

# POLICY BRIEF

## Migration governance in times of crisis and disinformation: the case of Ukraine

### Highlights

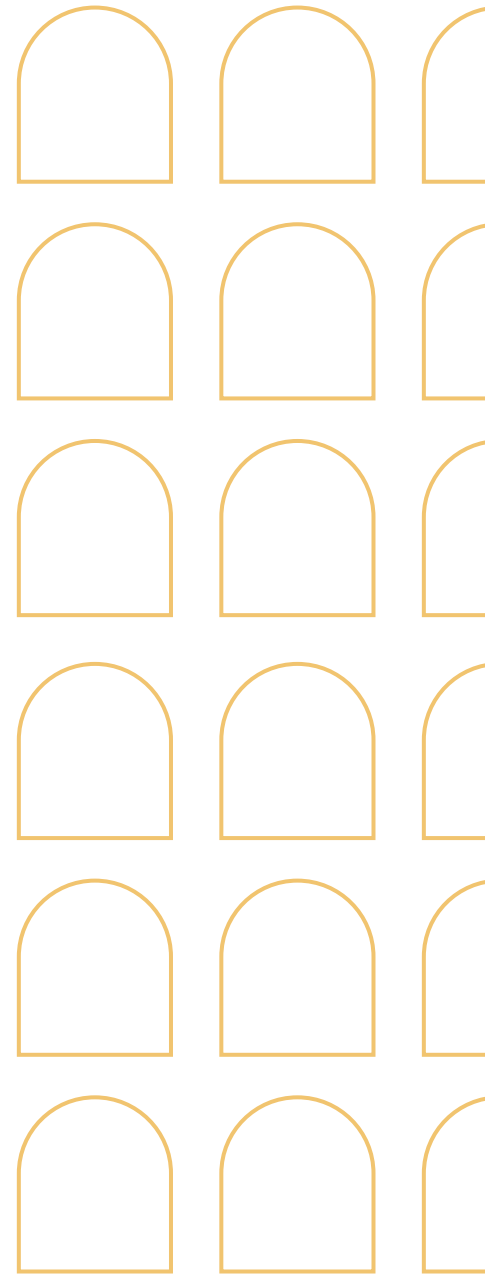
- Public support for Ukrainian refugees in Europe is shaped not only by humanitarian motives, but also, especially in Central and Eastern Europe, by the geopolitical threat from Russia.
- Disinformation framing Ukrainian refugees as a burden or threat to the EU often peak around key political events.
- The integration of Ukrainian women under temporary protection in the EU labour market is hindered by a combination of structural factors and personal circumstances, including language barriers, childcare responsibilities, limited recognition of qualifications, precarious employment and the uncertainty over their temporary legal status.
- Cultural participation is a vital tool for migration governance, helping bridge the gap between temporariness and integration by supporting the wellbeing, resilience and inclusion of displaced Ukrainians, especially women.

EU and governments can address the overlapping challenges by:

1. Developing communication strategies grounded in universal asylum principles and shared European values, combining trusted evidence-based messaging, critical media literacy, direct local engagement, and transparent policies that address public concerns and counter disinformation effectively.

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2. Providing TP holders with long-term residence options, speeding up qualification recognition in key sectors, and improving the access to affordable childcare to support women's employment and training.
3. Supporting cultural mediators to connect newcomers with local cultural ecosystems; investing in mobile, decentralized, and digital cultural initiatives, and collaborating with social media to enhance access to cultural opportunities for displaced persons.

## Quick guide

*Strengthening migration governance in response to the Ukrainian displacement requires communication grounded in universal asylum values, a proactive disinformation response, consistent EU-wide approaches that avoid refugee hierarchies and inclusive labour and cultural policies, especially for women.*

## Introduction

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 triggered the largest displacement in Europe in recent history and prompted an unprecedented policy response from the EU, including the activation of the Temporary Protection Directive (TPD).

Support for displaced Ukrainians across Central and Eastern Europe has been notably stronger than in past refugee crises. Yet, this solidarity is shaped not only by humanitarian considerations but also by geopolitical threat perceptions [1] and by public perceptions of persons displaced from Ukraine. Understanding how narratives of deservingness, vulnerability, and burden are formed and sometimes manipulated, is crucial for ensuring coherent and inclusive refugee policies.

