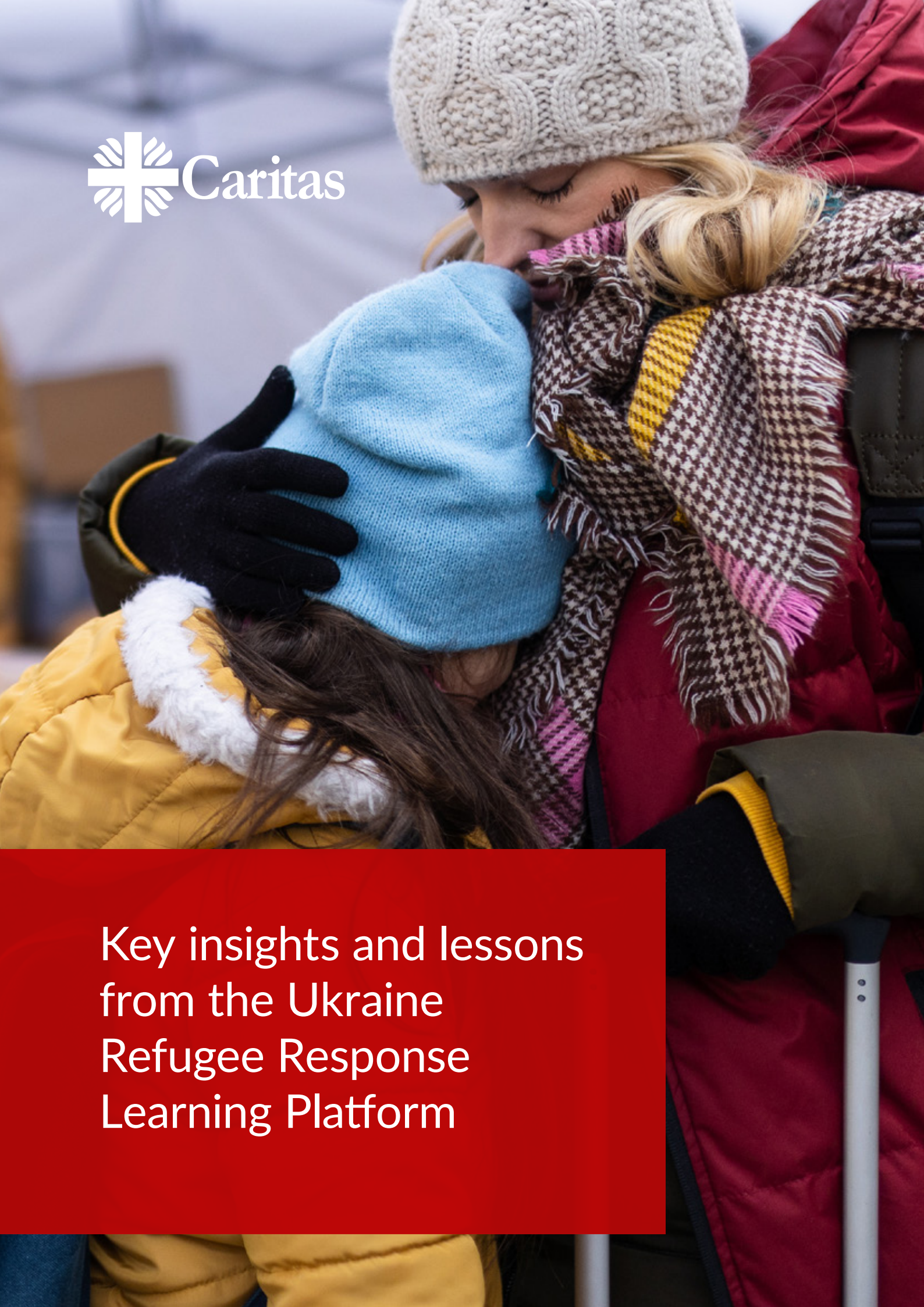




Key insights and lessons
from the Ukraine
Refugee Response
Learning Platform

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Introduction

More than three years into Russia's full-scale invasion, the war in Ukraine continues to exact a devastating human toll. Millions of Ukrainians have been forced to flee their homes, with more than 6 million living as refugees across Europe¹ and 3.7 million displaced within Ukraine². Through the combined efforts of the European Commission, national governments and NGOs such as Caritas, displaced Ukrainians have been able to obtain temporary legal status and, in most cases, access basic services and assistance.

Since the war began, local Caritas organizations have delivered direct, comprehensive support to displaced people in Ukraine and across host countries, including Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Hungary, Moldova, Poland, Romania and Slovakia. Our programs have helped thousands of Ukrainian refugees, internally displaced persons (IDPs) and returnees access housing, medical care, mental health and

psychosocial support, employment, education and other assistance to make recovery and long-term stability possible.

To strengthen our response and that of the global community, we established the Ukraine Refugee Response Learning Platform (URRLP)—a working group focused on sharing resources, improving regional coordination and promoting evidence-based approaches to protection, integration and return. This advocacy report is the result of the URRLP's collective work to assess international and national responses to the Ukraine refugee crisis, focusing on five priority areas: case management, psychosocial support, employment, education and safe return. Drawing on Caritas' deep field experience and local partnerships, the report outlines current response efforts, identifies critical gaps and risks and offers policy recommendations for European institutions, national governments, NGOs and the Caritas network

to enhance support for displaced Ukrainians.

As the conflict continues, the needs of refugees, IDPs and returnees are becoming increasingly complex. Many seek long-term security—whether through permanent residency abroad or safe return to Ukraine. International cooperation, forward-looking policies and well-resourced systems are urgently needed to ensure that every displaced person can build a safe and dignified future.

In certain countries involved in this project, financial resources were mobilized from multiple sources, including United Nations agencies such as UNHCR.

Recommendations are made by Caritas country programs that work directly with Ukrainian refugees, internally displaced persons and returnees in EU host countries and Ukraine, hereafter referred to as Caritas.

1 UNHCR. *Ukraine Refugee Situation* – Operational Data Portal. Accessed June 2025. <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/ukraine>
2 International Organization for Migration (IOM). *Ukraine Internal Displacement Report: General Population Survey, Round 19*. January 2025. <https://dtm.iom.int/reports/ukraine-internal-displacement-report-general-population-survey-round-19-january-2025>



Case Management

Regional Context

Since the start of the war in Ukraine, millions of people have been displaced within the country and across Europe. In response, the European Union activated the Temporary Protection Directive (TPD), granting immediate protection and access to basic services to displaced Ukrainians residing in EU member states. Today, an estimated 4.3 million Ukrainian refugees hold temporary protection status in the EU³, while another 3.7 million people remain internally displaced within Ukraine.⁴ Women, children, elderly people and those with disabilities—who often face the greatest risks and barriers to support—make up the majority of those displaced.

Refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) face a complex web of needs—from securing legal status and shelter to accessing health care, education and jobs. While national governments provide access to state programs to meet some of these needs, NGOs help fill critical gaps through case management services that offer coordinated, comprehensive assistance.

