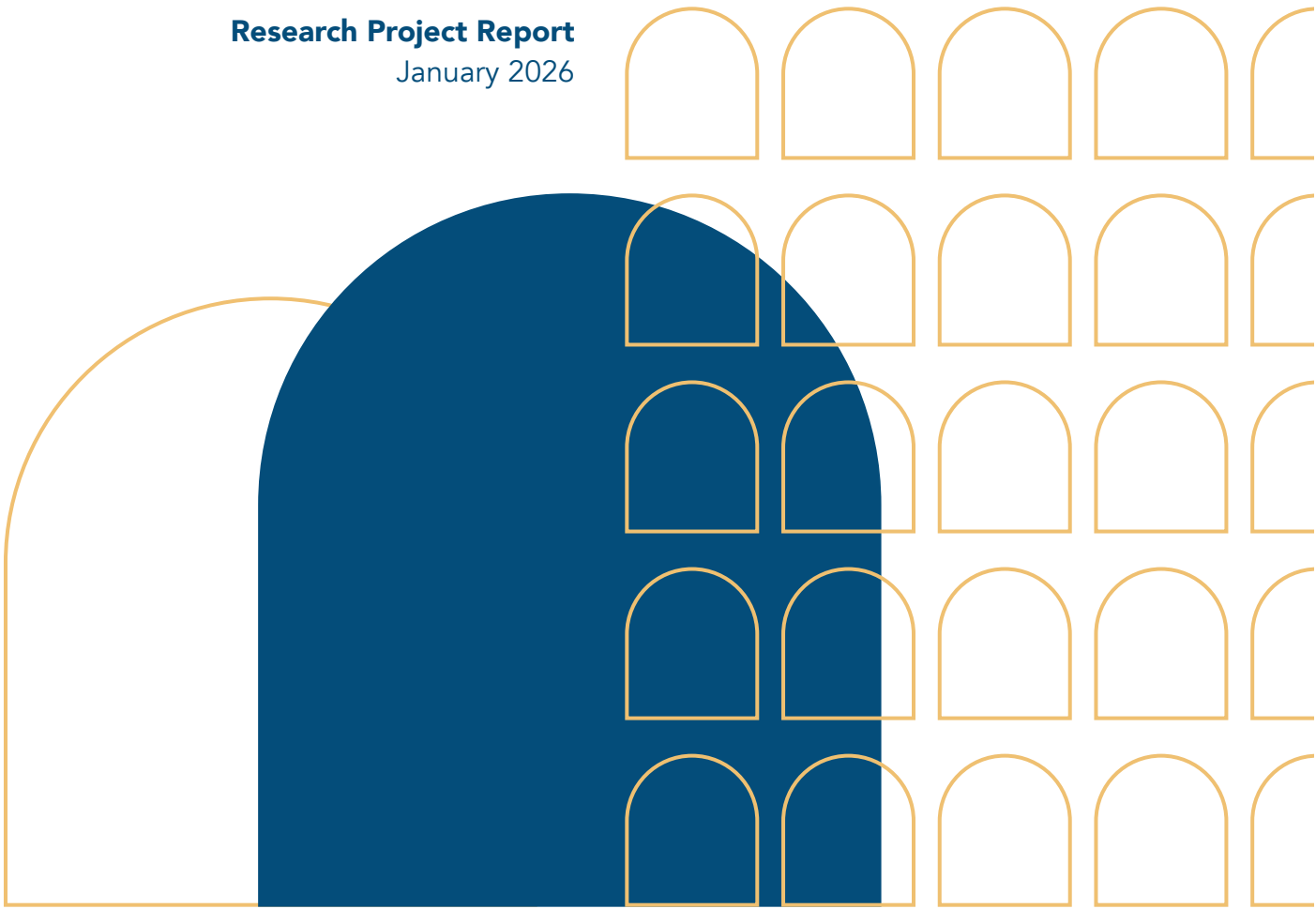
EUI MIGRATION POLICY CENTRE

Integration under Temporary Protection: The Case of Ukraine

Survey Report

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Research Project Report
January 2026



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Published by

European University Institute (EUI)

Via dei Roccettini 9, I-50014

San Domenico di Fiesole (FI)

Italy

doi:10.2870/7100945

ISBN:978-92-9466-880-6

QM-01-26-409-EN-N

Co-funded by the European Union

Funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA). Neither the European Union nor EACEA can be held responsible for them.

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Keda Marina, Kiselyova Yulia

Integration Under Temporary Protection: The Case of Ukraine. Survey Report. Florence: European University Institute, 2026. 53 p.

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Acknowledgements

The study, 'Integration Under Temporary Protection: The Case of Ukraine', was conducted within the JRC fellowship awarded to Keda Marina by Joint Research Centre at the Migration Policy Center of the Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies at the European University Institute (Italy).

Table of Content

INTRODUCTION **1**

METHODOLOGY **2**

RESULTS **3**

GENERAL PROFILE OF RESPONDENTS 3

PUSH AND PULL FACTORS 6

PERCEPTION OF TEMPORARINESS 8

CONDITIONS OF (NON)RETURN 18

LEVEL OF INTEGRATION 25

FACTORS OF HOPE 38

CONCLUSIONS **44**

REFERENCES **46**

ANNEXES **47**

INTRODUCTION

The Temporary Protection Directive, activated by the European Union in 2022, successfully addressed the acute humanitarian crisis caused by the influx of millions of Ukrainians fleeing Russia's military aggression. Initially designed as a short-term mechanism for up to three years to provide immediate assistance during refugees' temporary stay, this temporary instrument was affected by the protracted nature of the war and transformed into a lasting reality. This shift raises a critical set of questions regarding the future of the temporary status, as well as prospects of long-term stay and return for individuals under Temporary Protection. These questions are vital both for the future of Ukraine, which heavily relies on the return of its citizens for post-war reconstruction, and for the host countries, particularly those accommodating the largest numbers of displaced persons, to ensure their effective socio-economic integration (Malynovska, 2023).

Given the temporary nature of this protection, its eventual expiration may be abrupt and unexpected for refugees, potentially leading to unprepared returns, the risk of facing an unregulated legal status abroad, or displacement to another country. Consequently, it is crucial to assess the current information policy and the refugees' own awareness regarding their future life trajectories. Furthermore, once Temporary Protection ends, the status of Ukrainians may vary drastically across different states, heavily depending on whether the host country is interested in granting permanent residency to displaced persons and whether any steps are already being taken in this direction. In this context, it is crucially important to consider potential risks for particularly vulnerable categories of refugees.

To develop effective governance policies following the expiration of Temporary Protection, it is essential to consider how integration occurs under this temporary mechanism, which possesses a number of distinct features compared to other refugee response instruments.

Consequently, the research question is formulated as follows: how does the temporary nature of protection shape integration processes, aspirations about the future, legal pathways, and return intentions among displaced Ukrainians in EU countries. In designing this study, we drew upon the conceptual framework of integration developed by Ager and Strang (2008).

METHODOLOGY

Period – the survey was conducted by the authors personally between 21 April and 22 May 2026.

Geography – Germany, Poland, Czechia, Italy, Austria, France, Spain, Belgium, Netherlands.

The aim of the study – to examine the factors that influence (non)integration of Ukrainians under Temporary Protection, learn about their expectations and what supports them in exile.

Sample: the study is based on semi-structured in-depth interviews with 20 participants. The target group of the survey is comprised of temporarily displaced persons who fled the war in Ukraine and arrived in European Union countries after February 23, 2022.

In Poland and Italy, all the interviews were conducted personally by the authors through direct face-to-face communication with the interviewees. The respondents from other countries were interviewed via Zoom.

The results presented in this report should be interpreted in light of the methodological limitations and the ongoing movement of displaced persons within Europe: the results reflect the situation and intentions of displaced persons at the time of data collection (April-May 2026), which may change subsequently depending on a wide range of factors.

The survey questionnaire is comprised of 30 questions, divided into thematic blocks. Particular attention is paid to how respondents perceive their Temporary Protection status, the extent to which it generates feelings of uncertainty, and the strategies adopted by respondents regarding their legal and life trajectories, including remaining in the host country or returning to Ukraine. The study also examines how state institutions and policies in host countries, including information policies, shape these perceptions and future-oriented decisions. Within the framework of the policy of hope concept, we are also interested in the factors that strengthen or weaken the agency of forcibly displaced migrants. The findings are intended to contribute to the development of policy approaches for managing post-crisis migration.

Key research points:

- Displacement trajectories;
- Perception of Temporary Protection and legal uncertainty;
- Integration processes and barriers
- Agency under TP;
- Hope-making strategies.