While depictions of displaced persons from Ukraine in Europe have generally been positive in traditional media [2], disinformation spread by malicious actors reuses and recycles existing threat and burden narratives that have been deployed in the portrayal of non-European immigrants. Emphasizing the burden posed by displaced persons from Ukraine and casting doubt over their legitimacy and

deservingness, these narratives aim to undermine solidarity by stoking fears of collapse and by stirring notions of unfair treatment and of betrayal by political leaders.

Further, the swift activation of the TPD granted displaced people immediate access to employment. However, the actual numbers of integrated into the EU labour market differ from initial expectations in some EU states. This displacement wave is specific: it is war-driven, shaped by temporariness, and predominantly composed by women with children, a group that needs particular attention [3]. Language requirements, limited recognition of qualifications, and precarious employment complicate an integration of Ukrainian women into labour market. This process is also hindered by childcare burdens, family separation and an unclear vision of the future. A structured vision of post-TPD transition offering diverse choices and a gender-sensitive framework is vital to address these challenges and accelerate swift and competence-based integration of Ukrainian women into the EU labour market.

Also, the temporality and the uncertainty of Ukrainian forced migration present an additional challenge to adaptation and inclusion.

Cultural activities are another tool to facilitate integration by addressing the cultural needs of displaced persons and supporting their wellbeing. However, many displaced people remain excluded from cultural life in host communities due to systemic barriers, particularly those related to language, infrastructure, complicated psychological conditions and missing access to information.

## Public attitudes towards displaced ukrainians: lessons from comparative refugee perceptions in Europe

Public and institutional responses to Ukrainian refugees in Central and Eastern Europe have been broadly supportive, contrasting sharply with earlier reactions to Syrian refugees. New experimental evidence [1] which examined public attitudes toward Ukrainian and Syrian refugees in eight European countries (Poland, Hungary, Slovakia, Czechia, Romania, Germany, Austria and Italy) reveals that this support is not merely humanitarian but shaped by geopolitical factors, particularly the perceived threat from Russia. The study assessed respondents' preferences for allowing displaced Ukrainians or Syrians to come to the country in an experimental setting. It also captured individual-level differences in these preferences, particularly based on the perceived Russian threat. Understanding these mechanisms is essential to safeguarding inclusive asylum policies and preventing politicised hierarchies of deservingness among refugees.

### Key messages

**Displaced Ukrainians are viewed more favourably than Syrians across Europe.** This positive differential is most pronounced in Central and Eastern European countries (CEE), while favourable attitudes are less robust in Western Europe, where perceived differences between Ukrainians and Syrians are smaller.

**Perceived Russian threat amplifies solidarity with Ukrainians.** In CEE countries (especially in Poland and the Czech Republic), high levels of perceived threat from Russia act as a positive driver of support for Ukrainians. Ukrainians are framed not only as refugees but as allies in a shared geopolitical struggle. This “positive threat activation” reinforces in-group dynamics and moral obligations. However, in countries where Russia is seen as a less immediate threat (e.g., Italy), this effect is absent.

**Solidarity rooted in threat perception is fragile and context-dependent** - it may not translate to broader refugee populations or endure over time. While threat-induced solidarity fosters short-

term support, it risks producing a tiered system of refugee deservingness, in which displaced persons from other regions (e.g., Syria, Afghanistan) are viewed as less legitimate. This dynamic could erode long-standing EU commitments to non-discrimination and equal treatment in asylum.

### Policy Recommendations

- **Develop communication strategies that reinforce universal asylum principles.** While geopolitical narratives may strengthen solidarity in the short term, public messaging should be grounded in shared European values of protection, inclusion, and the rule of law. Institutional actors should avoid language that portrays some refugees as more deserving solely based on origin or geopolitical relevance.
- **Promote cross-country exchange on civic mobilisation and public messaging.** Central and Eastern European countries offer unique insights into how perceived threats can foster pro-refugee attitudes. These insights can inform public outreach and policy design in Central and Eastern Europe, where refugee support may be weaker or more fragmented.
- **There is a need to balance empathetic responses with policy consistency,** to avoid hierarchies that undermine refugee protection norms.

