From Reception to Reconstruction: Leveraging a Multi-stakeholder Approach to Displaced Ukrainians' Inclusion

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INTRODUCTION

The European Union (EU) hosts around 4.2 million displaced Ukrainians under temporary protection, granting them access to various socio-economic rights and allowing intra-EU mobility.[1] Their employment rate is higher than other migrant and refugee groups, yet structural barriers persist, affecting integration outcomes.

Temporary protection is set to expire in March 2026, compounding challenges. A potential US-imposed ceasefire adds uncertainty, making long-term planning difficult. While prospects for an EU-wide status for displaced Ukrainians post-2026 are unclear, they can already obtain national permits in some states.[2] Many still hope to return to Ukraine, although this prospect depends on the economic and security situation in Europe and Ukraine, and grows less likely over time.[3]

Amid the combined effect of unspeakable devastation from Russia's full-scale invasion and demographic decline in Ukraine, the country's reconstruction – and in particular, the future of critical sectors such as construction, transport, agriculture, and public services[4] – depends on displaced Ukrainians' potential return.[5]

Reconciling these needs in a volatile geo-political environment will require flexible solutions that promote 'dual intent' integration: supporting Ukrainians' human capital and self-sufficiency in the EU while reducing barriers to return.[6]

Achieving this demands coordination among all actors supporting Ukrainians' employment. This Policy Brief highlights how 'networks of inclusion actors' – trade unions, public employment services (PES), civil society organisations (CSOs), the Ukrainian diaspora – as well as networks of local and regional authorities, have enhanced EU and national initiatives.[7] Together, they have offered information, education, training, job matching and psycho-social support, advancing active labour market policies (ALMPs). Yet, shrinking financial support and coordination gaps threaten their current and longer-term impact.

With a new EU cycle starting, this Policy Brief examines how promoting labour inclusion in the EU can align with Ukraine's reconstruction. It focuses on Germany, Italy and Poland, each of which host active networks and large numbers of displaced Ukrainians.

BACKGROUND: FRAGMENTED INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSES DESPITE COMMON FRAMEWORKS

Following the activation of the Temporary Protection Directive (TPD) in March 2022, displaced Ukrainians received immediate labour market access, while also benefiting from other socio-economic rights and intra-EU mobility.[8]

Soon after, the Commission introduced coordination and funding measures to foster the uniform implementation of the TPD and early employment, also considering

Ukrainians' advanced education levels and skill sets. For instance, the Commission recommended skills-based assessments and the faster recognition and validation of Ukrainians' qualifications, crucial for entering regulated professions like healthcare.[9] It also launched the EU Talent Pool pilot, an online job matching platform, though few member states have participated formally, and Ukrainians' involvement has remained low.[10]

The Commission's Solidarity Platform brought together member states, EU agencies, international partners and the Ukrainian government to exchange information and coordinate efforts, with local authorities and CSOs participating on an ad hoc basis.[11]

Despite these initiatives, national integration policies, ALMPs and funding priorities have differed across the EU, resulting in uneven employment outcomes.

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Member states like Germany, with established integration procedures, prioritised language attainment. This addressed a structural obstacle to labour inclusion, but risked skills atrophy and difficulties entering the labour market later. Illustrating this challenge, the "Job Turbo" initiative, launched in November 2023, has helped 250,000 Ukrainians with basic language skills find work, though many are in lower-skilled positions than they are qualified for.[12] Meanwhile, in Poland and Italy, weaker integration support led to faster employment, but likewise, job opportunities have not been aligned with Ukrainians' qualifications ('underemployment').

Challenges in the recognition of qualifications have also contributed to underemployment, and varying outcomes. Countries like Italy and Poland introduced special procedures, qualification waivers and innovations like conditional licenses. This has eased pressure on public sector workers, notably educators and healthcare professionals. Elsewhere, stricter rules have limited options, fragmenting opportunities across the Union.

