Ukrainian displaced people's inclusion in Europe

Executive Summary

Europe welcomed over six million displaced people from Ukraine in the first years after the full-scale invasion. The initial response was built under pressure. Two years on, the questions changed. What helps people move from arrival to work, school, and stable routines? What breaks down when emergency measures meet long-term needs? What can countries learn from each other when systems, labour markets, and languages differ?

This project created a safe discussion space to address those questions across Europe and to build a network of people working on solutions. In 2024-25, we established a network involving academics, policymakers, and the business community, with active participation from Ukrainian displaced people. Through regular roundtables, shared information, and joint discussion, we identified gaps in integration support, compared approaches, and extracted practical lessons. The project relied on structured dialogue, direct involvement of displaced people, and a multi-stakeholder format.

This briefing summarises what we learned from the roundtables and interviews, what challenges displaced people and host communities shared, and what factors contributed to national and regional differences. It also looks ahead at what our findings imply for more sustainable support for those forced to leave Ukraine because of the full-scale invasion.

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Overview of events

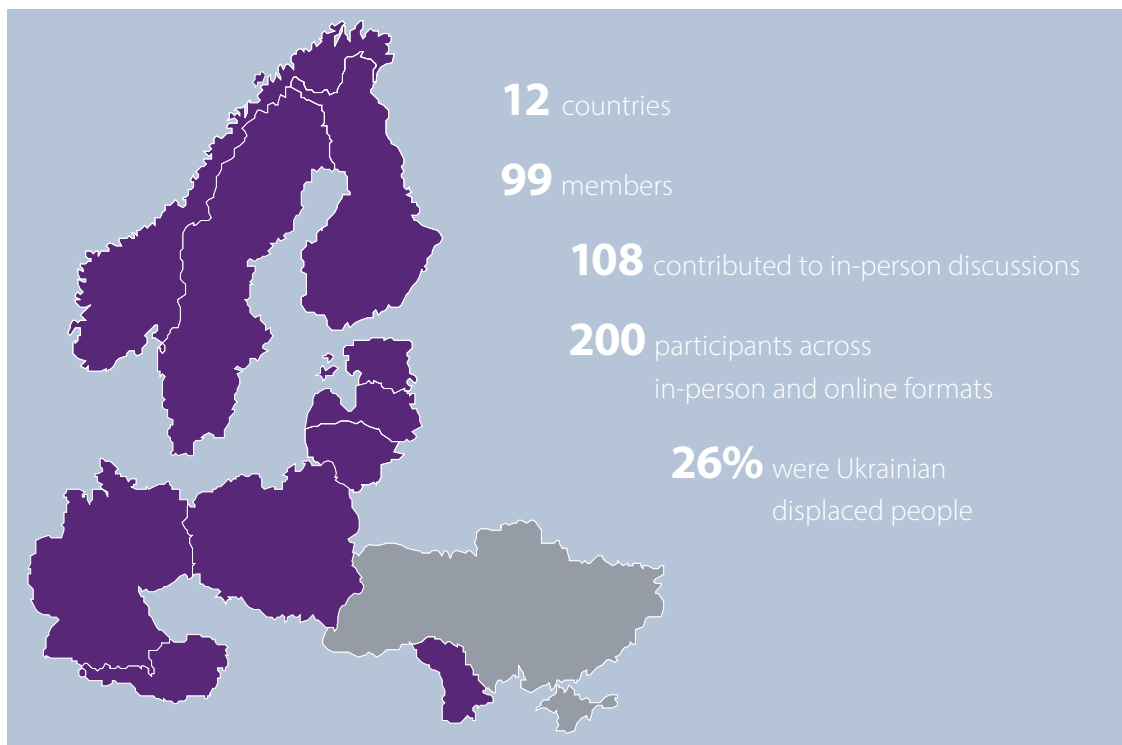We organised both online and in-person events. Each event focused on a different country and a different part of integration. The events were designed as working sessions. Participants compared how policies operate in practice, tested assumptions against lived experience, and identified what is needed next.

