaptive to fit into the Polish market.

Financial stability is crucial for them as it ensures their livelihood and enables them to support themselves and their parents. This is especially significant for participants whose families' financial situation critically changed after the beginning of the war.

Well, I just want to open my business a little bit, a little bit, somehow go in that direction, so that next year it will have a big Christmas tree, not this one. ... And to be able to make [give] gifts. I like to make gifts there, for example, something like buying an expensive phone for my mom or something else. (Veronika, 21)

Remote work options with Ukrainian companies remain a possibility for some, maintaining connections with their home country's economy. However, the domain of entrepreneurship in Poland presents significant challenges. Several respondents expressed they had difficulties in establishing their own businesses, often citing ethnic discrimination as a barrier. This discrimination not only hampers professional advancement but also impedes broader societal integration efforts.

In summary, while Ukrainian migrants strive for financial independence through various employment strategies in Poland, they face substantial obstacles, including adapting to different job roles, acquiring new skills, and overcoming discriminatory practices in entrepreneurship.

Future Plans to Stay or Return

Participants' plans for returning to Ukraine varied significantly, with several factors influencing their decisions. Four participants expressed a desire to return to Ukraine as soon as possible and five planned to return when it was safe. However, two did not plan to return soon and five had no plans to return. Still, ten participants were unsure about their future plans.

Those who would like to return to Ukraine stressed the necessity of the end of the war, changes in the government, and new job opportunities. Some participants expressed a strong desire to return to Ukraine primarily to reunite with family, friends, and partners. For instance, Olena, 26, shared her struggles with living abroad:

To be honest, I want to return to Ukraine for this very reason (to see my friends and family) because after living here for a year and a half, I realised that I cannot live my whole life as an emigrant, let's say, seeing my family once a year. It is very difficult for me. (Olena, 26)

Conversely, participants who had begun to establish their lives abroad, such as starting studies at a Polish university, indicated a low likelihood of returning to Ukraine. They cited better opportunities for building a future career and establishing businesses in Poland as key reasons. The ongoing instability in Ukraine was seen as a potential risk to their long-term plans, deterring them from considering a return soon after the war's end.

Economic and social consequences of the war also weigh heavily on their minds, particularly in areas heavily affected by conflict. Nathan, 18, reflected on the potential dangers of returning immediately post-conflict:

It depends on what it will be like. It depends on what happens after the war. But I think that after the war is over, it would be dangerous to stay there for three or four years. Literally. Because the soldiers, the way they come back from the war, what I've heard and what I know, they're just people. And maybe there will even be, like, a civil war there. I'm not sure about that. But a lot of my friends even tell me that. (Nathan, 18)

Additionally, challenges related to the legalisation of residence and uncertain residential status often emerge among those wishing to stay, complicating their ability to settle permanently. These complexities add another layer of consideration for participants when contemplating their futures in relation to returning to Ukraine or remaining abroad.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Drawing on the insights gained from the experiences and challenges documented throughout this study, these recommendations aim to address critical issues identified in the areas of housing, education, social integration, and employment. Furthermore, they propose actionable steps for both governmental and non-governmental institutions to facilitate a supportive environment for these young adults. By implementing these recommendations, stakeholders can significantly improve the living standards, educational outcomes, and overall integration of Ukrainian refugees (see Table 1).

Table 1. Recommendations

<i>Target agents /Recommendations</i>	<i>Governmental institutions</i>	<i>Non-governmental institutions</i>
Recommendations to improve housing		
<p>Tackle discrimination within the housing market: Launch a public education campaign to spread awareness about housing rights and responsibility. Monitor the situation by collecting data on housing trends to recognise discrimination and disparities, thus influencing public policy, target resources efficiently, and measure the progress in reducing discrimination.</p>	+	
<p>Legal protection of both renting vendors and immigrants: Provide resources to fair housing agencies in order to ensure that both landlords and tenants are secured in their agreement.</p>	+	

Recommendations to tackle unemployment and underemployment

<p>Ensure long-term impact: Promote opportunities for immigrants to obtain work, which will improve their disposable income and allow them to afford to rent an apartment. Offer support programmes to help with searching for a job, gaining language certificates, as well as nostrification of diplomas, which will support the employability of Ukrainian youth.</p>	+	+
<p>Support Career Development and Future Aspirations: provide career counselling and development services tailored to the needs of migrant students at the universities, official job centres and NGOs. This includes information on career opportunities within Poland and the EU, internship programs, and guidance on leveraging their skills and knowledge for career advancement.</p>	+	+
<p>Enhance Language Support Programs: Expand language courses both independent and within higher education institutions, offering tailored language-learning materials; integrating language learning into the educational institutions curriculum to address the direct impact of language barriers on academic performance and social integration.</p>	+	+

Recommendations to improve experience in higher education

<p>Enhance Academic Support Services: tutoring, academic advising, and special sessions on navigating online learning environments, which have become increasingly prevalent.</p>	+	+
<p>Foster Research Collaboration and Student Projects: Encourage and support collaborative research projects and student-led initiatives that involve participants from both countries.</p>	+	+

Recommendations to improve medical support

<p>Enhance Linguistic Support: Implement programmes that provide language assistance within healthcare facilities. This could include interpreters or providing medical staff with basic Ukrainian language training to improve communication and understanding between healthcare providers and Ukrainian patients.</p>	+	+
<p>Healthcare Navigation Assistance: Create a dedicated portal or hotline that provides guidance and support for Ukrainian migrants in Poland, offering assistance in areas ranging from how to find a doctor to understanding medical billing and insurance coverage.</p>		

ANNEX 1

Table 2. Participant sample summary

<i>Category</i>	<i>Type</i>	<i>Number of participants</i>
Gender	Male	7
	Female	19
Age	16-17	5
	18-25	11
	26-29	10
Education level	Secondary education	16
	BA	5
	MA	5
Student status	University	9
	School	4
	No	13
Employment in Poland	Yes	6
	No	20
Origin from Ukraine	Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson, Zaporizhzhia, Kharkiv oblasts	9
	other oblasts of Ukraine	17
Migration with	Close relatives (e.g., mother, father, sibling, husband/wife)	16
	Other relatives (e.g., aunt, uncle, cousin)	1
	Alone	9
Living with	Parents	9
	Siblings/cousins	3
	Other family members	4
	Friend	4
	Alone	6
Plans for future	Return ASAP	4
	Return when its safe	5
	Do not return soon	2
	Do not plan to return	5
	Not sure	10

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