## Eroding solidarity with displaced persons from Ukraine: an analysis of mis- and disinformation circulating on-line

A research team from the JRC conducted an analysis to identify the dominant narratives surrounding the forced displacement of Ukrainians to Europe. The study focused on 433 online news articles about Ukrainian displaced persons, published between February 22, 2022 and March 5, 2023 by sources that had been flagged by fact-checkers as potentially spreading disinformation [4]. The qualitative content analysis revealed that the most prevalent narrative is that the EU is **overwhelmed by the displacement of persons from Ukraine**, with 218

articles suggesting that this is pushing the region to a breaking point. This narrative emphasizes the financial burden of hosting displaced persons, rising food and energy prices and resource scarcity. A common theme within this narrative is that Ukrainian displaced persons are a burden and EU countries are unable to cope, stirring anxieties about the financial consequences of hosting them.

The second most popular narrative suggests that **migration from Ukraine poses a danger to the EU**, with 98 articles promoting this idea. This narrative aims to instill fear and mistrust towards Ukrainians seeking refuge by questioning their authenticity and suggesting they may pose a security threat. These stories also raise concerns about the global consequences of the war, including the potential for more immigrants arriving from other regions due to rising food prices.

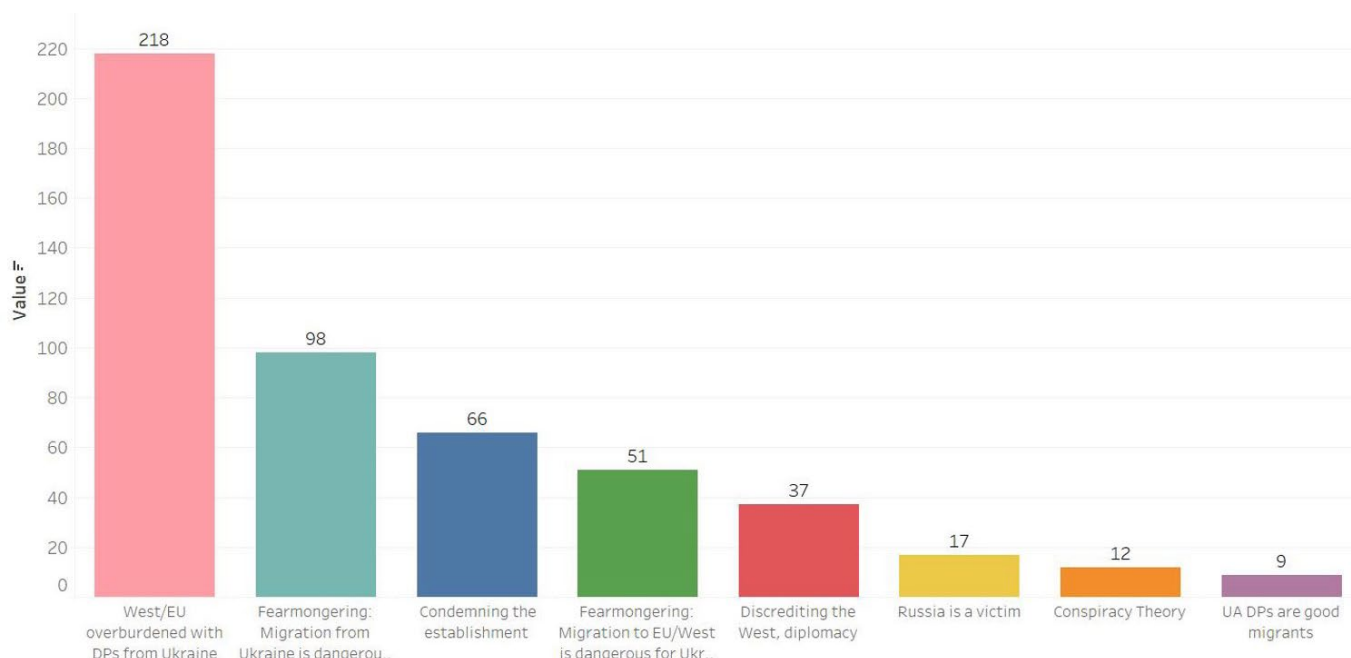
Another narrative **condemns the political establishment**, seeking to discredit and stir discontent with leadership as well as creating feelings of unfair treatment among the local population compared to displaced persons. The most common theme within this category is the loss of control, both at the borders and in managing the situation.

The analysis found that Germany and Poland, which have taken in many Ukrainians under temporary protection, are the most frequently mentioned countries in these news stories. The majority of articles were published in Russian, followed by German, Polish and Bulgarian. The research team also observed that the occurrence of these narratives over time reveals several peaks, often coinciding with significant events and policy decisions related to the war in Ukraine and its consequences.