Events

- April, 2024, Riga. Baltic experiences and perspectives.

- September, 2024, Chisinau. Ukrainian displaced people in Moldova.

- October, 2024, Riga. Employment and education of Ukrainian displaced people in the Baltic region.

- November, 2024, Vienna. Integration of Ukrainian displaced people in Austria.

- November, 2024, Warsaw. Labour inclusion, skills, and entrepreneurship for Ukrainian displaced people in Poland.

- December, 2024, Riga. Education and long-term approach to supporting Ukrainian displaced people.

- March, 2025, Stockholm. The Swedish model of supporting Ukrainian displaced people (included Denmark, Finland and Norway).

- April, 2025, Berlin. The German approach to Ukrainian displaced people's integration.

12 countries

99 members

108 contributed to in-person discussions

200 participants across
in-person and online formats

26% were Ukrainian
displaced people
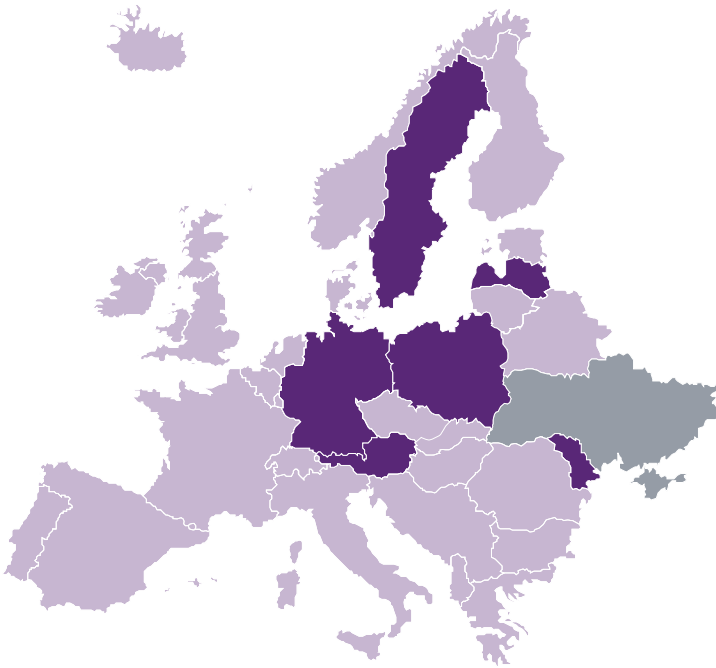
We held eight main events. The network expanded to 99 members across 12 countries (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Sweden, Norway, Germany, Moldova, Finland, Poland, Austria). In total, 108 contributed to in-person discussions, with over 200 participants across in-person and online formats. Ukrainian displaced people accounted for 26% of in-person participants, including students, academics, and activists. The countries varied in EU membership and in the extent of their recent experience supporting displaced people.

We worked with partner organisations including Startup Finland, the think tank Providus, UNHCR, and universities such as Central European University, the University of Warsaw, and the Stockholm School of Economics.

In addition, we carried out 39 exploratory interviews to identify issues and shape agendas in Latvia. The roundtables resulted in outputs including a FREE Policy Brief, a thesis, and a planned academic publication. This report draws on the material from the roundtables and interviews.

Same Directive, Different Paths

Across EU Member States, the Temporary Protection Directive set a common frame of rights. However, how this worked in practice differed depending on whether displaced Ukrainian people were placed inside standard integration systems, kept on parallel tracks, or shifted between the two. Several also differentiated rights within the Ukrainian group, linked to registration timing and administrative steps.

Extending the temporary

The temporal aspect of temporary protection was central to both policy planning and lived experience. For displaced people, integration decisions require commitment and cost time and money: language courses, training, leases, and credential recognition. When status was time-limited, and future rules were unclear, people hesitated to invest in host-country plans. Comparison also highlights that time under temporary protection often does not count towards permanent residence, weakening incentives to invest.