Considering these challenges, national employment services have adapted, with some successes. In Poland, the Warsaw Labour Office created a "special service point" that provides services ranging from re- and up-skilling to job-matching, with the model now used elsewhere in the country.[13] In Italy, the project PUOI (Protezione Unita a Obiettivo Integrazione) integrated just under 200 Ukrainians into socio-vocational training, facilitating entry into the labour market for 60% of them.[14] Several initiatives have been limited in scale, however.

Figure 1

PERCENTAGE OF DISPLACED UKRAINIANS AT WORK IN POLAND, ITALY AND GERMANY IN 2023.[15]
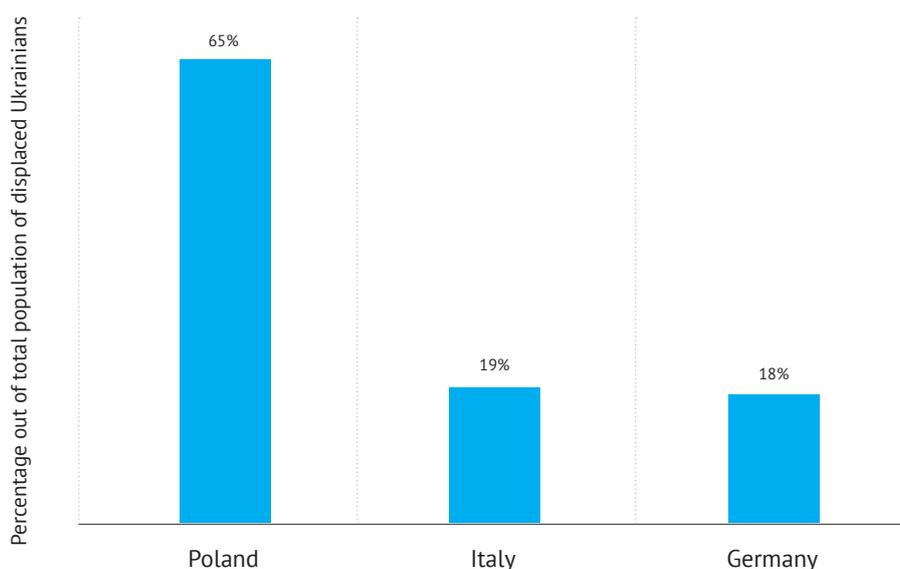
Despite a common protection status, displaced Ukrainians' employment rates are therefore varied across the EU, also depending on the support received (see Figure 1 for Germany, Italy and Poland). Inconsistent measurement of integration has also made it harder to draw cross-border comparisons or EU-wide conclusions.

Inconsistent financial support has aggravated disparities from the start. To even out differences, the EU has provided extensive assistance through the flexible use of cohesion and migration and asylum funding as well as ad hoc funds. Growing fiscal strain since 2022 has, however, led some member states to cut back on support.

Over time, Ukraine's reconstruction has also become central, prompting interest in dual intent policies. In June 2024, the Skills Alliance for Ukraine was launched, bringing together EU and international actors as well as employers.[16] This flagship initiative seeks to train around 180,000 Ukrainians in key sectors like construction, logistics, IT and agriculture, targeting both underrepresented groups in Ukraine and displaced Ukrainians in the EU.

Still, reconciling reconstruction needs with stay abroad remains a challenge. Stable work in the EU fosters self-sufficiency but reduces return prospects.

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Extending temporary protection to March 2026 has provided Ukrainians with a secure status longer than originally foreseen. Meanwhile, the possibility to freely go back for brief periods of time ('pendular movements') has allowed them to maintain ties with Ukraine. Yet, without an EU-wide decision on their post-2026 status, uncertainty is increasing.[17] Switching to national statuses could disrupt integration and prompt intra-EU relocation or irregularity as well as tensions between member states. Another annual extension is not unforeseeable, but failure to agree on a common approach will deepen challenges for the EU, Ukraine and displaced persons.