This suggests that the news items contributing to disinformation narratives about Ukrainians are contextually relevant and responsive to political developments. Furthermore, the research team noticed that the same news stories were translated and republished across different online platforms, demonstrating how disinformation can be amplified through networked publication outlets.

### Policy recommendations

- The problem with disinformation is that it erodes trust and undermines social bonds, tolerance and dialogue. There is no silver bullet against disinformation; a whole-of society approach is needed, involving collaboration among poli-



- (Super-)Narratives
- Condemning the establishment
  - Conspiracy Theory
  - Discrediting the West, diplomacy
  - Fearmongering: Migration from Ukraine is dangerous to EU/West
  - Fearmongering: Migration to EU/West is dangerous for Ukrainians
  - Russia is a victim
  - UA DPs are good migrants
  - West/EU overburdened with DPs from Ukraine

Figure 1 – Frequency of supernarratives

cymakers, researchers, civil society organisations, journalists and tech companies.

- In-person contact between locals and migrant groups can support combating disinformation targeting migrants which thrives on rumours, negative stereotypes and limited local and face-to-face experience. Equipping citizens with critical media literacy skills and pre-bunking disinformation narratives also contribute to tackling the influence of harmful content spread by malicious actors.
- Importantly, the public's legitimate concerns need to be taken seriously. This means that EU institutions, national and local authorities need to address these concerns and reassure the public that the arrival of large numbers of people seeking protection can be managed. Concrete policies need to back such reassurance.
- Simultaneously, public communicators should focus on establishing and maintaining their institution as a trusted and evidence-based source of information that will allow them to be a go-to source when more and more synthetic or artificial information floods the public sphere [4].

## EU labour market and TPD activation

TPD provided its holders with minimum rights and guaranteed basic standards, including access to the labour market, however approaches differ in some EU countries [5]. For example, in case of Poland, linguistic closeness, low unemployment, and developed migration infrastructure facilitated fast labour integration. However, many women are employed below their skill levels in low-paid, informal sectors. Limited childcare availability and underdeveloped social support systems remain significant barriers to long-term integration and career progression. Italy also has a long-standing, female-dominated Ukrainian migration history, especially in domestic and care work. While pre-existing Ukrainian networks support job access, opportunities remain concentrated in low-skilled, gendered sectors with irregular employment and minimal room for advancement. Germany, on a contrary, offers the most structured institutional support under the TPD, including financial assistance, integration courses,

and targeted employment initiatives. With comparatively high wages and a strong focus on long-term integration, Germany's approach is promising, particularly for skilled individuals. However, many women face obstacles such as lengthy qualification recognition procedures, strict language requirements, and bureaucratic delays, which slow entry into stable employment. Despite these challenges, Germany's long-term strategy holds strong potential.

### Key messages

Although national approaches differ significantly, joined EU strategy is needed to provide minimum standards for the TPD holders in the process of their labour market integration and guarantee their smooth transition to other options when the TPD is over.

### Policy recommendations

- Clarify long-term residence options, including pathways to permanent settlement, voluntary return, or circular migration, to reduce uncertainty and enable people under TPD to plan their futures.
- Accelerate recognition of qualifications, particularly in critical sectors such as healthcare and education.
- Expand access to affordable and reliable childcare to enable women to engage in employment and training.
- Address occupational segregation by promoting access to a broader range of sectors beyond traditional gendered roles and "Ukrainian" sectors.
- Support circular and transnational mobility, allowing women to maintain professional links between host countries and Ukraine during and after the war.

## Cultural practices in migration governance

Effective cultural interventions can bridge the gap between temporariness and long-term adaptation, contributing to social capital for vulnerable

groups, particularly women and children. Eliminating barriers to cultural participation can foster a shift from passive consumption to active engagement, increase involvement in high-brow activities, improve mental health outcomes, reduce isolation, and strengthen social cohesion, thus contributing to more sustainable inclusion and integration.

Based on empirical research involving 524 survey respondents from all EU countries and 56 in-depth interviews, this chapter of the policy brief identifies key barriers to cultural inclusion and provides actionable recommendations to strengthen the synergy between EU migration and cultural governance [6].

### Key messages

Distinct “female face” of Ukrainian forced migration wave justifies cultural interventions as a particularly effective tool for initial support, as women are more prone to war-related and acculturation trauma, yet more inclined to participate in high-brow cultural activities.