All respondents provided written informed consent for the processing of their data. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using MAXQDA qualitative data analysis software. MAXQDA facilitated the creation of a unified project database, the implementation of initial and thematic coding procedures, and the systematic organization of respondents' socio-demographic characteristics (Annexes. Table 1). To ensure confidentiality, respondents' names are changed when giving quotations from interviews.

RESULTS

GENERAL PROFILE OF RESPONDENTS

Gender

Male – 5 (25%).

Female – 15 (75%).

Fifteen women and five men were interviewed. Among the male respondents, three men were aged 18–25 and two aged 40–54. The women participants were predominantly middle-aged: four were aged 25–39, ten aged 40–54, and one respondent was over 55. (Figure 1)

One of the defining characteristics of the Ukrainian displacement following the 2022 Russian invasion is its predominantly female composition (Bird & Amaglobeli, 2022). Due to martial law in Ukraine, most men between the ages of 18 and 60 are not permitted to leave the country. While men accounted for approximately 10% of displaced Ukrainians in 2022–2023, according to UNHCR data, their share had increased to 26% by April 2026 (while women and children represented 74% of the displaced population). This means that the gender composition of our sample closely reflects the overall demographic profile of displaced Ukrainians in Europe.

One of the factors of change in the gender composition of the displaced Ukrainian population is the passage of time since the onset of large-scale displacement in 2022. Many children who arrived in Europe during the early stages of the full-scale war have since reached adulthood, including male respondents. This process has also contributed to the growing proportion of men within the displaced Ukrainian population in Europe. In our sample, three respondents (two from Germany and one from Austria) had arrived in Europe as minors and had reached the age of 21 by the time the interviews were conducted.

Age

The majority of respondents (80%) are individuals aged 25 to 54 years.

Figure 1. Age profile of respondents

18 – 24 years	3
25 – 39 years	4
40 – 54 years	12
Above 55	1

Educational and professional characteristics

The majority of respondents (75%) hold a higher education degree and represent a range of professional backgrounds, including education, economics, information technology, senior management, etc. The results of our survey align closely with other similar studies, which additionally indicates the high accuracy of the information received.

The qualitative composition of individuals displaced from Ukraine to Europe is reflected, among other factors,

in their level of education. The Ukrainian 2022 migration case is characterized by the high level of education among those who have arrived in EU countries. Thus, according to the survey conducted by the European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA) from April 2022 to January 2023, 74% of Ukrainian refugees in Europe hold a higher education degree (Bachelor's or Master's) (SAM-UKR 2023). According to the data from the Ukrainian National Institute for Strategic Studies (NISS), the educational level of refugees is significantly higher than that of the employed population in Ukraine, as confirmed also by a number of other surveys (Malynovska, 2023).

Geography

While conducting the study, the number of respondents from each EU country was adjusted to reflect their proportion in each host country at the time of data collection. Accordingly, since the largest number of Ukrainian refugees were residing in Germany and Poland, these countries are proportionally most represented in the sample: seven refugees were interviewed in Germany, and six in Poland. In addition, one respondent was interviewed in each of the following countries: Austria, Belgium, Spain, Italy, France, the Netherlands, and the Czech Republic.

The respondents in our study predominantly originate from the northern, central, and eastern regions of Ukraine, which have been among the areas most affected by the Russian invasion in 2022 and continue to be subject to constant missile and drone attacks. Specifically, they came from the following cities: Kyiv, Kharkiv, Dnipro, Kryvyi Rih, Bucha, Chernihiv, Kovel, Bila Tserkva, and Pavlohrad.

Dependents

One of the distinctive features of the Ukrainian migration case is the high proportion of dependents. Since the presence of dependents for whom the migrant must care can significantly affect integration, we asked about the number of persons dependent on the respondent who require care and assistance. The question was posed as follows: "*How many persons that left Ukraine after 23 February 2022 and require your care are currently residing with you?*" The results of the survey show that 11 respondents are displaced persons with children in their care; of these, 5 have 2 or more children.

People with disabilities

Under conditions of full-scale war, persons with disabilities and individuals requiring continuous medical care have become one of the most vulnerable population groups. They constitute a significant share of Ukrainian refugees. According to UNHCR data, in 2023, one in five (22%) surveyed Ukrainian households abroad included a family member with special needs, a disability, or a serious medical condition (UNHCR, 2023).

Among the respondents in this study, two women are caring for loved ones with disabilities, and one respondent herself has a disability. The presence of adults or children with disabilities in displaced families makes it possible to further specify the characteristics of their experience under Temporary Protection. Particular attention should be paid to the case of a respondent who acquired a disability during her migration experience in the host country. She found herself between different systems of registration and recognition of disability status, making her case an example of a complex intersection of migration, war, medical vulnerability, and administrative procedure.

Transnational family ties

Transnational family configurations directly influence perceptions of Temporary Protection, integration processes, and individuals' intentions regarding return to Ukraine. Among the respondents, four reported being in separated family arrangements. Some of them noted that this situation has a direct impact on their emotional well-being, becoming an additional factor of uncertainty. Even when access to housing, education, or employment in the host country is available, long-term decisions are often postponed due to uncertainty regarding family reunification, return, or further onward migration.

Language of the Interviews

The sociocultural profile of our respondents is also reflected in their choice of interview language. Before the start of the conversation, the interviewers asked respondents to choose the language in which they would feel comfortable talking about their experience. As a result, 11 interviews were recorded in Ukrainian, 5 in Russian, and another 4 in surzhyk, or Ukrainian with a substantial admixture of Russian elements... It should be noted that the choice of interview language reflected not only the language used by respondents in everyday communication, but also respondent's assumptions about the intended audience and the future status of their interview as public testimony. Thus, two respondents chose Ukrainian even though they speak Russian in everyday life. Another, who had switched to Ukrainian in daily and family communication after the full-scale invasion, opted to give the interview in Russian upon learning that the project's materials would be published in English.

PUSH AND PULL FACTORS

The majority of respondents fled at the onset of the full-scale invasion from border regions or areas directly exposed to active hostilities. For all respondents, the primary **push factor** was the severe military violence in their regions, with threats to life and personal safety playing the decisive role.

Voices of the displaced:

> *"After... we saw from the window of our house how they were bombing the Kyiv TV tower. And before that, we had already spent two weeks in the basement, we live in a small private house in Kyiv. ... On the night when, well, Kyiv was heavily bombed, I decided that we couldn't stay there anymore." (Olga, Czechia)*

> *"Every resident of Ukraine met the war in their own way. When we were leaving Chernihiv for Khmelnytskyi on March 4th, I wasn't just in shock, I had this complete cognitive dissonance in my head: Chernihiv was being wiped off the face of the earth, but in Khmelnytskyi, just a four-hour drive down, the restaurants were fully packed! I mean, we were driving out with the kids past corpses, past... there had just been strikes, guys were lying there without heads, without arms! I was covering my children's little eyes. And as we were leaving – we had been sitting in the basement for five days before that. So it was a severe shock! We saw all of it, we smelled the stench of death. Everyone was throwing up, I'm sorry to say. Because the aviation, the artillery – everything was flying right over our heads. And some 300–400 kilometers away, people had no idea what was happening at all. .... I mean, the war is going on across all of Ukraine, but it was particular local cities near the border that really bore the brunt of this war, this occupation, this absolute horror." (Iryna, France)*

"I left because my child started suffocating in the evening. He started going 'Khah-khah' [demonstrating labored breathing], 'Mom, make it stop shaking right here' [points to her chest]. He was nine years old at the time, and I realized that we simply wouldn't survive sitting it out here." (Liliana, Germany)

In contrast, the **pull factors** influencing the choice of the host country vary significantly. Since the vast majority of respondents fled at the very beginning of the war, the choice of destination during the initial stages of this migration wave was largely spontaneous or situational, as pointed out by a significant number of participants.

However, many respondents indicated that the decisive factor for them was often the availability of relatives or acquaintances. This factor of having social connections – who volunteered to help, primarily with housing – was frequently combined with other considerations, such as language proficiency or opportunities for children. For instance, a respondent in Belgium noted that in addition to finding a local Belgian host, she also considered the availability of specific infrastructure for her child, namely the opportunity to continue gymnastics classes with a Ukrainian-speaking coach at a local club.

For several respondents, professional networks played the leading role. For example, Olga chose the Czech Republic because it hosted a branch of the international non-governmental organization where she served as vice-director in Ukraine. Similarly, a global IT company with offices worldwide had a branch in Poland, which is why Oleksiy relocated there. Another respondent was contacted by a foreign colleague offering assistance while she was already en route to evacuation, without a specific plan or final destination in mind.