STATE OF PLAY: NAVIGATING LABOUR INCLUSION AMID UNCERTAINTY

With a new EU cycle underway, policymakers must reconcile existing priorities with realities on the ground, recognising the need for multi-stakeholder initiatives beyond those of national authorities and EU efforts.[18]

Since 2022, 'networks of inclusion actors' – CSOs, local/regional authorities, diaspora communities and labour unions – have provided immediate and structural support.

Initially providing emergency and humanitarian aid, these networks and actors quickly expanded. By establishing information points or 'one-stop shops', also involving the private sector, they have provided guidance on housing, education and employment.

Diaspora groups have delivered entrepreneurial, leadership and socio-cultural training, fostering self-sufficiency while also connecting newcomers to jobs, sometimes more successfully than institutional channels.[19] In some member states, Ukrainians' employment mirrors pre-2022 labour migration patterns. In Italy, for example, displaced Ukrainians entered the agricultural and domestic work sectors, in line with historical trends and despite their higher qualifications.[20]

In member states, trade unions organised fundraising and donation campaigns on top of providing critical information on labour rights.[21] In Italy, construction sector unions and those representing atypical workers entered into agreements with employer organisations for training or labour integration purposes.[22] In Poland, unions promoted public sector jobs, like teaching and intercultural assistance, also bridging cultural divides between students.[23] Union engagement varies across member states, however, due to obstacles such as language barriers and difficulties in reaching Ukrainian workers.[24]

Where they have been able to, networks have therefore filled gaps in the public response. They have augmented the outreach and impact of institutional initiatives, fostering self-sufficiency, resilience and wider socio-cultural integration.

Conversely, not leveraging diverse actors in labour inclusion and other initiatives has limited their added value. For instance, the EU Talent Pool pilot did not acknowledge or involve these networks, potentially explaining its limited uptake by job-seeking Ukrainians.

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Looking at dual intent policies, networks of inclusion actors could also help to achieve and reconcile different policy and political priorities.

Ukraine's reconstruction will remain a priority for the EU, requiring innovative solutions for equipping Ukrainians with the skills and competences necessary. At the same time, labour inclusion abroad could also support Ukraine's recovery. Global remittances fell from 10.4% of Ukraine's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in 2022 to 8.4% in 2023, but may increase again once hostilities cease, providing a strong financial component for reconstruction.[25]

Meanwhile, the EU also faces labour shortages and skills gaps, with several recent EU initiatives targeting the labour market participation of underrepresented groups such as women and migrants.[26] Given that the majority of displaced Ukranians are working-age women (see Box 1 and Figure 2), a balanced approach will be crucial.

Pursuing a dual intent approach could help reconcile these priorities, promoting Ukrainians' self-sufficiency while not pre-empting their return to Ukraine. To enhance durable solutions, however, non-state actors and networks should also be mobilised.

By building personal and professional bridges, the Ukrainian diaspora is a natural candidate for this role. Some larger diaspora organisations already provide (online) information on return and reintegration.[27] Yet, smaller and more informal networks lack the necessary resources. Widespread dissemination of information, while a priority for institutional actors, and especially the Ukrainian government, depends on trusted sources, and could be difficult to achieve at scale without their involvement, posing a challenge to attracting Ukrainians home.[28]

BOX 1. THE GENDERED DIMENSION OF THE UKRAINIAN DISPLACED POPULATION

Author: Emma Ugolini

About 65% of displaced Ukrainians are working-age women who face additional barriers to enter the labour market, including care responsibilities (see Figure 2).[29] Failure to systematically provide them with tailored support has limited their labour participation.