This was especially clear in Sweden, where uncertainty about the future of temporary protection affected planning and willingness to invest. Participants described delaying decisions such as committing to a housing contract, paying for courses, or investing time in Sweden-specific steps because the time horizon felt unclear. Policy changes and administrative sequencing also mattered. People arriving close together could face different steps and different outcomes depending on registration timelines, translating into unequal entitlements.

In Germany, uncertainty about what comes after temporary protection was discussed as affecting well-being and planning. The concern was not only legal status, but whether next year would resemble the current one. This influenced decisions about training pathways, job changes, and schooling choices.

In Moldova, which is not in the EU, temporary protection was enacted in March 2023 and extended from March 2024 to March 2025. The extension was described as including compensated medicines and specialised care, and changes to absence rules and entry requirements. These changes affected access to care and mobility, and therefore everyday decisions around work and schooling.

In Austria, a high level of bureaucracy met policy uncertainty, participants raised passport expiry and the way legal status shapes return decisions. Document expiry was discussed as

a practical risk that can remove options quickly and force people to prioritise paperwork over employment and training.

> In this sense, changes and lack of long-term knowing and clarity had a clear impact on people's lives and planning in the Ukrainian displaced populations.

Language spaces

Language acted as a gatekeeper and a facilitator. Even where displaced people were working, language shaped the type of job they could take, whether they could progress, and how easily they could use public services. It was not only motivation, but access to courses and the time to attend them.

In Germany, initial German proficiency was described as low while enrolment in integration courses was high. At the same time, mothers with young children, elderly adults, and people with health issues were described as having difficulty attending courses. This created a gap between formal availability and participation.

In the Baltics, language was a constraint on employment. In the SEIS Latvia survey (2024), cited in roundtable, language barriers were the most frequently cited obstacle to employment (38%). This contributed to poorer job matching and de-skilling. It is worth nothing, that the Baltic countries were seen as attractive because Russian is spoken by many residents, allowing easier communication and navigation of daily life.

In Moldova, Romanian language courses were offered, and demand was noted for more flexible formats, including evening and weekend courses.

In Sweden, language barriers were discussed alongside limited access to integration measures for people under temporary protection. The point raised was practical: when integration measures are restricted, the route into structured language learning becomes weaker, and language remains a barrier for longer.

In Denmark, Ukrainians were connected to mainstream language and integration provision, narrowing the gap between formal access and participation. In Norway, Ukrainians were initially granted access comparable to other protection holders, but later policy tightening was framed as avoiding more favourable conditions than neighbouring countries, which reduced predictability.

Access was uneven across countries and within countries over time and place. Participation was limited by capacity, distance, care responsibilities, and work schedules.

How caring responsibilities shape choices

Because men faced exit restrictions, early arrivals were mostly women, elderly people, and children. Many households were described as women arriving with children. This shaped what people could do in the first months and what remained difficult later.

In Germany, childcare constraints were linked to lower participation in language courses and lower employment for mothers. Even where courses were available, attendance depended on childcare and predictable schedules.

In Moldova, many women arrived with children, and children attending online school in Ukraine was described as a barrier to mothers entering the labour market. When children spent the school day at home in online schooling, supervision became part of the routine, leaving limited time for courses or paid work.

In Poland, single mothers and families with children were discussed as facing barriers linked to childcare constraints and limited job options. Similar stories came up in every country. In the Baltics, access to kindergartens was supported and relatively quick. In Poland and Latvia, decisions on mandatory attendance in primary and secondary schools were delayed, leaving families the option of relying only on Ukrainian online schooling. This increased care responsibilities for parents.

Vulnerability beyond emergency

A shared theme was ongoing vulnerability. After the emergency phase, it was emphasised during the discussions that risks were often assumed to be resolved. The roundtables highlighted that this was not the case. Vulnerability continued, but became less visible and more uneven.