Voices of the displaced:

> *"For me, the primary factor was that the firm I work for has a branch in Poland, in Lublin." (Oleksiy, Poland)*

> *"Well, we didn't have a plan when we were leaving the city, Kharkiv specifically. ... And so it turned out that we ended up in Lviv, and there was an acquaintance there – an acquaintance of my husband's father – where we could spend one night, but then we had to go somewhere else. And so during that one night, we had to decide what to do. Right at that moment, we had a choice: either to go to Sweden because my godfather and his family were already there at that time – so at least someone we knew – but also a man had written to me. Back in [20]18, I think, Mariia and I were part of a project for history teachers. It was a Kharkiv-Nuremberg teacher exchange, and that's where we met the curator of the German group. He saw on social media that we were traveling, that we were on a train, and he wrote to me saying, 'Once you cross the Ukrainian border into whatever country, it doesn't matter, write to me, I'll find you a place to live.' And that was it." (Anna, Germany)*

Proficiency in the language of the host country was an important pull factor and influenced the final choice between several possible destinations for some respondents. While initial decisions were usually shaped by existing social networks, even limited prior knowledge of a language (e.g., German, French) increased respondents' sense of control and made relocation feel less uncertain. Many participants preferred countries in whose language they had already had some proficiency before relocation. They viewed this as a practical advantage compared to starting in a completely unfamiliar linguistic environment. A respondent from France explicitly highlighted the importance of language proficiency, noting that her prior exposure to French was one of the key factors that allowed her to find employment in her professional field. A respondent from Germany who had taken prior language competence into consideration significantly improved his language skills during the period of Temporary Protection and, at the time of the study, had already obtained a C1 certificate. One of the respondents also considered the broader usefulness of more widely spoken languages, seen as offering better long-term prospects for integration and employment, while more local languages (e.g. Swedish) were often perceived as less practical.

Voices of the displaced:

> *"But the reasons why we chose Germany specifically, besides a coincidence of circumstances, were that we had acquaintances in this country. Plus, the German language – even though I knew it poorly at that time, I had studied it a bit in school. And that was also an advantage, for example, compared to other countries where my language skills would have been at absolute zero, for instance." (Volodymyr, Germany)*

> *"And regarding Sweden, that very same evening we were also thinking that if we go to Sweden, we'll have to learn Swedish, and like, who really needs Swedish that much, I don't know (laughs). But in Kharkiv I went to a school with a German focus, and my sister did too, so we already had some foundations in the German language. And my husband is an English teacher, so we thought it would be easier for him to learn this new language, and we decided to go to Germany." (Anna, Germany)*

One of the reasons why a significant number of Ukrainians chose Poland in 2022–2023 was its proximity to their homeland and the opportunity to quickly return home should the war end swiftly (Sar, 2024). It was this factor that became decisive for one of our respondents.

Voices of the displaced:

> *"Because it's close to home. Well, basically 200 kilometers from home, and we thought that the war would end in a month, maybe two, so we just waited, waited, waited. And later, for instance, I didn't see any point in moving to another country because the kids had already started school, and I didn't want to uproot and traumatize them again." (Olena, Poland)*

Despite the fact that the majority of respondents testified to the randomness of their destination choice, certain determining factors can still be observed operating in the background, subtly guiding their decisions. For instance, the choice made by Natalia from Germany was also not entirely random; rather, it was driven by the high level of public support in European society for refugees from Ukraine (Dražanová & Geddes, 2023), at the time when a significant number of Europeans were prepared to welcome Ukrainian refugees into their own homes. Thus, for Natalia, who otherwise notes the spontaneity of her decision, a crucial factor – given that she was traveling with a minor son and a retired mother – was the opportunity to stay directly with a family, bypassing refugee camps. This was a more secure and comfortable option.

Overall, the findings indicate that displacement decisions among Ukrainian refugees were shaped by a combination of strong push factors relating to immediate threats to life and safety and diverse interconnected pull factors linked to previous social ties (mostly diaspora), professional network and employment opportunities, language proficiency, geographical proximity to Ukraine, and access to housing and social welfare.

PERCEPTION OF TEMPORARINESS

For the vast majority of respondents, the current Temporary Protection status (as of 2026) represents the optimal legal regime (*status quo*). It guarantees a comprehensive baseline of rights that approach those associated with a permanent residence permit without forcing immediate, irreversible life alterations, and also legally preserves the right to return to Ukraine. At the time of the study, 17 of the 20 respondents held Temporary Protection (TP) status. Three respondent (one from Germany, and two from Poland) had already transitioned to an alternative residence status through employment.

Voices of the displaced:

> *"If I were speaking to people who can actually influence what the future of Temporary Protection will look like, I would try to advocate for the idea that the best solution would be to extend Temporary Protection in its current form." (Volodymyr, Germany)*

Respondents emphasize the absence of discriminatory restrictions on their daily freedoms compared to host-country citizens. At the same time, they recognize that their situation differed from that of forced migrants from earlier waves of displacement. In the words of a female migrant from Spain, "doors were easier to open" for Ukrainians in the host societies, and this awareness was accompanied by a strong sense of gratitude.

Voices of the displaced:

> *"I perceive it as a regular residence permit. I mean, I literally feel like a free person... I have practically all the rights that citizens have, except, of course, voting. I don't encounter any restrictions, only benefits from this status." (Yuriy, Austria)*

Transitioning to standard migration tracks (such as employment or student visas) is viewed by respondents as a regression. This is because standard visas often strip them of TP-specific social safety nets, such as student stipends or subsidized healthcare.

Voices of the displaced:

> *"...I would hope they don't force those who work to switch to work visas, or those who study, like me, to student visas. There are specific caveats there. It would be better if this status was either extended or slightly modified but kept essentially as it is... Right now, I am studying, I am a student. If I were to obtain a formal student visa, I would lose my right to a stipend in Germany, and these years wouldn't count toward my future path to citizenship. While under Temporary Protection, I can utilize these benefits; if I switch to a student visa, everything is annulled... It would be wonderful if the new status remained exactly the same." (Vladyslav, Germany)*

Temporary Protection was perceived as particularly valuable by respondents belonging to vulnerable groups, for whom alternative legal pathways often appeared difficult to access. For example, a single mother with two minors, caring for a son with cerebral palsy, explained that, although she had considered other options, she preferred to remain under Temporary Protection for as long as it remains available, as it provides a special medical program for her son:

Voices of the displaced:

> *"Not yet. I've thought about it and considered it, but I decided that as long as Temporary Protection exists, we will stay under it for as long as possible. After that, we'll see how the situation develops." (Valentyna, Spain)*

At the same time, respondents identified a number of challenges associated with the temporary nature of the status. Participants were generally well aware that Temporary Protection is time-limited, which often generated feelings of uncertainty and insecurity about the future. The recurrent need to wait for political decisions regarding extensions of the status was described as a source of ongoing stress and emotional strain.

Voices of the displaced:

> *"Every time you worry whether it will be extended or not. ... We're always sitting on pins and needles." (Olena, Poland)*

The strongest **anxiety** among respondents concerns the forced return or "expulsion". **I**t is articulated as a latent fear of sudden deportation following the expiration of the official Temporary Protection framework in March 2027, which persists in the collective consciousness of the displaced despite their rational trust in European humanitarian values.

Voices of the displaced:

> *"I also know that next year has been declared the year of cultural cooperation between Ukraine and Germany, so they can't just expel all of us during a year of cultural cooperation (laughs). ... I am surrounded by many of our women who are deeply anxious that on 4 March 2027...we will all be driven out, that everything will just end and they'll throw us out. I don't believe it, because that's not how things are done in Europe... I know it will be different, but how exactly, I don't know." (Anna, Germany)*

> *"I really want to hope that Spain won't deport us back to Ukraine (laughs) when this Temporary Protection ends, and that they will finally provide an opportunity for transition" (Valentyna, Spain, mother of a child with cerebral palsy)*

> *"The hardest part is when they extend it for just one year at a time – one year, then another year. For*

many people, I see this as the most severe burden; it keeps them in a suspended state. It prevents them from developing. If they would just tell people: 'You can stay until the end of the war. No one will drive you out of here.' They just need to communicate this to people. Rationally, I understand they won't deport everyone – that would be inhumane – but people are terrified. I see that so many are constantly worrying." (Arina, Germany)

The short-term nature of TP, which requires annual renewal, poses a barrier to employment (which is discussed further in the chapter "Level of integration / Employment").