In response, some countries have introduced targeted measures, including childcare, language and professional training, or support for the recognition of qualifications, for example, for nurses and midwives.[30] Women-led diaspora associations have further supported displaced Ukrainians to navigate the labour market, providing, for example, guidance on entrepreneurship.[31]

As public funding declines, leveraging networks remains critical for sustaining gender-sensitive integration, including dual intent policies, especially since many women have stronger return intentions than men. The Skills4Recovery initiative, part of the Skills Alliance, embodies this approach by upskilling women in both Ukraine and the EU for key reconstruction sectors.[32]

Sectoral collaborations between EU and Ukrainian social partners have also emerged, facilitating information exchange on how to rebuild Ukraine's industries and its labour market.[33] Networks of local and regional authorities have also facilitated mutual learning and knowledge exchange between EU and Ukrainian municipalities on, among others, rebuilding critical infrastructure.[34]

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As to the former, for example, the Commission's Solidarity Platform initially facilitated coordination, yet meetings are now less frequent and non-state actors' participation remains selective.[35] Further coordination platforms include the European Partnership for Integration, which brings social and economic partners together to promote employment for refugees and other migrants, including Ukrainians.[36] As with the Solidarity Platform, participation has been limited to selected social partners.

As a result, effective coordination often happens outside institutional platforms, in actor-specific fora. However, this raises its own set of challenges, as only some may pursue comprehensive or long-term strategies.[37]

More broadly, reduced opportunity for meaningful exchange and coordination increases the risk of overlaps and limited information intake, also thwarting durable solutions.

Similar coordination challenges are emerging in relation to dual intent policies. As the above-mentioned Skills Alliance develops, it could offer a useful platform for enhancing collaboration and information exchange, also ensuring the quality and positive impact of launched programmes.[38] Yet, limited involvement by non-state actors and networks risks duplicating efforts and decreasing the overall effectiveness of the initiative.

Funding constraints compound these challenges. Amid profound geopolitical changes, ensuring appropriate integration and inclusion funding is set to become harder. The EU funding cycle ends in 2027, with some member states already cutting public benefits. Cuts to USAID will have a further impact, in particular affecting Central and Eastern European countries hosting large numbers of Ukrainians.[40]

Figure 2

GENDER COMPOSITION (%) OF THE DISPLACED UKRAINIAN WORKING AGE
POPULATION IN THE EU (18-64 YEARS OLD).[39]

	European Union	Germany	Italy	Poland
Female	65%	62%	80%	73%
Male	35%	38%	20%	27%
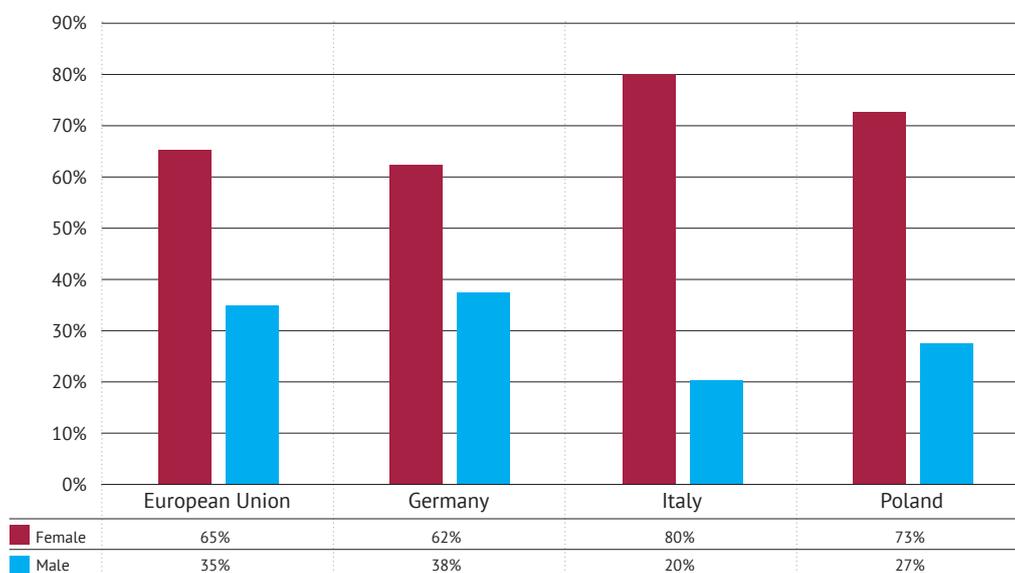
Additionally, insufficient information on how cohesion funds have been spent may complicate the negotiations on the new Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF), making it harder to agree on continued support for displaced Ukrainians.[41]