In Austria, participants raised risks such as sexual harassment and described gaps in basic services where private donors and volunteers filled roles, linked to how responsibilities were allocated at the city level. Access to support could depend on where a person lived and on whether local volunteer capacity remained, rather than on a consistent baseline. In Latvia, safety and security concerns were reported by a share of respondents. Women reported harassment

risks in many organisations, including senior roles. These issues influenced everyday choices, including travel, job choices, and participation outside the home. In the roundtables, we discussed how these stories remain absent from conversations on the topic, which makes already vulnerable populations even more vulnerable.

Disability was largely absent from discussions and priorities, except in Austria, where uneven access to support was linked to municipalities. Some had limited capacity to assist, leaving some of the most vulnerable people with fewer options. This shows a wider pattern: local capacity can matter as much as formal rights, creating uneven outcomes within one framework.

In our discussions the same pattern emerged: temporary protection created formal rights, but outcomes depended on whether those rights were turned into workable pathways in daily life. Where status horizons were unclear, administrative steps were slow, or access to language and childcare was constrained, people delayed decisions, accepted poorer job matches, or remained outside training and employment despite having work rights on paper. Unequal entitlements linked to timing and local capacity further widened gaps within the same protection framework. In practice, sustainable inclusion depends on reducing uncertainty and removing early bottlenecks, so that households can plan, participate, and move from emergency support to stable routines.

Different trajectories

Each country had its own system, approach and constraints. As a result, displaced Ukrainians faced different opportunities depending on where and when they arrived. The combination of time-limited status and country-specific policy choices produced different trajectories, both for displaced people and for the policymakers working to support them.

Moving from emergency response to sustainable support

Differences were less about intent and more about delivery. Three factors came up repeatedly: who carried day-to-day responsibility, how tasks were split across government and civil society, and the expected sequence from arrival to language, training, and work. If we compare Scandinavian responses there is a practical dividing line: whether Ukrainians were channelled into existing refugee integration systems, or placed on separate, lighter tracks, with later adjustments when gaps became visible.

In Austria, participants described a model where volunteers and private donors covered parts of basic support, linked to how responsibilities were allocated between different levels of government. This could work well in some places, but it created uneven access. The type and reliability of support could change between locations, depending on local actors and how long volunteer capacity can be maintained.

In Poland, the early phase was described as community-driven, with housing, donations, and volunteer support filling immediate needs. Over time, the discussion shifted from emergency response to long-term policy and coordination. The concern was not whether people could be helped in the first weeks, but whether there was a clear system for the second year, and how gaps would be prevented once early mobilisation slowed down.

In Moldova, the response was discussed in whole-of-society terms, alongside the constraints of being a frontline state outside the EU. As cited in roundtable, at the end of June 2024, around 122,000 refugees from Ukraine were stated as remaining in Moldova, described as around 4% of the population, and refugees were described as largely women and children. Given the scale relative to the country's systems, coordination across state institutions, municipalities and non-state actors was described as necessary.

In the Baltic countries, a similar pattern was visible, with NGOs, government actors and civil society working alongside each other. These countries described limited recent experience of

receiving and supporting displaced populations and having to set up arrangements quickly. Two years into the full-scale invasion, the focus shifted from emergency response towards medium-term coordination. This brought changes in roles, responsibilities and funding patterns. In some cases, NGOs moved from direct service provision towards targeted support or advocacy. Participants also noted the strain that sustained crisis-response work can place on individuals and organisations.

> Long-term inclusion depends as much on governance and coordination as on policy design: clear responsibility, stable funding, and the ability to turn emergency measures into reliable pathways year on year. Sustainable inclusion builds resilience by reducing uncertainty for families and employers, strengthening participation in work and education, but also acknowledging support for those who support.

Chicken and egg scenarios around work, documentation and language

Differences were also visible in policy design and sequencing. In Germany, the approach prioritised language acquisition and training before employment. This was described as producing a slower start, followed by later increases in employment, on the assumption that language and training improve job matching and reduce long-term underemployment.

In Sweden, participants described barriers linked to access to personal ID, bank accounts, and housing. They were practical prerequisites. Without a bank account, wages are hard to receive. Without stable housing, job choices narrow. Without necessary documentation, employers and service providers can block access, even when work rights exist on paper. This coincided with greater access to some mainstream systems, but tighter access to parts of residence-based social insurance, creating mixed incentives.