Key obstacles for cultural participation include language barriers, financial costs (e.g. admission and transportation), psychological distress, and limited access in non-urban areas.

Digital media is the main gateway to cultural participation: social media platforms, particularly Facebook, Telegram and Instagram, are the main channels through which displaced Ukrainians access cultural information.

### Policy recommendations

- Apply multilingual communication strategies (at least at the initial stage), provide basic information (online and on-site) in native language.
- Support mediators, cultural agents/institutions and community-based bodies to guide newcomers through local cultural ecosystems, provide micro-grants for migrant-led cultural projects.
- Invest in mobile and decentralized cultural formats, touring exhibitions, pop-up events, and digital participation tools in areas with limited infrastructure.

- Collaborate with digital media, (esp. social media networks) for disseminating information about cultural opportunities for displaced persons to ensure their better access to high-quality cultural content.

### Joint strategies for strengthening migration governance and supporting displaced ukrainians:

- Cultivate universal asylum principles and shared European values in public communication.
- The public’s legitimate concerns seriously, address these concerns and reassure the public that the arrival of large numbers of people seeking protection can be managed. Concrete policies need to back such reassurance.
- Implement collaborative approaches to counter disinformation campaigns targeting Ukrainian displaced persons and ensure EU institutions remain trusted sources of information.
- Actively integrate cultural instruments into migration governance, moving beyond passive cultural consumption to active engagement.
- Jointly define long-term residence pathways for displaced Ukrainians to reduce uncertainty and boost integration.
- Prioritize gender-responsive policies across all integration domains, specifically tailoring the interventions to the needs of women with children, including childcare burdens, mental health support, and pathways to overcome underemployment and precarious work.

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*The Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies (RSCAS), created in 1992 and directed by Professor Erik Jones, aims to develop inter-disciplinary and comparative research on the major issues facing the process of European integration, European societies and Europe's place in 21<sup>st</sup> century global politics. The Centre is home to a large post-doctoral programme and hosts major research programmes, projects and data sets, in addition to a range of working groups and ad hoc initiatives. The research agenda is organised around a set of core themes and is continuously evolving, reflecting the changing agenda of European integration, the expanding membership of the European Union, developments in Europe's neighbourhood and the wider world.*

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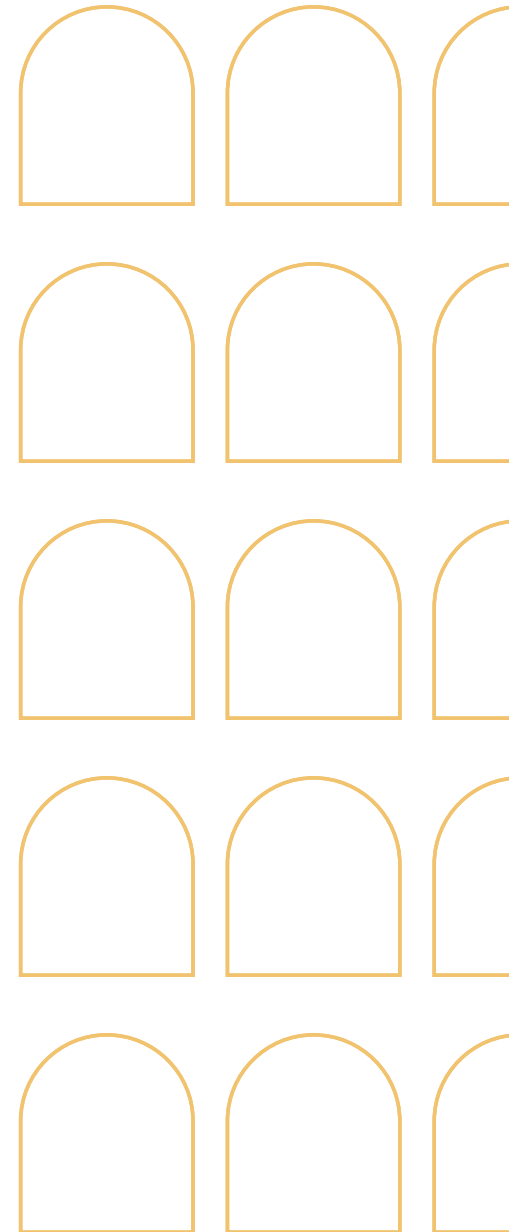
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