PROSPECTS: ENHANCING ALMPS AND ACHIEVING DUAL INTENT THROUGH A MULTI-STAKEHOLDER APPROACH

Despite uncertainty over their stay, robust efforts are needed to provide Ukrainians with meaningful integration opportunities in the EU. This hinges on adopting a common position on their future status, under or outside the TPD. Regardless of the specific option chosen, continued labour market access, intra-EU mobility and pendular movements should be retained. At the same time, the Policy Brief puts forward the following recommendations, also ensuring that the resources and knowledge created for supporting displaced Ukrainians can be mobilised again in the future, if needed:

► **Map and streamline the multi-stakeholder approach:** The EU should systematically map integration and dual intent support across member states. Identifying the full range of networks and their positive impacts would help tailor new programmes based on best practices and align ALMPs to the demographic profiles and aspirations of displaced Ukrainians. Other than strengthening effectiveness, this would help avoid duplication.

► **Support and leverage the complementary role of networks:** Structural opportunities for mutual exchange and collaboration between institutional actors and networks can be reinforced. To this end, the EU can expand existing multi-stakeholder platforms like the European Partnership for Integration. Initiatives like the Skills Alliance can channel efforts to strengthen cooperation between EU and Ukrainian unions and facilitate the conclusion of further sectoral agreements. Diasporas and CSOs looking to formalise or upscale their operations should receive assistance to overcome administrative barriers. Integrating their services into institutional tools like the EU Talent Pool should also be explored to promote greater complementarity between efforts.

► **Maintain flexible funding:** Sustained financial support is vital for both integration and potential return. As the MFF negotiations begin, stable, longer-term funding should be prioritised over short-term, ad hoc arrangements. Funding should however remain flexible amid uncertainty over how long displaced Ukrainians will stay, while also ensuring adequate resources for value-adding initiatives by non-state actors and networks. Underfunded PES also need support to implement ALMPs effectively. New initiatives should include clear monitoring to measure their impact.

► **Promote skills-based initiatives to feed effective matching:** Skills development opportunities as well as recognition and validation procedures should be recalibrated with dual intent in mind.

Closer collaboration between EU networks and their Ukrainian counterparts can tailor training to both EU and Ukraine's labour markets. Unions and PES can increase re- and up-skilling initiatives while further opportunities for sectoral cooperation can ready Ukraine's industries to welcome workers back. Platforms like the Skills Alliance can serve as a coordinating umbrella, provided they involve all relevant actors.

► **Establish shared integration indicators:** Institutional actors should adopt harmonised standards to assess the effectiveness of integration policies, including ALMPs, and promote a level playing field. Involving diverse actors and networks in that process would encourage mutual learning and improve comparability of measures. This would also provide a clearer picture of Ukrainians' employment trajectories. To support reintegration in Ukraine, Ukrainian standards could be aligned with EU metrics.

By strengthening these efforts, the EU can maximise the benefits of past and current investments in reception and integration. At the same time, it can best enable Ukrainians to play an active role in rebuilding their country when conditions allow, fulfilling the dual intent of supporting them today and empowering their future return.

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7 This Policy Brief is published as part of a project on the "The labour inclusion of Ukrainian refugees: Matching skills with shortages and future needs", in cooperation with the European Confederation of Independent Trade Unions (CESI) and in the context of the EU co-funded project "ACTIVER – Active labour market policies in Europe: Successful designs and implementation through union participation".

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