Limitation of Temporary Protection generates some everyday inconveniences, particularly regarding cross-border travel. While the protection status is formally extended, these changes are often not reflected in physical identification documents, which continue to display expired dates. A respondent from Germany detailed how this bureaucratic inertia creates friction at border checkpoints and produces a subjective feeling of illegality:

Voices of the displaced:

"It is supposed to be renewed every year, and formally it is, but they refuse to update the sticker in the passport. Consequently, the passport displays expired dates, and whenever you travel abroad, outside of Germany, you must present an additional document to border guards proving that your protection has been extended. Yet, looking at the passport alone, it gives the impression that you are residing in the country illegally." (Volodymyr, Germany)

One of the aspects of this pervasive anxiety is the state of liminality "deferred life syndrome", which manifests in everyday domestic decisions, such as for example refusing to purchase essential household goods. Conversely, when a displaced individual finally breaks this pattern, even a minor consumer purchase is perceived as a profound existential milestone and a reclamation of personal agency. In the case of highly qualified migrants, legal ambiguities and uncertainties may delay major purchases, such as furniture, real estate, or a car. As Oleksiy from Poland explains, such purchases are linked to the feeling of being "fully settled" and may thus be postponed under legal uncertainty, making such uncertainty economically disadvantageous for the receiving countries by limiting the migrants' consumption and investment. This freezing of domestic life choices is evident in the empirical data from several host countries:

Voices of the displaced:

"We would like more legal clarity regarding the right of stay and employment here in Poland. For the upcoming year, things remain unclear; the CUKR cards do not exist yet, and it is unknown if, when, or how they will be implemented. It is equally unclear what happens after such a card expires. Although... everyone knows that working Ukrainians generate real revenue for the Polish state... However, specific legal loopholes prevent people from fully settling down. As long as a person hasn't settled, they avoid major purchases – be it furniture, real estate, or a car. Yet, this is exactly what drives economic growth." (Oleksiy, Poland)

"For the first two and a half years, we did not have proper beds to sleep on, and the children did not sleep separately. Because, well, 'this is temporary, why should we buy furniture in a foreign country where we are only temporarily?' And that is how everything is. Your whole life is simply on pause." (Roksana, Netherlands)

"I don't know what stability we can even talk about. Let me put it this way: I bought a new frying pan in March of this year [2026], just last month, and for me, it was a massive deal! These are very

mundane, domestic things, but still – buying a frying pan. It is my frying pan in someone else's house. It's a rented apartment, it's not ours, but the pan is mine. Virtually all the other things we have are items given to us by kind people... but this one is mine. And it's not a small spoon you can just stick in your pocket and leave with; it's a whole frying pan. It felt like a massive milestone (laughs). And it's a great one too, one of those trendy non-stick ones where you can cook without oil, you know?" (Anna, Germany)

For individuals managing transnational (separated) families with relatives actively serving on the front lines, this syndrome takes on an even more rigid, mechanical form of emotional numbness:

Voices of the displaced:

"I have this 'deferred life syndrome' because I... I function like a robot, you know, purely by schedule. I cannot distract myself with anything, and I have only one thought: once my eldest son is safe, only then will I start living. This is already the fifth year going on, and I still haven't begun to live." (Olga, Czechia, living with her youngest child and elderly mother; husband and eldest son serving in Ukraine)

For mothers navigating extreme vulnerabilities, such as caring for a child with chronic medical conditions while separated from their spouses, the mental toll translates into a sense of profound emotional paralysis. A respondent in Germany, whose daughter suffers from epilepsy while her husband and son remain in Ukraine, expressed this existential stagnation through a poignant poetic metaphor:

Voices of the displaced:

"I have this overwhelming feeling that I have just been frozen inside... Neither a wife nor a widow / Neither alive nor dead / And that I wear black clothing / Please do not ask me about that."[1] *(Arina, Germany)*

When the respondents were asked to describe their current mental state using a single word, the absolute majority of them found it impossible to compress their complex experiences into a single term. Instead, they used multi-layered phrases and metaphors to articulate their daily reality: "adventure", "stability within chaos", "race for survival", "lethargic sleep". The most frequent self-description across nearly all of the interviews is the concept of a "suspended state" or "liminality".

Voices of the displaced:

"It feels like lethargic sleep, where you are constantly under the impression that you will suddenly wake up and everything will return to exactly how it used to be." (Roksana, Netherlands)

This inner state of structural suspension is often layered with a profound sense of survivor's guilt stemming from residing in a safe environment while the homeland remains under attack. Empirical data indicates that physical safety and material stability do not shield displaced individuals from severe mental health crises; rather, the contrast between their secure surroundings and the ongoing trauma in Ukraine often results in psychological distress. A respondent from Germany vividly described how this intersection of legal uncertainty, severe depression, and internalized guilt produces deep disorientation across displaced communities:

Voices of the displaced:

1 These are the lines from Veronika Dolina's poem (and popular romance) "The Conversation" («Разговор»: И не жена, и не вдова, / И не жива, и не мертва. / А то, что чёрное ношу, / О том не спрашивай, прошу).

"This suspended state completely derails you. I know so many people – and my family is no exception –where almost every household has someone suffering from either chronic or episodic depression, and quite severe, you know. We are talking about anti-depressants and a total loss of orientation, where people struggle to find the will to get up in the morning and function. Even though you have a roof over your head and it is peaceful and quiet here. What crushes us even more – and makes us feel like we have no right to complain – is knowing that people at home are under bombardment. Realizing this kills you inside even more. You think to yourself: 'How can this be? I am sitting here safe, with my arms, legs, and mind intact, yet I am suffering.' But unfortunately, I talk to our people scattered across different host countries, and everyone shares this exact emotional state. It affects even those who possess material stability, the younger ones, or those who know they are safe from immediate expulsion. It remains profoundly difficult." (Liliana, Germany)

Regarding future **pathways after the expiration of TP,** the absolute majority of respondents evidenced a critical lack of understanding. Across almost all demographics, displaced individuals exhibit pervasive ambiguity and an inability to project their future actions. The potential expiration of TP while the conflict continues exposes a severe policy gap that leaves refugees trapped between the impossibility of a safe return and the absence of a predictable legal status in their host countries.

Voices of the displaced:

"If the war were to end, we would return to Ukraine on our own. But if the war continues and our protection framework expires, it is completely unclear – absolutely unclear – what we will do or how we will manage going forward." (Svitlana, Poland)

"In other words, it is being caught in between everything – neither here nor there. Between worlds, between societies, between states, between everything. It is a state of absolute uncertainty." (Roksana, Netherlands)

Mis-, Dis-, absence of information. A primary driver of the profound uncertainty among the displaced is an institutional deficit of official communication. The baseline level of awareness regarding post-Temporary Protection pathways can be characterized as fragmented. Displaced individuals face a dual absence of systematic legal guidance, both from host-country governments and from representatives of the Ukrainian state abroad. Left to navigate complex legal frameworks independently, refugees turn to decentralized digital environments – primarily social media networks – where they frequently encounter legal dead-ends or develop significant misconceptions. Simultaneously, this information vacuum is being filled with unverified amateur guidance and coordinated disinformation campaigns. Private actors exploit the prevailing structural anxiety by distributing alarmist narratives ("you will be expelled tomorrow") in order to sell expensive, often redundant documentation services. The hostile information environment, coupled with the absence of a long-term legal status, serves as a continuous source of severe mental stress. This sense of abandonment is vividly articulated by a respondent in Italy:

Voices of the displaced:

"There is no certainty, no sense of a baseline foundation in either the information or legislative fields. I have no idea what awaits me, what rules might suddenly change, or where and how to rush next. There is no official counsellor, no dedicated office to approach with complex legal issues. You are left with the distinct feeling that nobody cares about you; that refugees are welcome only as long as they are economically profitable to the host state... I heard that someone used to handle these issues at the consulate, but an official, responsible figure designated for formal counselling simply does not exist. It

seems to be just volunteers offering services on their own terms." (Solomia, Italy)

In Germany, respondents emphasize that this institutional vacuum is weaponized by external actors to systematically induce panic:

Voices of the displaced:

> *"People lack basic information; many do not know their rights or understand local laws. The main driver of this confusion is social media, which is heavily populated by paid, pro-Russian bloggers who intentionally sow panic and spread disinformation. This is our greatest problem. These people are already traumatized by war, under constant stress, and many literally have no homes left to return to – whether because of occupation or destruction in cities like Kharkiv or Mariupol. On top of that, they are thrown into a state of panic by the disinformation they consume... This issue needs to be addressed at the state level through systematic informational outreach. Our people have been deceived by state institutions so many times back home that they inherently project this deep-seated distrust onto foreign governments, such as Germany. They are constantly looking for a hidden catch. For example, a common rumour is: 'They are giving you social welfare now, Natalia, but later they will send you an invoice and force you to repay every cent.' For five years now, a new horror story surfaces every few months. Rationally, I understand it is impossible, but managing this panic requires state-level communication. It triggers severe collective hysteria." (Arina, Germany)*

This daily exposure to conflicting digital sources normalizes a state of constant instability:

Voices of the displaced:

> *"...every day brings new updates from the internet and various Telegram channels – some verified, some completely unverified. In reality, no one truly knows what will happen next." (Sofiia, Germany)*

Similarly, informational fragmentation leads to highly speculative conclusions regarding broader European and national policies:

Voices of the displaced:

> *"The available information is completely vague. It appears the European Union has decentralized the decision-making process, shifting the responsibility entirely onto individual member states. Regarding Austria, there is no clarity; it seems highly unlikely that any further blanket extensions will be granted. Based on the current fragmented data, the only visible alternative is transitioning to standard individual residence permits, based on either employment or education." (Yuriy, Austria)*

Some respondents stated that they would not face any difficulties while **transitioning from Temporary Protection**. But for the majority of respondents this prospect generates profound anxiety across several key dimensions. Transition to standard immigration tracks (e.g., highly skilled migrant or entrepreneurial visas) requires navigating dense bureaucratic loops and satisfying strict income thresholds. Respondents observe that ordinary or low-wage employment cannot bridge this financial divide.

Voices of the displaced:

> *"In the Netherlands, it is incredibly difficult. The only available options are transitioning to a highly skilled migrant status – an expat – or an entrepreneurial business visa. But these tracks carry highly*

intricate, complex requirements. To satisfy them, you must execute a long sequence of steps, and so far, our efforts are simply not enough. We try constantly, but there are no concrete results yet." (Roksana, Netherlands)

"How are we supposed to integrate permanently? For instance, covering market-rate rent or paying for private health insurance establishes a high financial threshold that may become mandatory to secure a permanent status. Meeting this threshold is not always possible. You cannot achieve it working an unskilled job, or living on a median or minimum wage. Consequently, to meet it, one must integrate further, yet targeted integration programs are non-existent. We are trapped in a scenario where rigid demands, particularly financial ones, are imposed upon us without any structural state programs to help us meet them." (Roksana, Netherlands)

While respondents generally viewed a transition to a work-based residence permit as an acceptable option, they also emphasized that the loss or termination of an employment contract could result in the loss of their residence status. In such circumstances, individuals fear facing immediate deportation.

Voices of the displaced:

"It is terrifying to switch to a regular work visa, obviously, because you become entirely dependent on your employer." (Anna, Germany)

"As for me personally, I haven't depended on the Job Centre since 2023, I think, and I could already switch to a different residence status. But then, on the other hand, you become dependent on your employer, because your residence permit is tied to your employment contract. So, in a way, under Temporary Protection you depend on the temporary status itself, whereas with a work-based permit you depend on your employer. That's the trade-off." (Anna, Germany)

"And I'm afraid that if, for example, next year – or more likely even this year, in the summer or towards the end of the year – they announce in Germany what will happen next with Ukrainians and set specific deadlines, everything simply won't fit into those timeframes. And that will cause a lot more grey hair for everyone, because people will be worried about being forced to leave, deported, or something else, simply because some official fails to respond on time, cannot be reached, or delays the process in some way." (Anna, Germany)

For certain demographics, such as displaced students, transitioning to alternative legal instruments causes an immediate regression in rights:

Voices of the displaced:

"I am a student and I don't work, so Temporary Protection is the only viable framework for me. If I am forced to switch to a standard student visa, I will immediately lose my right to a state stipend, and it is completely unknown how I will fund the remainder of my education. Furthermore, switching visas entirely annuls all my previous years of residence, resetting my timeline for future German citizenship to zero. While obtaining citizenship isn't my immediate goal, it is deeply unsettling that after living here for so many years, the option is completely erased due to a bureaucratic status change. It would be wonderful if the new framework preserved the exact same basket of rights we have now." (Volodymyr, Germany)

If legal pathways for continued residence in the host country are not established and the war in Ukraine remains unresolved, some respondents indicated their willingness to pursue onward migration, including relocation outside Europe.

Voices of the displaced:

> *"If the war ends, then returning to Ukraine is certainly one possible scenario. If residence permits are not extended, there may be little choice but to move elsewhere, perhaps even to another continent. Since I work online, I am considering Asia or Latin America. The third scenario is staying in Europe, but that depends on resolving the residence permit issue. For now, I am trying to establish my own business, pay taxes, build a work record, and hope that either Temporary Protection will be extended or another legal solution will be introduced." (Yurii, Austria)*

A significant source of everyday anxiety is the slow speed of host-country immigration systems. Refusal or delay in issuing physical documents creates structural blockages in daily life, such as friction with financial institutions.

Voices of the displaced:

> *"The sheer duration of the approval process is a massive problem. If our current document expires before the new residence permit is physically issued, we enter a hazardous legal grey zone. This immediately creates severe issues with banks, because financial institutions require you to constantly update and verify your valid legal status to maintain your accounts." (Valentyna, Spain)*

The findings reveal a clear and recurring demand among displaced Ukrainians for the time spent under Temporary Protection to be **recognised as part of the legal residence period** required for obtaining long-term residence permits and, in some cases, citizenship. While many participants initially perceived their displacement as temporary and expected to return to Ukraine within a relatively short period, the prolonged duration of the war has significantly altered these expectations. After four to five years of residence in EU countries, respondents increasingly expressed a need for greater legal certainty regarding their future status and the long-term implications of Temporary Protection. Particular concern was raised about whether the time spent under Temporary Protection would count toward the five- or, in some countries, ten-year residence requirements for permanent residence or naturalization. Many respondents argued that they have spent several years contributing to their host societies through employment, tax payments, language acquisition, and social integration. Consequently, the prospect of having these years excluded from future residence calculations and restarting the residency clock from zero upon transitioning to another legal status was widely perceived as unfair and inconsistent with their integration efforts.

Voices of the displaced:

> *"I would really like to see – and I think it would be fair – for all Ukrainians to have their years under Temporary Protection counted as part of their legal residence in the host country. That would be the right and fair thing to do, because Ukrainians have integrated. Some slightly more, some less, but overall, everyone has. And yes, if people were first given the opportunity to obtain a residence permit, they could then decide for themselves what they want to do. Some people I know do not want to stay; they want to return to Ukraine. In fact, some already have." (Kateryna, Belgium)*

When asked **what kind of support or changes would facilitate the transition from Temporary Protection** to another legal status in the host country, respondents proposed a range of perspectives. A shared priority among all respondents without exception was legal certainty regarding their future residence after the end of Temporary Protection. This was accompanied by a set of related concerns focusing on clarity, transparency, and better explanation of transition procedures.

Voices of the displaced:

> *"I would like to understand as early as possible what the strategic outlook is, meaning whether I can stay in Poland or not, and for how long. At the moment, there is a legal gap – for example, regarding whether time spent under Temporary Protection counts towards the five-year residence requirement for a long- term EU residence permit. It is not specified in the law, neither a yes nor a no, and there are also no precedents yet because not enough time has passed. This is unclear. Second, it is also unclear what will happen with the CUKR status. I think this will become clearer within the next six months. For me, what matters most is understanding as early as possible what my strategic prospects in Poland are." (Oleksiy, Poland)*

Interestingly, some respondents emphasized that granting them a secure long-term legal status would serve as a strong form of motivation in itself, even in the absence of additional material support. In other words, once such a status is obtained, they would feel capable of managing the integration process independently. The right to remain, work, and study without the threat of expulsion was therefore described as, in itself, the most meaningful form of assistance.

Voices of the displaced:

> *"Naturally, what we need most is stability, and ideally long-term, lawful residency options. Once that is guaranteed, we will independently solve how to integrate. The primary issue is having the lawful option to stay, because returning right now is simply impossible. The framework we currently possess – perhaps even without any direct government financial aid – would be entirely sufficient. We would all work, continue our lives, our children would proceed with their education, and we would move forward." (Liliana, Germany)*

At the same time, the transition from Temporary Protection to a more secure residence status is not perceived as equally reassuring by all respondents. In Poland, the available transition pathway, commonly referred to as the CUKR status, grants the right to reside in the country for three years and to work. However, for vulnerable groups, this shift also generates anxiety. Olena, who acquired a disability while in Poland and whose employment depends on externally funded integration projects, emphasized that the prospect of losing work created a sense of profound insecurity. For her, the CUKR status would bring "three years of peace," but would not resolve the deeper problem of survival in the absence of stable income, medical coverage, or disability-related support.