State Response

Currently, Ukrainian refugees living in European Union host countries are granted legal protection under the TPD, entitling them to a temporary residence permit and access to the labour market, housing, healthcare, education for children and basic banking services. Some countries have provided additional support and services beyond those outlined in the TPD, such as psychological services, legal assistance, document translation services, diploma recognition, employment assistance and financial support for children or those with a disability. These services vary across host countries and often have different eligibility requirements.

In Ukraine, IDPs are only required to register with the authorities in order to access social benefits, including free shelter, medical care, psychological, legal and financial assistance and employment services.

³ Eurostat. 4.3 million under temporary protection in January 2025. 10 March 2025. <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/w/ddn-20250310-2>

⁴ International Organization for Migration (IOM). Ukraine Internal Displacement Report: General Population Survey, Round 19. January 2025. <https://dtm.iom.int/reports/ukraine-internal-displacement-report-general-population-survey-round-19-january-2025>

Gaps and Risks

Although government and NGOs have mobilized substantial resources to support displaced populations, gaps in access to social services, funding, workforce training and coordination continue to undermine the stability and long-term recovery of refugees and IDPs.

Limited Access to Services in Ukraine

The worsening security situation in Ukraine, particularly in frontline regions, and lack of social services in remote areas prevent displaced people from meeting their basic needs.

Insufficient and Inflexible Funding

Diminished donor support and rigid funding limits the ability of NGOs such as Caritas to meet the long-term and comprehensive needs of beneficiaries, such as housing and chronic or expensive medical treatment.

Gaps in Assistance

Despite various national refugee support models and the rights outlined by the TPD, there are still gaps in access to state services and other assistance, particularly for vulnerable groups such as single mothers, people with disabilities and war veterans. In many cases, eligibility for government assistance depends on factors such as age, health status, employment status or possession of specific documents.

Fragmented Institutional Cooperation

Inconsistent collaboration with national and local authorities weakens referral pathways, slows service delivery and undermines durable solutions.

Hostility Toward Refugees

Hostile and discriminatory behaviours against refugees and migrants are intensifying in many countries, fuelled partially by misinformation about the war in Ukraine and Ukrainian refugees. In some cases, aid organizations themselves face opposition and stigmatization for supporting refugees.

Lack of Support and Training for Case Managers

The lack of systematic, government-certified training programs for case managers results in many specialists entering the field without formal social work education. Additionally, high caseloads and the emotional intensity and complexity of the work make case managers vulnerable to secondary psychological issues and health problems, including burnout.

Varying Beneficiary Engagement

Beneficiaries' emotional resiliency and commitment to language learning, job seeking and other actions are essential to their successful integration and long-term stability. Lack of follow-through can limit the effectiveness of support plans and slow the path to independence.

Long-term Support for the Most Vulnerable

Some individuals—particularly those with disabilities, chronic illness or advanced age—require long-term healthcare and social services. This continuity of care is usually not provided by state systems.

Shrinking Referral Ecosystems

As the war continues, fewer organizations remain active in refugee support, making effective referrals increasingly difficult.

Caritas Response

Across host countries and within Ukraine, Caritas' comprehensive case management services have helped thousands of displaced individuals and families meet their basic needs, achieve stability and become self-sufficient. Case managers work closely with each client for several weeks and up to six months, assessing their needs holistically and providing coordinated, individualized support through direct assistance from Caritas and referrals to external services.

Short- and Long-term Housing

One of the first critical needs for displaced persons is housing. Case managers help beneficiaries access immediate shelter—often at a Caritas refugee shelter—and obtain long-term accommodations through rental subsidies and by finding paid or free housing.

Material Needs

Case managers ensure those who are displaced have basic necessities, including by connecting them with Caritas distributions of essential items

such as food, clothing, shoes, bedding and hygiene products.

Legal Assistance

Case managers help clients access legal support, such as assistance with completing official documents, navigating administrative procedures and securing translation services.

Healthcare Access

Case managers help beneficiaries find healthcare providers, schedule appointments and secure transportation to appointments. Caritas also helps cover the financial costs of medication and treatment in emergency situations.

Mental Health and Psychosocial Support

Case managers assist refugees and IDPs in accessing individual counselling, group therapy, support groups and other mental health and psychosocial support through Caritas and external specialist referrals.

Employment Help

Caritas provides extensive vocational support to help refugees and IDPs gain safe, sustainable employment. Case managers help clients gather and fill out paperwork, create professional CVs, submit job applications, access vocational skills trainings and mediate issues with employers.

School Integration

Case managers help children integrate into the local school system by communicating with parents/caregivers, working with teachers and administrators, ensuring children have appropriate language and psychosocial support, and other activities that foster a successful transition.

Social Integration

To enhance social adaptation, case managers provide displaced persons with opportunities to complete language courses, participate in socio-cultural events and community-based activities and build relationships with host community members.

Psychosocial Support



Regional Context

The war in Ukraine has caused widespread psychological trauma, with millions of people experiencing heightened levels of stress, anxiety, depression and symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). A 2024 WHO health needs assessment found that 46% of Ukrainians reported mental health concerns, while 41% reported mental health disorders⁵. Refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs)—especially children, caregivers, older adults and survivors of violence—are particularly vulnerable to the compounded effects of displacement and prolonged instability.

Governments, NGOs and professional associations of Ukraine's neighbouring countries, in cooperation with international actors, have put enormous effort into supporting victims of war, including launching a range of mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) initiatives. Programs such as Ukraine's national "How Are You?" campaign and therapeutic services provided by humanitarian organizations have been vital in fostering emotional recovery and resilience. Yet growing demand for MHPSS and persistent barriers—such as limited access, stigma and lack of awareness—mean many still lack the support they need.

State Response

In collaboration with the World Health Organization, Ukraine's Ministry of Health has created a national MHPSS model designed to establish a comprehensive, coordinated and sustainable mental health system in response to the widespread psychological impact of the ongoing war. Key components include community-based services, training for healthcare providers, educators and social workers, the integration of mental health services into primary healthcare settings and public awareness campaigns to promote mental well-being and reduce stigma. Although the system is designed for the entire Ukrainian population, IDPs are a targeted group for assistance.

The Temporary Protection Directive (TPD) does not specifically mandate mental health services for refugees, so in most cases, these services are only available through NGOs. Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia, however, do provide access to psychological assistance for refugees.

Gaps and Risks

As the psychological toll of war and displacement deepens, the demand for mental health and psychosocial services continues to grow. Yet many refugees and IDPs still struggle to access timely, appropriate and sustained support due to limited services and staff capacity.

Lack of Access to MHPSS Programs

Many host countries lack national MHPSS programs that are accessible to refugees. In Ukraine, mental health services are less accessible in frontline and remote areas, making it difficult for IDPs to receive the support they need.

Gaps in Assistance

Refugees, IDPs, and asylum seekers in general are significantly more vulnerable to the risks of human trafficking. The MHPSS Working Group recommends much closer cooperation between mental health professionals and both the European Commission (to strengthen the EU Strategy on Combatting Trafficking in Human Beings) and the Council of Europe's Group of Experts on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings (GRETA) in the future.