In Moldova, by contrast, the right to work was activated quickly through issuing a fiscal code, including cases without ID documentation. This removed an early barrier, but outcomes then depended more on labour market conditions. Informality and weak knowledge of worker rights were discussed as risks, shaping job quality and vulnerability.

Demography was central to these patterns. Who arrived shaped needs and pressure points. In Germany, like elsewhere, the displaced population was described as largely women and children, with many single-parent households and high care needs, which made childcare and schooling central to labour market participation. In Moldova, a ministry representative stated

that people with cancer or disabilities may be more likely to come, bringing more complex needs and increasing demand on health and care systems.

Taken together, these cases show that labour market outcomes depend not only on formal work rights but also on sequencing, administrative access, and the everyday constraints created by household needs and local capacity.

Focus on labour markets and education

From all topics, two stood out as important and difficult in different ways. They came up in every session and affected most displaced people: labour market inclusion and education.

Labour markets

The labour market came up in every country's discussion, where policy met daily reality. Work was discussed as income, stability, and control over daily life. It also shaped whether people felt able to stay where they were, move within Europe, or return to Ukraine.

For many displaced Ukrainians, work was the first topic raised. Even early surveys showed that many sought employment soon after arrival. During our conversations, this was described as integrity and self-reliance, and sometimes as a way people differentiated themselves from other displaced groups ("we are not refugees", said many).

On paper, the Temporary Protection Directive opened access to work in most settings. In Poland, national legislation adopted on 12 March 2022, alongside the activation of temporary protection on 4 March 2022, provided access to employment, education and services. By 2023, nearly 78% of Ukrainian refugees in Poland were employed, according to figures cited in roundtable. In Latvia, among working-age refugees, 56% were employed at the time of the SEIS survey. During the roundtables, it was clear that formal access did not settle labour market inclusion. The route into work differed, and so did job quality, security, and the ability to use existing skills.

In the Nordics and Poland, the difference was whether work rights came with practical enablers. Norway and Denmark paired temporary protection with early, structured onboarding through municipalities and clear permission to work quickly after registration or biometrics, enabling faster entry into jobs. Denmark more consistently connected Ukrainians to mainstream integration measures, including language provision, reducing the gap between

entitlement and take-up. Poland went furthest on rapid legal and administrative integration, linking temporary protection to immediate work rights and a workable registration route, plus access to services that stabilise households while job-searching. Sweden also granted the right to work, but lower benefits, delayed access to language training, and uncertainty about longer-term status reduced the effectiveness of integration tools and slowed labour market entry, with employment concentrating in lower-skilled sectors despite many having higher qualifications. Policy change over time mattered as much as initial design. In Norway and Sweden, later adjustments aimed at reducing attractiveness and differentiating entitlements reshaped labour market pathways after the first year, not only at arrival.

By 2024, Ukrainians contributed 2.7% of Polish GDP as cited in roundtable, while labour market inclusion in other contexts was much slower. Poland illustrated what fast entry can look like and what it can cost. Employment was high early, but mismatch was repeatedly raised. Many worked below qualifications due to language barriers and limited matching roles. Poland also saw high levels of entrepreneurship. Participants described internships, entrepreneurship training, and integration hubs that provide step-by-step advice on setting up a business. The sessions did not present a uniform picture. Single mothers and elderly refugees were discussed as facing narrower job options. Funding constraints shaped what could be sustained.

In the Baltic countries, early labour market entry was described as common, with language proximity sometimes reducing barriers to immediate employment. This created risks. De-skilling came up repeatedly, and so did informal work. In Latvia, most employment was described as regular and formal, but language barriers still hindered employment and de-skilling was prevalent. In customer-facing roles, Latvian and Estonian language requirements applied early, limiting options and, in some cases, leading to job loss for people already working. Participants also raised remote work patterns, including people keeping jobs linked to Ukraine or elsewhere while living locally, which complicated how employment is recorded and understood. At the same time, this was a pathway to stability.