Voices of the displaced:

> *"I think that such segments of the population, such segments of our vulnerable people, they should be protected, or at least their UKR status should be extended, or on their CUKR status, at least they should be provided with some kind of shelter and help, so that they have that medical insurance, so that they... they are fighting illness, fighting for survival here, and it's like they are simply being deprived of the right to life (with tears in her voice)". (Olena, Poland)*

A considerable number of respondents explicitly pointed to the need for more structured integration programmes in host countries. These expectations primarily concerned legal stability and access to housing and financial instruments, as well as institutional support for language acquisition and labour market integration.

Voices of the displaced:

"This includes legal security for long-term residence, the possibility to obtain a mortgage, and more broadly, access to integration programmes. It also means opportunities to learn the language, prepare for and pass state examinations, ideally with the support of qualified professionals rather than self-study alone. Furthermore, there should be assistance in finding employment corresponding to one's educational background and previous professional experience. This could include retraining, additional courses, or adaptation to local labour market requirements. These conditions need to be created institutionally, because it is virtually impossible to find them independently. For example, teachers should have the opportunity to retrain and then enter the local labour market." (Roxana, Netherlands)

Similarly, another respondent underscored the importance of targeted integration policies aligned with labour market needs:

Voices of the displaced:

"I would expect Poland to offer more integration programmes for immigrants. I know there is a shortage of certain professions in Poland – for example in education, construction, and among drivers. It would make sense to develop integration programmes targeted at these groups." (Oleksiy, Poland)

Respondents belonging to vulnerable and particularly vulnerable groups placed strong emphasis on the need for socio-economic support, primarily related to housing access and affordability. Several respondents highlighted the overwhelming financial pressure related to housing costs.

Voices of the displaced:

"Housing – providing accommodation – would really help me move forward, both in terms of work and overall stability. The issue of rent is a huge problem for me, and it could be one of the decisive factors. In addition, I would need opportunities for my child to study here. It is also important to understand what other legal statuses are available, and what barriers they involve. For example, if I am required to have official residence, where am I supposed to get it if landlords refuse to rent formally? Even if I am willing to work and I am a responsible and valuable employee, how can I overcome such structural barriers?" (Solomia, Italy)

"Almost everything I earn goes to paying rent. My net salary is 30,000 crowns, and I pay 28,600 for the apartment. So practically all my income goes to housing. I do not see any major problems except financial ones. If I switch to a work permit, I will also have to cover insurance and taxes myself, but that is manageable – as long as I can handle it financially. Everything else is not scary." (Olga, Czechia)

CONDITIONS OF (NON)RETURN

The findings demonstrate a high degree of uncertainty regarding future (non)return. While most respondents expressed a strong emotional attachment to Ukraine and did not exclude the possibility of return, few had made a definitive decision. Only one respondent explicitly stated that she had plans to return in the nearest future – specifically in the summer of 2026 (Olesia, Poland) Despite demonstrating a high degree of integration, including official contractual employment, language proficiency, and feeling relatively comfortable in the host society, her decision is driven by family separation, as her husband and close kin remain in Ukraine. Several respondents noted that their return might be possible after the war (either immediately or after some time). Instead, most respondents tended to keep multiple future scenarios open, including both return to Ukraine and long-term settlement in the host country.

Condition for return

Security as the Primary Condition. The cessation of hostilities and restoration of security emerged as the most important prerequisite for return. Respondents consistently emphasized that returning to a country where missile attacks, drone strikes, and military threats persist would be incompatible with their responsibilities toward children and family members.

Voices of the displaced:

> *"Only under the condition that the war officially ends. When no Shaheds or missiles are flying anymore -basically, when active hostilities stop, only then." (Tetiana, Poland)*

The complete cessation of the war and guaranteed safety in Ukraine constitute the primary prerequisite for the absolute majority of respondents who expressed a desire to return. This is particularly emphasized by participants from territories bordering Russia and Belarus, as well as from regions most heavily affected by the war:

Voices of the displaced:

> *"If only they weren't shelling my hometown. If I were certain that I could make sweets in my workshop and that my children would simply be safe and sound... Therefore, as for a resident of Chernihiv, the safety of my children is paramount to me... But when Hrads are flying right at you at home, and you run to a bomb shelter and find it locked... why should I subject my children to this, condemning them to it? Right now, I don't feel safe for myself or my children at home. So, as a person responsible for them, I cannot bring them back there." (Iryna, France)*

> *"Conditions? Well, peace, definitely peace, security... Our region – yes, it also MATTERS ENORMOUSLY, because as I understand it, at this moment it is practically a buffer zone. But it's true, because the demarcation line is moving closer and closer." (Liliana, Germany, the respondent is from Kryvyi Rih)*

A distinct socio-psychological dimension observed among some individuals is the internalized pressure to legitimize their protection status, often linked to a form of regionalized survivor's guilt. This is particularly evident among respondents from Western Ukraine. In response to a pervasive narrative in social media and policy debates that labels the western regions of Ukraine as entirely 'safe' – suggesting that residents from these areas lack a valid justification for seeking international protection – displaced persons feel compelled to defend the legitimacy of their flight. For instance, Olena, who has arrived to Poland with two minors, explicitly addresses this regional stigma by highlighting the localized structural precarity of her home environment, demonstrating that proximity to critical strategic targets (such as railway hubs) nullifies generic notions of regional safety:

Voices of the displaced:

> *'I live near the train station. Yes, even though I am from Western Ukraine, they have been striking us since New Year's Eve – they started on New Year's, and they constantly target the railway infrastructure, aiming right there. Well, I can see the station from my windows, and what am I supposed to do, return there and just wait for a rocket to hit? Or wait for them to miss the station and hit my house instead?' (Olena, Poland)"*

In addition to the immediate cessation of the war, respondents stress the need for long-term social and ecological security.

Voices of the displaced:

> *"The issue is highly complex and, once again, entirely beyond our control. First and foremost, of course, is the cessation of hostilities. The second factor is internal security. If we look at Kharkiv – or, frankly, any other city – there is a massive volume of unregistered weapons currently in circulation. Literally anyone, even a child, could easily bring a grenade to school. Furthermore, outdoor recreational activities are entirely out of the question, at least in the frontline regions, because everything is mined..." (Oleksiy, Poland)*

Return as emotional attachment, restoration of a lost life and identity. Beyond physical security, many respondents associated return with the possibility of recovering elements of their pre-war lives. Participants cited not only employment and housing, but also broader notions of normality, social belonging, and continuity. For a number of participants, the desire to return was driven primarily by emotional and symbolic ties to Ukraine. Family connections, memories, cultural belonging, and attachment to place frequently appeared in narratives about future return.

Voices of the displaced:

> *"My heart is there, my umbilical cord is buried there – my home is there... and my father's and relatives' graves are there as well." (Olga, Czechia)*
>
> *"I see myself in Ukraine." (Arina, Germany)*
>
> *"No, nothing will hold me here, because I was born there, my family is there. In any case, I am going home. No matter how difficult it may be, I am going home. I believe that once the war is over, I will return to Ukraine and build a chicken coop – that is my dream: to raise chickens and sell meat, chickens, everything like that." (Tetiana, Poland)*
>
> *"As they say, where you are born, there you are needed. I don't even know what attracts me – it is my native land, my home. Probably there are no neighbours left: some have left, some died. I don't know... as they say, my umbilical cord is buried in Ukraine, maybe someone will understand – that is what's pulling me back." (Svitlana, Poland)*

Several respondents explicitly stated that they would consider returning only if they could regain the opportunities, living standards, and life trajectories that had been disrupted by forced displacement.

Voices of the displaced:

> *"I would return to Ukraine only under the condition that my previous life and all the opportunities I had before the war were restored to me." (Roksana, Netherlands)*

Even among highly integrated respondents with stable employment, strong language skills (C1 level), and positive experiences in the host country, emotional attachment to Ukraine often remained unchanged. In these cases, return was described not as a rational step but as a deeply personal aspiration linked to identity and belonging.