MHPSS for Displaced Children

The trauma sustained by refugee and internally displaced children can severely impact their emotional, psychological, social and cognitive development. Without access to age-appropriate MHPSS services or trauma-sensitive environments, particularly in schools, children may struggle to process trauma and successfully integrate into their new community.

Lack of Support and Training for Frontline Workers

Psychologists, social workers and other frontline staff supporting refugees and IDPs are regularly exposed to trauma and high emotional intensity, placing them at risk of burnout, secondary traumatic stress and other psychological health impacts. Without adequate training and support systems, these professionals may struggle to sustain the quality of care they provide.

Limited Funding for NGO MHPSS Programs

NGOs provide the majority of MHPSS services for displaced persons, but their capacity to deliver this support is at risk as the number of displaced persons grows and funding shrinks.

Caritas Response

Through a network of community centres and mobile teams staffed by psychologists, social workers, and mental health professionals, Caritas delivers both emergency and long-term psychosocial care to Ukrainian refugees and IDPs.

Individual Assistance

Displaced persons can access crisis intervention, individual therapy and psychosocial counselling at Caritas centres to help process and heal from trauma. Caritas also partners with other organizations to provide beneficiaries with referrals to specialists such as psychiatrists, doctors and therapists.

Group Support

Caritas facilitates opportunities for communal support, including group crisis intervention, weekly support groups, thematic clubs for children and young people, psycho-educational workshops and group therapy, such as art therapy and integration activities.

Child-friendly Spaces

Caritas safe spaces provide safe, structured and emotionally supportive environments to enhance the psychosocial well-being of children, young people and caregivers. Through after-school clubs, language classes, opportunities for emotional and creative expression and other support, children are able to regain a sense of normalcy and emotional security. The spaces also offer caregivers specialized support and foster social integration through community activities.

Prevention and Education

Workshops and trainings on MHPSS topics—such as stress management, trauma-focused care, peer violence, integration challenges and psychoeducation—enable displaced persons to learn more about their mental health needs and mechanisms to cope.

Digital and Mobile Support

Caritas offers digital and mobile support to increase access to MHPSS. Displaced persons can complete consultations online or by telephone, and mobile intervention teams are utilized to reach people in smaller towns, remote areas or frontline locations (in Ukraine) who have difficulty reaching Caritas centres.

Staff Training and Support

To support staff in their work with displaced persons, Caritas has facilitated workshops and trainings about advanced psychosocial support, disaster management, self-care and other appropriate topics. Regular psychological supervision and self-care sessions are also provided to support the mental health needs of providers.

⁵ World Health Organization. *Three Years of War: Rising Demand for Mental Health Support, Trauma Care and Rehabilitation*. 24 February 2025. <https://www.who.int/europe/news/item/24-02-2025-three-years-of-war-rising-demand-for-mental-health-support-trauma-care-and-rehabilitation>

Employment and Livelihoods

Regional Context

The war in Ukraine has significantly impacted the European labour market, with the majority of Ukrainian refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) falling within working age (15-64). European host countries have implemented policies and programmes to support refugees' socio-economic inclusion, most notably the EU Temporary Protection Directive (TPD). These measures—combined with low unemployment rates and other factors—have contributed to relatively high employment rates among working-age Ukrainian refugees seeking employment in countries such as Bulgaria (57%), Hungary (60%), Poland (67%), Romania (40%) and Slovakia (65%), especially when compared to other refugee groups⁶.

The unemployment rate in Ukraine continues to shrink year-over-year, falling from 18.5% in 2022 to 17.4% in 2023 and 14.3% at the end of 2024. Despite this encouraging trend, the labour shortage in Ukraine remains high due to mobilisation efforts and migration, and labour market activity remains lower than before the full-scale war⁷. Additionally, although working-age IDPs have the legal right to work anywhere in the country, only 56% report employment—significantly less than returnees (69%) and the non-displaced population (68%)⁸.

State Response

Employment outcomes for Ukrainian refugees in European host countries have been a significant focus since the beginning of the war in Ukraine. The activation of the TPD by the EU granted refugees legal access to the labour market, facilitating their integration into the workforce. In addition to the TPD, many host countries have implemented support programmes to assist displaced persons in finding employment, including language courses, job placement services, job training and assistance with credential recognition.

In Ukraine, the government encourages employers to hire IDPs and provides incentives for doing so. Internally displaced persons can also access employment services upon registering with the authorities.

Gaps and Risks

Even with supportive legal frameworks and encouraging employment figures in some countries, many Ukrainian refugees—especially vulnerable groups such as single mothers and people with disabilities—face obstacles to securing stable, dignified work. Internally displaced persons face similar barriers as well as additional challenges unique to being displaced in a war-affected country.

Language Skills

Language proficiency remains a significant hurdle for the majority of the Ukrainian refugee population in host European countries. Language courses are not always widely available, and vocational language training is even more limited. This hinders refugees' ability to learn the local language, find stable employment and integrate into the community.

Underemployment

Despite high education levels and flexible and transferable skills among Ukrainian refugees in European host countries, many find work in low-skilled or precarious jobs that typically do not require specific qualifications or language proficiency. This is often due to immediate needs, a lack of other, more viable job options and/or a lack of language skills.

Delayed Diploma Recognition

Recognition of professional qualifications from Ukraine can be a lengthy process, leading to underemployment or unemployment while waiting for certification. Likewise in Ukraine, IDPs, especially those displaced from conflict zones, may be missing certifications for prior education and experience, limiting their job opportunities.

Lack of Employer and Refugee Investment

Some employers are reluctant to hire displaced people from Ukraine, citing uncertainties regarding their long-term stay in the country, language barriers at the workplace, unverified skills and experience and lack of information on regulatory provisions for hiring foreign labour.

For refugees and IDPs, the uncertain situation of the ongoing war in Ukraine, return intentions and the waiting dilemma prevent some from pursuing opportunities to gain skills and employment.

Lack of Access to Social Services

Refugees and IDPs must first meet their basic needs—such as housing, healthcare, mental health and childcare—before they can meaningfully access employment. Gaps in childcare and psychosocial support are especially acute, particularly for IDPs in remote and frontline areas where services are limited.

The fear of losing humanitarian or state assistance also inhibits displaced persons from seeking formal employment, as it can make them ineligible for certain support.

IDP Legal Challenges

Many IDPs lack updated documentation, such as proof of residency, which limits their access to formal employment. Moreover, fear of sharing personal data (e.g., for work registration) due to mobilization risks is a critical barrier. Men, in particular, avoid formal employment to evade conscription to the army, which pushes them into informal sectors and unsafe or unsustainable employment opportunities.

Unsuited Skills

Upon entering the labour market in a new place, displaced persons often have the need to develop new skills to meet the demands of local jobs. This is especially relevant for IDPs who have been displaced from cities—where tech and services dominate—to rural economies, where agriculture is often the primary industry.