Germany showed a different pattern, where the system shaped both the pace and the type of entry into work. Labour market participation was discussed as increasing with length of stay. Participants described a pathway shaped by language courses, job-centre processes, and recognition systems. Recognition delays were a repeated constraint, especially for regulated professions such as education and medicine. Childcare was described as a binding constraint. Comparison adds a further mechanism: activation requirements can indirectly disadvantage women with care responsibilities, because conditionality assumes availability for work and training that childcare capacity does not always allow. Local initiatives such as job fairs,

counselling, childcare expansion, and employer-supported language-on-the-job were raised as responses. At the same time, there is an information gap; even among those at the roundtable, the understanding of available support and the amount of support available was articulated differently.

Austria brought out a different set of constraints. Labour market discussion returned to information gaps and fragmentation. Participants described practices that existed but were not always connected into a coherent pathway. A practice example discussed was a Professional Integration Hub format, used to connect displaced people to employers through internships and matching, and to concentrate information in one place. Participants also raised disability and paperwork barriers. People with disabilities struggled with assessment, paperwork, and registration, and needs were not always identified early, meaning problems surfaced later when people were already under strain.

In Sweden, labour market discussion often turned into prerequisites that sit outside employment policy. Limited access to personal ID, bank accounts, and housing was described as slowing down employment. Without a bank account, salary payment becomes difficult. Without stable housing, job options narrow. Without documentation, other systems that rely on that ID also slow down, delaying job entry and stability. In this sense, the labour market pathway depended on administrative access points not treated as labour market policy.

In Moldova, labour market access was shaped by early policy choices and by the labour market context. A ministry representative described issuing a fiscal code enabling the right to work even without ID documentation. This removed an early barrier. At the same time, informality was described as a risk shaping job quality and vulnerability. The informal economy was stated as 23%, and Ukrainians were described as vulnerable to informal work and weak knowledge of worker rights, raising risks around contracts and salary payment. Capacity and funding constraints also mattered. A representative stated that an employment programmes budget (2 million euros) was spent by July. Next steps discussed included linking cash assistance with employment, investing in childcare and after-school programmes, working with the Congress of Ukrainians in Moldova, and continuing career guidance and job mediation via the National Employment Agency.

All in all, the differences were not only administrative. They shaped whether people entered work quickly but below skill level, or later with the possibility of better matching. They also shaped decisions to stay, move within Europe, or plan for return.

Education

Education came up as a child wellbeing issue and as an integration infrastructure issue. Schooling shapes language exposure, social networks, and whether caregivers can work or attend courses.

Many displaced people left Ukraine with dependents, and early reports noted 1.8 million children crossing borders. In Poland, over 60% arrived with children, increasing demand on education and services. The Ukrainian government provided online schooling, building on its experience during Covid-19.

In all European countries except Poland and Latvia, schooling in the local system became mandatory. This was discussed as supporting children's development, safety, socialisation and integration, and as enabling caregivers to attend courses or work.

In Latvia, education was discussed as a policy gap with direct operational consequences. Latvia was slow to follow with policy. The result was a split pathway. Some children attended Latvian school, others attended Ukrainian school remotely, and some attended both.

In the SEIS Latvia survey, in the 2023/2024 school year, 62% of refugee children aged 7–16 were reported as enrolled in Latvian schools. Among children not enrolled in school in Latvia, 89% were formally enrolled in a school in Ukraine and studied remotely while in Latvia, and around 9% did not attend school activities either in Latvia or remotely.

The split pathway created strain. Children attending both systems faced long days and competing demands. Children attending only Ukrainian remote schooling had fewer opportunities for contact with Latvian peers and teachers, which slowed language exposure and social integration. Participants raised concerns about social development and wellbeing.