Voices of the displaced:

> *"In the future, I would like to return to Ukraine, and the lack of any emotional attachment to Germany is probably also the reason for the absence of a desire to fully integrate." (Volodymyr, Germany)*

> *"I really want to return home. My view has not changed at all over the past four years. Despite everything happening at home, I still want to go back – no matter what benefits are available here. Maybe I am just a very deep patriot, I don't know." (Iryna, France)*

A significant role in future planning is played by such a factor as political trust and expectations about future governance. For some respondents, especially those with higher levels of political engagement, return depended not only on security but also on confidence in Ukraine's future political and institutional development. In the case of the last quoted statement above (Iryna, France), it is important to note the respondent's high level of trust in Ukraine's future and her belief in the country's post-war reconstruction and revival:

Voices of the displaced:

> *"I have lived in the United States, I have lived in Mexico – I mean, I have emigrated... Our country is extremely highly developed. I don't even know how to put it. It has its downsides, but right now, after having emigrated and lived across different continents and in different countries, I can say that Ukraine is a top country. The economy, all the systems – I don't know, education, banking, healthcare – we have everything at a high level, that is true. But of course, there are also some disadvantages." (Iryna, France).*

At the same time, concerns about corruption, governance, political accountability emerged as significant factors, no less important than long-term security guarantees, shaping future return intentions. Respondents emphasized the need for a clear vision of post-war reconstruction and Ukraine's future geopolitical direction before making a final decision about returning.

Voices of the displaced:

> *"A ceasefire and a clear policy. That is, as far as possible, guarantees that the government will have a coherent project implemented in the country, with clearly defined rules. And also whether the so-called 'security guarantees' will actually function. A project outlining where Ukraine is heading – whether it is a fully independent state, or a path towards the European Union, what relations with NATO will look like, whether third countries would intervene in case of a Russian attack, and what relations with Russia will be after the war. In other words, I would like to get answers to these questions before making a final decision about returning." (Yurii, Austria)*

> *"Plus... what concerns me is not even the security issue in Ukraine per se, but two other questions: who do people vote for? They vote... not for the future of Ukraine. That is the first issue. And the second is total corruption and theft – at least among those in power. They are stealing, stealing our future. Money goes into private pockets instead of, for example, being invested in social infrastructure, roads, and so on. So for me, this second issue – the electoral and corruption problem – is probably an even bigger barrier than security." (Oleksiy, Poland)*

Certain expectations were also voiced regarding potential return programs.

Voices of the displaced:

> *"Some kind of... maybe... state program [would be needed], otherwise it is difficult because there is simply no trust left... in Ukraine in general, so... I don't even know what Ukraine would have to offer me to make me return." (Ihor, Poland)*

A number of push factors also drive displaced persons to consider returning. The primary factor is the severe hardship resulting from limited employment opportunities and absence of systematic social security for vulnerable and highly vulnerable groups. Several respondents highlighted a critical gap in their host countries' integration practices: while policies actively promote the labor market integration of able-bodied individuals, non-able-bodied persons often face systemic neglect. Respondents framed this lack of institutional support as a form of "hidden deportation" driven by economic pressure. This structural barrier is clearly illustrated by the case of Olena, a refugee in Poland who works closely with vulnerable displaced populations and has herself acquired a disability in exile:

Voices of the displaced:

> *"The main difficulties are related to work; you lack stability and have no predictability for the future. This sparks a strong desire to return home because at least you have a roof over your head there... The struggles with employment are profound, and there is absolutely no wsparcie [support] for persons with disabilities." (Olena, Poland)*

Providing numerous examples, Olena further detailed how the intersection of unemployment, lack of health insurance, and institutional exclusion creates life-threatening conditions for vulnerable individuals, particularly those from occupied territories who have no home to return to:

Voices of the displaced:

> *"There is a 44-year-old woman with a severe disability. She is unable to work, so the labor office does not register her, meaning she cannot receive medical insurance (ubezpieczenie) through them. And she... one could say, is doomed to death, because she will not receive free medical treatment, right. At the same time, she cannot return home because she is from an occupied territory in Ukraine – where would she return to, where would she register, for example? She also cannot withdraw money. With the 250 zloty pension paid in Ukraine, she and an eleven-year-old child simply cannot live." (Olena, Poland)*

The longer the war continues, the fewer people are likely to return. A significant number of respondents note that, over time, their intentions to return home become less strong, while factors encouraging them to consider staying or moving to another country (if the host country does not provide long-term residence permits) become more prominent. For some, returning to their previous living conditions seemed increasingly unrealistic, and the prospect of having to "start everything from scratch once again" made returning home feel like yet another migration.

Voices of the displaced:

> *"Well, at the beginning I probably did plan to return, maybe during the first year or so, but then I... abandoned that idea." (Ihor, Poland)*

> *"Especially in the beginning, you know, it felt like I would survive everything, I would even go on foot*

to Kryvyi Rih, home, just to be at home, despite the fact that there were good people around." (Liliana, Germany)

"Ninety percent of the people I know want to stay here for the coming years at least, because they simply have no choice. Many have nowhere to go. There are people from Donbas. There are people who, even in Ukraine, did not have their own housing and rented apartments – where would they go back to? There is no one left there either. There are no jobs left for us in Ukraine. There is nothing left... four years is already a long time, the fifth year is beginning, it is not two or even three years." (Liliana, Germany)

"Probably in the first year, when the war had just started, many of us – including me – thought it might end soon. It was all a sudden shock for everyone, sure, and we thought we might return. But after a year and then later, it became clear that the war would last a long time, and that is why the longer it goes on, the stronger is the desire to stay here in Poland." (Oleksiy, Poland)

"A year ago I was absolutely sure and kept thinking that I would definitely return to Ukraine. But over this last year... I realise that I don't really want to go back." (Valentyna, Spain)

Conditions for staying in the host country. The respondents were asked to identify the conditions under which they would consider staying in their host country. The most frequently mentioned factor was what many referred to as *"legalization"* – a term used consistently across interviews. While Temporary Protection already provides a legal basis for residence, respondents generally used this term to refer to a more secure and long-term legal status, such as a long-term residence permit.

In this sense, the possibility of legal certainty beyond the Temporary Protection framework emerged as the key condition influencing decisions to remain in the host country.

Voices of the displaced:

"If they tell us, 'Stay, work, let your children continue their education. We'll grant you a residence permit,' then of course I would carry on living and working here, and my children would continue studying. That's it." (Kateryna, Belgium)

"It is the existence of a legal opportunity – in other words, access to a residence permit that is not temporary. It should be a long-term residence permit that takes into account the years we have already spent here, so that it may eventually count toward eligibility for citizenship. At the moment, however, these years are not expected to be counted, at least in the Netherlands. I do not know what the situation is across Europe as a whole. It feels somewhat strange: we have lived here for four years and paid taxes all this time." (Roksana, Netherlands)

Another important condition concerns the facilitation of effective economic integration, including access to mortgage financing for improved housing security and opportunities for entrepreneurship and business development.

Voices of the displaced:

"What I really want is self-realisation – the kind of professional fulfilment I had started to achieve at home. I have my own brand, and I want to continue developing it. If I am fortunate enough to do that here, then I will stay. But if, as an adult who is responsible for... soon... three children, if I cannot support them and cannot earn the income I aspire to, rather than merely relying on the basic level of

support offered by the state, then I will move to another country. I will go wherever I can build my business and make a living." (Iryna, France)

"At the moment, however, Ukrainians cannot legally obtain a mortgage, even if they have a good job, because we do not have the documents that would allow us to remain here on a long-term basis." (Roksana, Netherlands)

One of the strongest factors discouraging return is the successful integration of children into the educational systems of host countries. After several years abroad, many children have become embedded in local schools, social networks, and linguistic environments. Respondents frequently expressed concern that returning to Ukraine would require their children to undergo a difficult process of re-integration, potentially disrupting their educational trajectories and emotional well-being. In some cases, children have spent a substantial portion of their school years abroad and have limited familiarity with the Ukrainian educational environment. As a result, several respondents indicated that they would prefer to remain in the EU at least until their children complete their education.

Voices of the displaced:

"Even if I were to return to Ukraine, I understand that I would have to start from scratch. Yes, it would be a little easier because my close kin are there, it's our language, I know how everything works, and there's no language barrier. But after being away for so long, you still have to start over again: find a school, find a job. It's all difficult. I just don't want to start everything from scratch again." (laughs) (Valentyna, Spain)

"So many times, whenever I was unemployed or between courses, during those periods when I have absolutely no income, I think: that's it, I'm going home, I'm packing up and going home. But then... the children hold me back. They have already missed four years of Ukrainian school. Yes, they have been taking tests remotely for four years, but that is simply not the same as actually attending school and learning in person." (Olena, Poland)

In the case of Russian-speaking families, fears related to re-integration are overlaid with concerns about linguistic integration (especially for children).