Caritas Response

Recognizing that stable employment is key to long-term recovery and self-reliance, Caritas has expanded its efforts to help refugees and IDPs enter the labour market. Its programs focus on reducing barriers to economic inclusion through vocational training, job placement, language instruction and support services tailored to displaced individuals' needs.

Individual Support

Caritas case managers and career advisors work with beneficiaries to access better paying jobs aligned with their qualifications and experience. This can include support such as creating professional CVs, obtaining recognition of qualifications and

credentials, accompanying them to interviews, facilitating conversations with employers and more.

Information Sessions and Workshops

Caritas provides opportunities for refugees to learn about their legal status, access to benefits, employment opportunities and other information particular to their host country, as well as develop professional skills. Workshops cover topics such as economic and cultural adaptation, money management, insurance, taxes, job search strategies, interview preparation and how to start and run a business within the host country.

Skills Development and Training

To help displaced persons gain employable skills that meet the demands of the local labour market, Caritas provides technical and vocational education and training.

Language Courses

Caritas' language courses help refugees learn the host country language and about its culture, society and people. The courses focus on informal and vocational vocabulary through hands-on practice, supporting refugees' communication and providing them better opportunities for dignified employment and social inclusion.

Employer Engagement

Through Caritas job fairs, beneficiaries and career experts are able to establish relationships with employers open to hiring refugees. This often directly results in subsequent job offers, professional internships, training offers and information regarding the employment of foreigners.

Addressing Labour Exploitation and Abuse

Caritas ensures refugees understand their rights regarding working conditions and supports them in addressing employer malpractice. Through established cooperation with local authorities in some national contexts, refugees can anonymously report complaints about their employer. This both reduces the chances of labour abuse and helps local labour inspection authorities identify and address exploitative practices.

Cash for Work and Cash for Job

Through Caritas' Cash for Work (CfW) and Cash for Job (CfJ) programs, displaced persons in Ukraine obtain temporary and longer-term employment opportunities. Cash for Work involves three-month public service placements with local organizations and municipalities, while CfJ partners with socially-oriented small businesses to support longer-term jobs through wage reimbursements.

⁶ UNHCR. *High Employment Rates, but Low Wages: A Poverty Assessment of Ukrainian Refugees in Neighboring Countries*. 17 March 2025. <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/115013>

⁷ Centre for Economic Strategy. *Ukrainian Economy in 2024: Special Edition of the Tracker*. 18 March 2025. https://ces.org.ua/en/ukrainian_economy_in_2024/

⁸ International Organization for Migration (IOM). *Ukraine — Employment, Mobility and Labour Market Dynamics in Ukraine — November 2024*. 15 November 2024. <https://dtm.iom.int/reports/ukraine-employment-mobility-and-labour-market-dynamics-ukraine-november-2024>

Education

Regional Context

The war in Ukraine has disrupted the lives of millions of children, including an estimated 737,000 who have been internally displaced and 1.7 million living as refugees⁹. Many children who fled the country have spent up to three years out of formal education, resulting in significant setbacks to their learning, social development and emotional well-being.

Although the EU Temporary Protection Directive (TPD) guarantees Ukrainian children legal access to national school systems, unclear and inconsistent enrolment policies, language barriers and other challenges have made it difficult for many to enrol and successfully integrate. School enrolment rates are gradually improving, but a considerable number of displaced children remain disconnected from stable, supportive education.

State Response

Under the TPD, national governments permit Ukrainian children with temporary protection to enrol in their national education systems. This includes free education at the preschool and primary levels in all member states. In Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia, enrolment in local schools is compulsory, with different forms of sanctions if families do not comply, such as fines, cuts in government support and interventions by child protection authorities.

Schools in Poland and Czech Republic offer the most comprehensive support for children from Ukraine, including mandatory language courses, preparatory classes and intercultural assistance. In Hungary, the government offers schools financial support for organizing language classes and other integration activities. The Czech, Hungarian and Polish governments also partner with and fund NGO programs that support school integration.

In countries such as Moldova, Romania and Slovakia, there has been little to no systemic approach to school integration, or national strategies have not been effectively implemented at the local level. As a result, children found themselves placed in classrooms without adequate language support or guidance, leaving them isolated and unable to meaningfully participate in their education.

Gaps and Risks

While legal access to education exists in host countries, challenges such as school inclusion, language barriers and lack of trauma-informed support continue to limit meaningful participation and long-term integration.

Language Barriers

Language is one of the biggest barriers to successful school integration. This is especially true in Hungary, Moldova and Romania, where non-Slavic languages are spoken that are difficult for Ukrainian children to learn. The lack of methodologies for teaching the national language as a foreign language and the limited availability of language courses for children have further exacerbated this gap.

School Capacity Issues

In countries hosting large communities of refugees from Ukraine, such as Poland and Czech Republic, schools have lacked the physical space and teachers needed to accommodate the surge in students.

Lack of Integration Methodologies

Schools often do not have any experience integrating children from other countries, and many countries lack systemic approaches to prepare and support teachers for this work. There are limited methodologies for teaching the national language to foreign students and a lack of integration assistance for students, including psychosocial support. Improperly designed integration methodologies introduced in some countries have created more obstacles for students, rather than provide support.

Lack of MHPSS in Schools

Many schools lack the mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) services needed to help refugee students process their trauma and adjust to a new culture. Teachers also lack trauma-sensitive training to support their students in the classroom. Without trained staff and inclusive policies, refugee children may face isolation, bullying or additional stress in the school environment.

Alternative Informal Education Opportunities

NGO child-friendly spaces provide safe, inclusive and educational environments for Ukrainian children, but they sometimes became de

facto alternatives to national school systems— inadvertently delaying formal school enrolment. Additionally, many Ukrainian children continue to follow Ukraine's online curriculum, further fragmenting their education pathways and integration.

Confusion About Curriculum Recognition

Confusion and misinformation about whether host country education would be recognized by Ukraine's school system led many parents to avoid enrolling their children in local schools or to have them follow both the national curriculum and Ukraine's online program. This dual schooling placed excessive academic pressure on children and contributed to negative psychological effects.

Short-Term Mindset Among Parents

Especially during the first two years of the crisis, many parents expected to return to Ukraine in the near future. As a result, enrolling their children in local schools or investing in learning the local language was often not a priority. For many, the perceived effort required—for both their children and themselves—felt too great given the uncertainty of their situation.

Insecurity for Students in Ukraine

The ongoing conflict continues to damage and destroy homes, school buildings and other infrastructure and make it unsafe for Ukrainian children to attend school in-person. Many students complete school online either part-time or full-time. War-induced anxiety, depression, behavioural and adjustment disorders also inhibit students' ability to focus and learn.

Impact of War on Ukrainian Teachers

Ukrainian teachers are not only supporting students through trauma—they are also enduring the psychological toll of war themselves. According to a 2024 Caritas Ukraine needs assessment, 84% reported feeling less motivated to teach, 64% noted a decline in their physical health and over half expressed a need for psycho-emotional support.

Caritas Response

Caritas has developed a comprehensive, community-based approach to support Ukrainian children's educational and psychosocial needs. By partnering with students, caregivers and educators, we promote inclusive learning environments, provide psychosocial support and help displaced children overcome barriers to school participation and academic success.