At the roundtable, policymakers and practitioners described schools and municipalities as stretched. Examples were given of teachers providing extra classes and support, and of schools employing displaced Ukrainian teachers to support learners. UNHCR survey results were shared in the roundtable context before publication, supporting a more specific discussion about scale and risks.

Legislation moved slowly and was linked to the wider debate on distance education rather than treated as a standalone issue. Providus estimated that approximately one third of

Ukrainian children of compulsory school age might be outside the Latvian education system (in the sense of not attending Latvian schooling) and described the group outside the system as invisible children.

Operational figures shared by UNHCR included around 4,000 displaced minors in on-site learning in general education, 1,200 in pre-schools, and 2,638 in basic education. A Latvia-specific example raised was that a government-organised induction programme focused on Latvian language and culture had zero uptake initially. The difference to countries like Norway, where education became mandatory after staying more than three months was significant. In Norway adaptive language education could include bilingual subject teaching and multilingual resources, with support focusing on teachers and newly arrived pupils.

What we learned and looking into the future

The network format helped participants move from broad claims to operational detail. It showed how decisions in one policy area shape outcomes in another. Schooling choices influenced women's labour market entry. Childcare capacity affected participation in language courses. Administrative steps, such as personal IDs and access to banking, determined whether job offers could be taken up.

A recurring issue was sequencing. Some countries enabled faster entry into work, resulting in quicker employment but a higher risk of mismatch and de-skilling. Others prioritised language and training first, slowing entry but improving the chance of better matching over time. These trade-offs were discussed directly. They affected household types differently, with single parents and caregivers facing the tightest constraints.

Another recurring issue was that vulnerability continues beyond the first phase. Risks linked to harassment, informal work, and gaps in basic services did not disappear. They changed form. At the same time, the response shifted from emergency mobilisation to longer-term systems. This reshaped the role of civil society and highlighted the fragility of project-based funding.

Some policy outcomes were clearly problematic, such as shifting categories in Sweden and the lack of mandatory education in Latvia. For many other measures, it is still too early to assess longer-term inclusion, labour market trajectories, and decisions to leave, remain, or return. In Sweden, uncertainty and unequal entitlements linked to registration timelines were discussed alongside labour market risks such as informal work and exploitation. In Germany, credential recognition and childcare access were described as gating factors for skilled employment, especially for women, and local initiatives such as job fairs, counselling, childcare expansion, and employer-supported language-on-the-job were raised as responses. In Poland, discussion returned to flexible work, childcare provision, sector-specific language courses, and the need for a national integration strategy to shift from reactive measures to longer-term planning. Different stories, shared support for Ukrainian displaced people.

Looking ahead, these national choices will sit inside a more constrained European policy environment. The EU Asylum and Migration Pact applies from June 2026 and signals a tighter approach to asylum management and returns for people without legal status, shaping labour supply, employer access to workers at the margins of legality, and the tone of migration debate. For Ukrainians, temporary protection has been extended to March 2027, but the policy discussion is shifting towards transition pathways into work- and study-based statuses and other

national permits, with a need for coordination to avoid a patchwork that drives secondary movement. Ukraine is treated as a labour market case in its own right: reconstruction creates incentives for return, especially of younger and well-educated citizens, while host countries weigh their own shortages and the need for stability for temporary protection beneficiaries. With scenarios ranging from substantial return under a ceasefire to renewed displacement if the situation deteriorates, this uncertainty shapes whether people invest in host-country language and credentials, whether employers invest in training, and whether governments build long-term inclusion systems or keep operating in short cycles. It also means that policies that help people work, train, and stabilise now function as risk management. The result is a three-way balance: beneficiary stability, host-country labour shortages, and Ukraine's reconstruction workforce needs.

The practical lesson is that integration measures are also resilience-building. When systems reduce uncertainty and remove early bottlenecks, people can work, learn, and regain a sense of control over daily life, and they can make clearer decisions later if return becomes possible. Our methodology mattered for reaching this conclusion: bringing together business, policy and academic perspectives, alongside strong Ukrainian displaced voices, moved the discussion beyond general statements and added depth, realism and detail to what works in practice.