MHPSS in Ukrainian Schools

In Ukraine, Caritas has implemented a program in more than 80 schools across the country to improve children's psychosocial well-being, provide teachers with emotional support and professional development and create a safe space for parents to share experiences and access help.

Caritas Integration Centres

At Caritas integration centres, professional social workers provide case management and individual counselling to support children's enrolment and adjustment in local schools. These centres also connect families with other essential services, promoting long-term integration and well-being.

Holistic Student Support

Children receive academic and emotional support through before- and after-school learning programs, homework help, language classes and school-readiness summer activities. Caritas also offers material support such as school supplies and clothing and scholarships to reduce financial barriers. Child-friendly safe spaces serve as hubs for education, psychosocial care and community-building activities.

Caregiver Support

To help parents and caregivers navigate unfamiliar school systems, Caritas case managers assist with enrolment paperwork, provide information about school requirements, accompany families to school meetings and facilitate communication between parents and educators. They also provide regular communication through meetings and other channels to ensure parents are informed and involved in their children's academic progress.

Training for Teachers and School Staff

Caritas provides training in child protection, trauma-informed care, cultural sensitivity and inclusive education for teachers, school psychologists and social pedagogues. Case managers help mediate between refugee families and school personnel to ensure better understanding and collaboration. These efforts help schools become safer and more welcoming for displaced children.

⁹ United Nations. *UN Report Details Devastating Impact of Hostilities on Children in Ukraine*. 21 March 2025. <https://ukraine.un.org/en/291365-un-report-details-devastating-impact-hostilities-children-ukraine>

Safe Return



Regional Context

As of December 2024, more than 5 million Ukrainian refugees remained abroad, with many living in the European Union under temporary protection. Although many initially hoped to return home, that number has declined as the war continues: fewer than half of refugees surveyed plan to return to Ukraine¹⁰. At the same time, growing numbers of refugees are already returning, often driven by financial hardship and difficult living conditions in host countries.

Despite return becoming a more urgent issue, no national or international concrete plans have been developed to support reintegration. Without coordinated strategies, refugees risk returning prematurely—without guarantees of security, housing, healthcare or livelihoods. And for refugees who wish to remain in their host countries, the European Union (EU) has yet to establish a long-term legal framework to replace the Temporary Protection Directive (TPD), leaving them without a clear path to permanent residency or secure legal status. This state of uncertain legal status, combined with Ukrainians' economic and housing instability, is contributing to a rise in human trafficking across the region.

State Response

There is a lack of clear strategies once the TPD expires, both for the continuation of legal residency—especially for the most vulnerable who cannot obtain a work permit or student visa—and for refugees' voluntary return to Ukraine once the security situation improves.

Gaps and Risks

While the question of return is becoming more urgent for many displaced Ukrainians, significant legal, economic and safety-related barriers remain. At the same time, those who wish to stay in host countries face ongoing uncertainty about their long-term legal status and future integration.

Uncertain Legal Status

As of late 2024, fewer than half of Ukrainian refugees say they intend to return to Ukraine in the

future. Yet despite growing signs that many wish to remain, the EU has not developed a clear long-term legal alternative to the Temporary Protection Directive, which is set to expire in March 2027. Although, the EC has published Proposal for a Council Recommendation on a coordinated approach to the transition out of temporary protection for displaced persons from Ukraine in June 2025, it is not legally binding for Member States. This leaves millions with no clear pathway to permanent residency or stable legal status, especially the most vulnerable who are unable to obtain work permits or student visas.

Pressure to Return

Rising living costs, financial insecurity and difficulties gaining liveable employment are forcing some refugees to return to Ukraine earlier than planned—even while the war continues. Driven by hardship and limited support in host countries, refugees return to unsafe conditions and difficulties accessing housing, healthcare, employment and other necessities.

Barriers to Safe Return

For those who wish to go back, return is often not a viable or safe option. Ongoing military activity, destroyed housing, limited job opportunities and fragile public services continue to deter many from returning. Without guarantees of security and reintegration support, returning to Ukraine can deepen vulnerability rather than resolve it.

Human Trafficking

For both Ukrainians remaining in host countries and those returning to Ukraine, the risk of human trafficking is rising. Difficulties in securing stable housing and sustainable employment increase vulnerability to forced labour and sexual exploitation—and in some cases, this is already happening. In 2022, 402 Ukrainian victims of trafficking were recorded across the EU, a six-fold increase from the 65 cases reported in 2021¹¹.

Lack of National or International Return Planning

Although growing numbers of refugees are considering return, there are currently no comprehensive systems in place to support them through that process. In the absence of coordinated planning between host countries, Ukraine and humanitarian actors, returns are happening informally and without essential safeguards. This lack of structure increases the risk of unsafe or unsustainable returns and leaves both individuals and communities without the support they need to reintegrate successfully. Return planning should

include clear information about return conditions, support for housing and employment, access to healthcare and psychosocial services and systems to monitor and respond to protection concerns during reintegration.

Caritas Response

Caritas has extensive experience assisting people returning to their home countries—both prior to departure and through reintegration services—as well as those remaining in host countries.

Support for Returnees

Caritas Ukraine and Caritas Belgium have pioneered a project to provide continuity in support for the most vulnerable returnees, which is being replicated by Caritas Romania and Moldova. Through the project, Caritas organizations within host countries provide returnees with tailored assistance, including support for traveling back to Ukraine. Once the beneficiary arrives in Ukraine, Caritas staff transfer the case to Caritas Ukraine, which provides reintegration services including assistance with housing and employment.

Support for Ukrainians Remaining in Host Countries

In addition to providing psychosocial care, material assistance, housing support and access to education, employment and medical services, Caritas Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Poland and Romania offer legal counselling for Ukrainians seeking permanent residence in their host countries. This assistance is especially critical to identify alternative legal solutions for those who cannot obtain work permits or student visas.

¹⁰ Centre for Economic Strategy. *Ukrainian Refugees After Three Years Abroad: Fourth Wave of Research*. 3 March 2025. <https://ces.org.ua/en/refugees-fourth-wave/>

¹¹ UNODC. *Addressing Trafficking in Persons in the Context of the War in Ukraine*. 2025. https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/tip/studies/2025/TIP_Study_2025_eng.pdf

Recommendations for the European Commission



Photo by: Philipp Spätek

1. Involuntary return to Ukraine:

There are signs that a growing numbers of beneficiaries of temporary protection in European countries are forced—due to their vulnerabilities and inadequate support from some host countries—to return to Ukraine, including areas that cannot be considered safe. The return of highly vulnerable persons to Ukraine in these conditions also raises the risk of human trafficking and other forms of abuse.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

(1) No beneficiaries of temporary protection in an EU member state—especially children, persons with disabilities and elderly people—should be forced by economic circumstances or the lack of access to basic medical and social services to return to a country affected by war. The European Commission shall monitor the implementation of provisions of the Temporary Protection Directive, especially Article 13, in all member states and request member states to take proper action if beneficiaries' rights are not respected.

(2) Caritas urges the European Commission to strengthen its focus on preventing human trafficking and refugee abuse, maintaining a zero-tolerance policy for exploitation and work without labour contracts.

2. Voluntary return to Ukraine:

Thousands of refugees have already returned to Ukraine, and it is estimated that 1 million to 2 million more will return once the war ends¹². Refugees must be able to make informed and voluntary decisions to return based on accurate information about the conditions in Ukraine. Those who do return require comprehensive support to reintegrate into a society deeply impacted by war.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

(1) Caritas proposes that the European Commission develop a support program for those who decide to return to Ukraine, especially for the most vulnerable beneficiaries of temporary protection. This program could follow a similar approach to the EU Reintegration Programme.

(2) Given that EU member states host the majority of Ukrainian refugees, the European Commission should promote international cooperation between Ukraine and host countries to support refugees' voluntary return and reintegration.

(3) The European Commission is encouraged to actively involve NGOs in the development

and implementation of return and reintegration programs for Ukrainian refugees. Adequate, flexible funding should also be allocated to enable NGOs to effectively contribute to these efforts on the ground.

3. Long-term protection status:

Regardless of the developments or outcome in Ukraine, a large number of beneficiaries of temporary protection will choose to remain in their EU host countries. Without clear and accessible legal pathways for refugees once temporary protection ends in March 2027, even those who successfully integrate into the local society will face legal insecurity and uncertainty about their possibilities for the future.

RECOMMENDATION:

Caritas urges the creation of a coordinated, long-term transition strategy that clearly outlines avenues for permanent legal residence for Ukrainian refugees and that provides guidance and support for those returning to Ukraine.

4. Support for refugee integration:

As the number of refugees from Ukraine and other war-affected regions grows, policies and programs that provide support and social services must be bolstered to meet basic needs and foster socio-economic integration.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

(1) European institutions should provide systemic support and additional funding through Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF) and other mechanisms for humanitarian organizations that assist displaced Ukrainians.

(2) The European Commission should encourage host countries to adopt a consistent approach regarding education for refugee children, in agreement with the Ukrainian government: namely, integration programs in schools, language training, compulsory school attendance in host countries and clear regulations for recognition of education upon return to Ukraine.

(3) Caritas proposes the creation of guidance for national institutions to develop clear, standardized and transparent criteria for assessing and validating educational qualifications from Ukraine to facilitate Ukrainian professionals' integration into the labour markets of host countries.

¹² Centre for Economic Strategy. *Ukrainian Refugees After Three Years Abroad. Fourth Wave of Research*. 3 March 2025. <https://ces.org.ua/en/refugees-fourth-wave/>

Recommendations for National Governments

1. Long-term protection status:

According to a December 2024 survey by the Centre for Economic Strategy, fewer than half of refugees plan to return to Ukraine¹³. Once the Temporary Protection Directive (TPD) expires in March 2027, many refugees—especially those not eligible for work or study permits—will be left without clear and accessible options for permanent legal residence.

RECOMMENDATION:

Caritas proposes the creation of national long-term legal frameworks that give Ukrainian refugees an avenue for permanent residence in their host country following the end of the TPD. Governments should facilitate the transition from temporary protection status to existing residency permits—especially for vulnerable groups that do not qualify for work or study permits—and address unnecessary barriers to gaining legal residency.

2. Safe return and reintegration:

Thousands of Ukrainian refugees have already returned to their homeland, and many more will return following the end of the war. Returnees face challenging situations, including not being able to return to hometowns under Russian occupation, destroyed homes and communities, damaged infrastructure and an economy that has been deeply affected by the war. It is therefore essential that refugees' decisions to return to Ukraine be both voluntary and informed and that returnees receive support on both sides of their journey.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

It is recommended that host countries' public employment services and local integration actors prepare to facilitate effective job market transitions for returnees, including through cooperation and continuous exchanges with other member states and Ukrainian authorities.

3. State social services:

Inconsistent access to state support and services leaves refugees unable to meet their most basic needs in host countries, let alone achieve long-term stability and self-sufficiency.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

(1) Ukrainian refugees must be able to access basic healthcare, mental health and psychosocial support, housing, education and necessary assistance in terms of social welfare and means of subsistence, pursuant to the rights outlined in the TPD.

(2) Caritas urges host countries to provide access to additional, existing programs that would facilitate refugees' healing and socio-economic integration, such as psychological support programmes that provide long-term assistance, digital tools or helplines that provide psychosocial services and childcare.

(3) Caritas proposes that host countries provide funding for language courses, translation and legalization of documents and educational diplomas and psychological assistance to improve integration efforts.

(4) Government policies must recognize the necessity of long-term support for vulnerable individuals who, for various reasons including chronic illness, disability and age, are unable to work.

(5) In Ukraine, access to mental health services and childcare for IDPs must be improved, particularly in remote and frontline areas.

4. Language and cultural orientation courses:

Lack of availability or access to intensive language and cultural orientation courses significantly reduces refugees' ability to adapt to their new community and gain sustainable employment.

RECOMMENDATION:

Governments should offer widely accessible language learning programmes and promote initiatives that incorporate language learning into vocational courses and on-the-job training.

5. Education:

Many Ukrainian refugee children have been out of formal education for three years due to confusing policies and expectations and alternative educational opportunities. This has had a huge detrimental impact on their learning, social integration and development.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

(1) Host countries must make school attendance mandatory for children upon arrival in the country.

(2) Caritas urges governments to adopt policies that integrate psychosocial support into the education system and to allocate resources for the emotional and social integration of refugee students. This includes investing in trauma-informed teaching methodologies, anti-bullying and cultural mediation training and the development of tools and resources for teaching the local language.

(3) Organizational measures should be taken at the level of the educational system, such as additional places, enrolment procedures, language training, support by psychologists and other programs to prepare and support children.

6. Social cohesion and anti-discrimination efforts:

Hostility and discriminatory behaviours against refugees and migrants are intensifying in many countries, fuelled partially by misinformation about the war in Ukraine and Ukrainian refugees. In some cases, aid organizations themselves face hostility and stigmatization for supporting refugees.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

(1) Governments must follow the European legislation on non-discrimination and the recommendations of the Handbook on European non-discrimination law, published by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights and the Council of Europe.

(2) Governments should develop and implement systemic anti-discrimination and anti-xenophobia measures, including information campaigns for citizens and integration and awareness programs in schools.

(3) National social cohesion programs should be created to facilitate interaction between refugee and host communities. Programs could leverage peer mentorship and joint extracurricular activities to build trust and reduce social tensions.

(4) Governments are urged to publicly recognise and support the contributions of NGOs in responding to the refugee crisis.

7. Refugee economic inclusion efforts:

Barriers to economic integration—such as lack of language and vocational skills that meet the demands of the local job market—prevent refugees from gaining safe, sustainable employment and long-term stability and self-sufficiency in their host countries.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

(1) Caritas proposes that governments work to engage the private sector and supply side of the labour market to increase employment opportunities for displaced persons. This could include offering tax breaks or subsidies for employing refugees, collaborating with businesses and industries to create job opportunities for refugees and organizing job fairs specifically for refugees and employers open to hiring them.

(2) National authorities should make the process of recognising Ukrainian educational and professional qualifications more accessible, affordable and efficient to enable skilled displaced people to enter the workforce quickly.

(3) Caritas proposes the use of regular national public awareness campaigns, the dissemination of information on local labour laws and the use of secure mechanisms for anonymous complaints to prevent exploitation, irregular work and other forms of workplace abuse.

8. IDP economic inclusion efforts:

In Ukraine, employment rates among internally displaced persons are lower than the national average, with approximately half of working-age IDPs being unemployed. Barriers to formal employment include missing documentation, fear of losing state or humanitarian benefits and lack of access to services such as psychosocial support and childcare.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

(1) Caritas recommends that the Ukrainian government provide targeted support for IDPs and vulnerable groups in the labour market in Ukraine, including funding agro-cooperatives in rural areas to create jobs for IDPs, prioritizing grants for IDP-led businesses, supporting “Community Work Programs” in villages and expanding entrepreneurship initiatives focused on displaced populations.

(2) Caritas recommends that the Ukrainian government support gender-responsive policies and programs that help women re-enter the workforce. This can include measures such as increasing access to childcare centres in IDP-dense regions and partnering with organizations like Caritas to offer trauma-informed vocational training for female IDPs.

¹³ Ibid.

9. Support for NGOs:

In Ukraine and most of its neighbouring countries, NGOs such as Caritas played an essential role in receiving, hosting and supporting refugees and IDPs fleeing war zones. Now—more than three years after the start of the full-scale invasion—Caritas and other NGOs continue to assist both those intending to stay in their host countries and those planning to return to Ukraine. Most of this work has been funded by international donors, such as national Caritas organizations, institutional donors like UN agencies, the European Commission and other international NGOs, and by private donors. Much of the funding is ending, even though the needs of those displaced remain. Unfortunately, government funding, even for essential services provided by NGOs, has been either very limited or non-existent in several neighbouring countries.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- (1) National governments are called to recognize the important work done by civil society and NGOs in managing the humanitarian crisis caused by the war in Ukraine and to create a proper legal environment allowing NGOs to do this important work.
- (2) Governments on national and local levels should provide proper funding for the continuation of essential social and integration services and reintegration programs offered by civil society actors, including Caritas.
- (3) Governments should include local NGOs—which collected important data and learnings in their work with refugees and developed innovative solutions for assistance and integration—in consultations aimed at developing programs supporting refugees, migrants, IDPs and returnees.
- (4) In each country, there should be a joint evaluation of the national response to the Ukraine refugee crisis involving the national government, relevant state agencies, NGOs, and other civil society actors and international organizations working in their country.

2. Frontline staff support and development:

Due to the complex, stressful and intensive nature of working directly with displaced persons, frontline staff must have appropriate support and opportunities for learning and development.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- (1) Civil society actors should implement flexible human resource management policies and ensure frontline staff can access psychological support, supervision and time for rest and recovery.
- (2) Civil society actors must provide access to trainings for volunteers and staff to help them better understand the needs of refugees and how to work with clients with trauma.
- (3) Civil society actors should consider facilitating experience-sharing platforms between frontline staff in different countries to improve strategies for emotional resilience and coping mechanisms. These international organizations should hold conferences, workshops and trainings for staff to share experiences, resources and best practices in supporting refugees.

3. Mental health and psychosocial support:

There is significant demand for psychosocial support (PSS), making capacity building through trainings, workshops and engagement of facilitators, animators and volunteers essential.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- (1) Civil society actors should consider the development of additional forms of psychological support, such as online consultations and psychological sessions with the help of artificial intelligence, to help address PSS needs.
- (2) The capacity of civil society staff must be strengthened through training and resource provision in psychosocial first aid, trauma-informed care and community-based mental health approaches, ensuring that service delivery supports the emotional well-being of refugees.
- (3) Civil society actors should raise awareness about human trafficking hazards. Field workers have experienced increased danger due to refugee and IDP involvement with forced prostitution and forced labour.

4. Education:

Civil society actors play a vital role in helping refugee children successfully integrate into local schools, which is essential for their social adaptation, healing, learning and development.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- (1) NGOs should support public schools to become open and inclusive learning environments for all children, including refugee children. This includes training for teachers, promotion of new teaching tools and methodologies for trauma-informed teaching.
- (2) Integration in local schools should start as soon as possible—even immediately after arriving in the host country. Instead of building parallel educational structures and competing with local schools, civil society actors should develop educational programs and support activities that complement schools and school communities. Parallel educational structures should only be used for a limited period of time in situations when children have no option to attend local schools.

5. Employment and livelihoods:

Civil society actors provide robust support for refugees seeking employment requiring comprehensive assessments of the beneficiaries' needs, individualized approaches and cross-sector collaboration and cooperation.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- (1) Civil society actors should engage or directly partner with public employment offices, community organizations and other key stakeholders to provide additional support networks, mentorship opportunities and resources for refugees.
- (2) Given the specific features and situation of displaced persons from Ukraine—such as the ongoing uncertainty of their temporary residence status, dynamically changing attitudes toward return and/or relocation to another country, demographic profiles and family situations—NGOs should continue to provide individualized approaches for facilitating job market entry and access to dignified employment to all working-age refugees, in line with their credentials and experience, as well as offer tailored support to those remaining outside the labour force.
- (3) Mental health and psychosocial support and protection components should be integrated into livelihood assistance provisions to address IDP needs and increase their ability to access employment.

Recommendations for Civil Society Actors



1. International advocacy:

The number of refugees from Ukraine and other war-affected regions is growing, but funding for programs that support them is decreasing or non-existent.

RECOMMENDATION:

Civil society actors should advocate at national and European levels, emphasizing the importance of humanitarian assistance in refugee response and the need for additional funding and policies that support this critical work.

Annex: Case Studies¹⁴



IMPACT STORY 1: **Oleh**

Oleh, a 47-year-old man from the southern part of Ukraine, lost his home and entire family when a shell hit his house in February 2022. Oleh survived only because he was not home. All of his belongings and documents were destroyed in the fire. The traumatic event left him deeply shaken and worsened his neurological condition, leading to a six-month stay in a psychiatric hospital. Homeless after being discharged, Oleh lived at a railway station for some time before moving in with a family on the condition that he would repair a room in their home. After two months, he was evicted without payment for his work. Now a victim of labor exploitation and with no other options, Oleh returned to the railway station.

Volunteers eventually evacuated Oleh to the western part of Ukraine, where he was referred to Caritas. The Caritas Crisis Center provided food, help finding new shelter, necessary items including a heater, dishes and bedding, and medicine to treat his condition. Oleh also received psychological support and help in restoring essential documents such as his passport and tax ID. He was referred to other Caritas projects, which enabled him to acquire construction tools and secure temporary employment. This comprehensive support significantly helped Oleh adapt to his new community, gain permanent employment and rent an independent apartment.



IMPACT STORY 2: **Luba**

Luba and her son fled their home in a town in northern Ukraine which came under heavy bombardment and endured a month-long food blockade—in March 2022. Once safely in Poland, Luba faced a new set of challenges: she needed legal assistance, medical care for her son, who has a disability, job support and the opportunity to learn Polish.

With the help of Caritas staff, Luba enrolled in a Polish language course and secured work as an intercultural assistant at a primary school. She arranged medical care for her son, which enabled him to attend school. Caritas also referred Luba to a foundation that assists with the costs of diploma recognition, bringing her closer to her goal of returning to work as a teacher. While waiting for her educational credentials to be verified, Luba works as a teacher's assistant and attends vocational courses. She actively participates in workshops and community excursions and has formed new friendships. With determination and the right support, Luba is not only overcoming the trauma of displacement—she is steadily building a new life as a valued member of her adopted Polish community.



IMPACT STORY 3: **Tetyana**

Under threat of Russian shelling, Tetyana, a 53-year-old woman from the Donetsk region, fled to Poland in October 2023. As an older woman, she found herself in a particularly vulnerable situation: she did not speak Polish well, her financial resources were nearly depleted and she struggled to find a job.

The team at the Caritas Rzeszów Center for Migrants and Refugees Support responded immediately, providing Tetyana with a food package and long-term psychological care. Tetyana also received extensive employment assistance. Working with a career advisor, Tetyana created a CV, participated in a career counseling session and completed a vocational training on cash register operation, which included a specialized, industry-specific Polish language module. Tetyana obtained medical clearance from an occupational health doctor so she could acquire a health and safety work permit. She then gained employment as a cashier under a work contract at a supermarket in Rzeszów and became an official Polish-Ukrainian translator. With Caritas' support over the course of nine months, Tetyana regained stability and successfully integrated into the local community.



IMPACT STORY 4: **Ivanna**

Ivanna, a 32-year-old woman, first contacted Caritas in Poland seeking help with employment and housing. During the intake process, staff observed symptoms of disorientation, confusion and abnormal behavior and suspected she might be experiencing a serious mental health disorder. Though initially reluctant to engage in treatment, Ivanna eventually agreed to enter a psychiatric daycare unit, and soon after, a hospital.

At one point, Ivanna lost her belongings—including identification—and was found wandering near the Caritas office after sleeping at a bus station. Staff helped her recover what they could and facilitated her hospital admission, which was made possible thanks to her Caritas registration card. Ivanna spent a year in the hospital. Throughout her stay, Caritas staff visited weekly and provided food, clothing and hygiene supplies. With no family willing to assist, the case manager found her a place in a supportive, collective accommodation center and connected her to long-term therapy and other support at a community center. Ivanna's condition has since stabilized, but due to her illness and isolation, she continues to rely on consistent support.

¹⁴ Names have been changed to protect program participant identities.



IMPACT STORY 5: **Mariia**

Mariia, a trained electrical engineer with experience as a power network designer, arrived in Poland determined to restart her career. She diligently studied Polish and worked with a Caritas career advisor to begin the diploma recognition (nostrification) process—a required step to practice her profession. With support from Caritas staff, Mariia translated her documents and began contacting technical universities across Poland. Despite having the legal authority to conduct nostrifications, several institutions either declined to process her application or redirected her endlessly with no clear information. The process dragged on for weeks, causing frustration and delay. Another major obstacle was the cost: nostrification fees in Poland are approximately €1,000—equal to the monthly minimum salary and unaffordable for Mariia. Mariia discovered a Save the Children program that covers nostrification fees. She quickly secured funding to cover the full amount—but the grant had to be used by year's end. As time ran out, a career advisor from Save the Children helped identify a willing university, and Caritas staff successfully advocated for expedited processing. Mariia's application was approved just in time, with a full fee exemption.

Mariia now awaits registration with the Chamber of Civil Engineers. Her story highlights the power of persistence—and the critical need to address systemic barriers for displaced professionals seeking to reclaim their careers.



IMPACT STORY 6: **Olha**

Olha, a 66-year-old retired woman from a small town in northern Ukraine, fled Ukraine with her family in early March 2022. After evacuating to Kyiv, then Ternopil, they crossed into Romania. Days after their departure, Olha learned that her son-in-law — had been killed.

In Romania, the family received temporary housing in Cluj-Napoca for over a year, but struggled to find affordable rent after the refugee hotel closed in 2024. Facing financial difficulty and emotional strain, Olha connected with Caritas through another Ukrainian beneficiary. Since January 2024, Caritas has supported Olha and her family with material aid, such as non-perishable food, clothing, shoes and bedding, emergency financial assistance, social counselling and employment support. The team also helped them navigate local services, including healthcare and housing. Olha actively participates in group activities, which have helped reduce anxiety for her and her family members. "It is good and nice to feel that we belong," she said. "We are supported by a community and receive the information and help we need in a foreign country."



IMPACT STORY 7: **Vira**

Vira, 63, her 34-year-old daughter Alina and two young grandchildren fled to Romania from the heavily bombed town in southern Ukraine in early 2023, leaving Alina's husband behind in Ukraine. Like many other refugees, they faced multiple challenges: limited income, language barriers and no access to a family doctor—especially critical due to Vira's chronic condition, which required expensive medication and physiotherapy. Although the family initially received housing through a government program, delays in landlord payments created further financial instability.

The family registered with Caritas in March 2023 and received help with immediate material needs, social counselling and guidance to access basic services. Caritas staff also helped them navigate the medical system, securing appointments and physiotherapy for Vira. Vira especially appreciated the opportunity to participate in social activities with other Ukrainian refugees, which eased her sense of isolation.

Alina eventually found short-term work, but when their government support ended in mid-2024, the family struggled to afford basic living costs. In September 2024, they made the difficult decision to return to Ukraine. Despite ongoing insecurity, damaged infrastructure and limited services, financial hardship and barriers to integration left Vira and Alina with few alternatives.



IMPACT STORY 8: **Olena**

Olena, a Ukrainian nurse and mother, arrived in Bulgaria with her two children in March 2022. She initially found factory work through an intermediary employer and put her nursing career on hold to focus on her children's well-being. When Olena first visited Caritas in June 2022, her priority was enrolling her daughter in a sports school—similar to the one she attended in Ukraine—and her young son in a nearby primary school. Her goal was to restore a sense of comfort and normalcy by reconnecting them with familiar routines and interests.

Caritas staff supported Olena in navigating the education system, completing paperwork and attending school visits and meetings. By September, both children were successfully enrolled in schools of their choice. A year later, feeling ready to return to her profession, Olena asked for assistance with diploma recognition. Caritas helped her prepare for the Bulgarian language exam and provided counselling and networking opportunities to re-enter the healthcare field.

Today, the family is thriving in their new community. In 2023, Olena began working as a nurse, both her children have made friends and speak Bulgarian fluently, and the family now has a pet, which they love very much.



Caritas
Bulgaria



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Czech Republic



Caritas
Hungary



Caritas
Moldova



Caritas
Slovakia



Caritas
Romania



Caritas
Ukraine

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under the leadership of
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