"If they tell us, 'Stay, work, let your children continue their education. We'll grant you a residence permit." And of course, I was regarding, honestly speaking, in a rather selfish way – what Ukraine could currently offer my younger son. To my shame, my younger son hardly speaks Ukrainian, because we lived in Kyiv, and he only started kindergarten at the age of five. We are a Russian-speaking family, and I realised that if he goes to school here, returning to Ukraine right now... Here he is an excellent student, already in the third grade. And this is the main thing holding me back." (Olga, Czechia)

Social support provided by the host countries – mainly access to welfare provisions and public services. One respondent from Germany highlighted the high quality of healthcare services, describing how her mother's cancer was detected, operated on, and treated free of charge. She viewed this as a life-saving intervention that would have been financially unattainable in wartime Ukraine. Initial support from the Jobcenter, including assistance with housing costs and language classes (in Germany in particular), also provided a crucial foundation that facilitated longer-term settlement plans.

Beyond material support, several respondents emphasized the normative and value-based dimensions of European societies. In particular, respondents caring for family members with disabilities or chronic health con-

ditions stressed the importance of social inclusion, accessibility, and tolerance. For these individuals, the host society was perceived not only as providing services but also as offering a more supportive social environment. For example, one respondent from Germany, whose adult daughter has epilepsy, observed:

> *"For me, the answer is easy. Right now, I would do everything possible for my child to stay here because I do not want to take her back to Ukraine – I simply do not see any prospects for her there. This society is more tolerant towards children like my daughter. She feels more COMFORTABLE here. She can easily travel by bus and use public transport; even before the war, that would not have been possible for her in Ukraine. Here she can move around independently, WITHOUT ME, which is a huge achievement for us. People here are KINDER." (Arina, Germany)*

At the same time, the perceived inclusivity of European societies made certain structural and cultural limitations in Ukraine more visible to respondents and became an important factor shaping their perceptions of return. One such factor is ageism in Ukraine versus perceived opportunities in the EU. Respondents (Natalia and Sofiia, Germany) explicitly note that in Ukraine a person in their fifties is often perceived as "exhausted human capital," whereas in Germany they feel like "a young, regular woman with opportunities to study even at 55 or 60."

Another important factor shaping migrants' decisions about whether to return or remain in the host country is the perceived social divisions within Ukrainian society. This finding emerged spontaneously in the interviews rather than in response to direct questions. Respondents tended to discuss this issue cautiously and somewhat hesitantly; however, it was evident that the topic carried considerable emotional significance and was associated with experiences of loss, disappointment, and uncertainty.

Respondents highlighted how several years of living in fundamentally different realities have created divergent experiences and perspectives among Ukrainians. Some participants described a gradual weakening of social ties with friends and acquaintances who remained in Ukraine, as well as concerns about future reintegration and acceptance upon return. For example, one respondent in Germany, Natalia, spoke about the loss of social connections and the growing sense of distance between those who stayed and those who left.

Voices of the displaced:

> *"I hear people saying, 'She left, she abandoned the country.' But migration is extremely difficult for every person. When you are used to your daily life, your language, your social environment, being uprooted from all that for more than a month is incredibly hard. At home, you would endure the shelling and everything else. Integration is very difficult. I wish that people who remain in Ukraine would not criticize or insult those who have left. This concerns, above all, women with children. Sometimes I come across online discussions where people speak very negatively about mothers with children or people with disabilities who have left and receive assistance that is currently unavailable to many in Ukraine. For me, this is shameful." (Iryna, France)*

These accounts suggest that displacement may create not only physical separation, but also symbolic boundaries between groups whose wartime experiences have evolved under markedly different circumstances.

Finally, family unity also emerged as an important factor encouraging longer-term settlement in the host country. Several female respondents from separated families noted that their willingness to remain would be strengthened if their husbands were able to join them, pointing the family separation as the main difficulty.

Voices of the displaced:

"And if my husband was here with me, then I could see myself staying here. ... The only thing I've really encountered, was bullying from so-called Russian Germans. And it wasn't just me; many people have faced it. These are German citizens who speak Russian, whose families came... some twenty years ago. Their parents immigrated... and they themselves were born here they're now in their twenties or thirties, you know? There is a very strong influence of Russian propaganda..., and it really affects the way people think. At times, it was genuinely difficult. But I learned how to protect myself from it, and now I take it quite calmly. What is really hard, though, is being here without a man. When you have a man with you, people don't allow themselves to behave like that." (Arina, Germany)

"I don't know, physical burnout – that's, like, the first thing [difficulty]. But if only, maybe ... if the family... well, the whole family, yeah, my husband, maybe my parents, and, you know, my son – if only we were all together in one little corner... maybe it would be easier. But this way, we're all scattered across the world." (Olesia, Poland)

LEVEL OF INTEGRATION

In assessing the level of integration, we rely on measurable indicators, including language proficiency, employment status, and respondents' perceived socio-cultural integration.

The findings suggest that the vast majority of respondents have reached a level of initial adaptation (including the psychological adjustment of children) and continue towards fairly effective integration. At the same time, in response to the prolonged nature of the war, respondents have learned to manage the sense of temporariness described above: they study the language and work, while still maintaining strong emotional and symbolic ties to Ukraine.

Language Proficiency

The level of linguistic integration among respondents can be assessed as relatively high. All respondents reported knowledge of the language of the host country. Twelve respondents indicated that they hold official language certificates ranging from A2 to C1 level (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Language profile of respondents

certificate possession	number
A2	2
B1	3
B2	6
C1	1
No certificate	8

The vast majority of respondents are aware of the necessity of learning the language of the host country and emphasize that further integration would be impossible without it. The respondent with higher-level proficiency (C1) noted that he had taken into account prior language skills when choosing the destination country, yet he still stressed the need for ongoing improvement and refinement, observing the gap between formal certification and practical fluency:

Voices of the displaced:

"Learning the language and fully embedding yourself in a new society is essential. I have lived in the United States and Mexico, so I have experienced migration before... Wherever you go, you need to work and learn the language. It is the same in every country. This is the number one priority. If you want to work, communicate with people... you are not just there as a tourist. It is the main tool. Without language, you cannot function. Very few people here speak English, so you need to learn it in order to understand others." (Iryna, France)

"Right now I am not studying the language anymore because I have already learned it. But 'learned' is a strong word. I do have a language certificate – C1 level – which is sufficient for studying at a German university. Nevertheless, I still feel a certain language barrier. And I think anyone would say the same, regardless of their level. Even with a C1 certificate, I still have gaps and I cannot say that I know the language perfectly." (Volodymyr, Germany)

However, among respondents without an official language certificate, only one woman reported that she is not currently learning the language of her host country. The others reported sufficient or high levels of language proficiency (up to B2). One respondent noted that he had taken a B2 examination but had not yet received the results and was expecting the certificate in July. Several of these respondents are employed and use the host-country language in their workplace on a daily basis. However, they stated that they did not currently plan to obtain formal certification. Some of them intend to return to Ukraine, while others consider their current language skills sufficient for residence and indicated that they would take a formal exam if necessary, noting that the certification process is fee-based.

Voices of the displaced:

"I've taken a lot of courses, I can speak quite fluently, well enough. I've never taken any official exam... just to get a certificate. First of all – it's simple, for me it's about money, and I don't have extra spare cash just to spend on a certificate. Second – no one has ever asked me for one for work. And third – I just don't even have that much motivation for this certificate right now. If I ever need it, I think I'll find a way, but there has to be, like, a constructive reason for me to spend that money. Right now, that money is important to me, and it's way more important for my kid than for some certificate that isn't even in demand anywhere yet." (Solomia, Italy)

The easiest linguistic integration was reported by respondents who had already taken language factors into account when choosing their destination country. For example, a female respondent who had previously studied German and considered this in her migration decision noted:

Voices of the displaced:

"With the language I have no problems. I caught up very quickly, so I don't really have a language barrier anymore – I overcame it quite fast. In fact, the first thing I started doing was organizing conversation clubs to help people with German, so that it would be easier for them to overcome the language barrier." (Anna, Germany)

Linguistic integration appears to be the smoothest among children. Respondents consistently observed that children adapted to the host-country language more quickly and often achieved a higher level of proficiency than adults.

Voices of the displaced:

"Many children here have already adapted; they now know German better than Russian. For exam-

ple, he knows German grammar better than a German native speaker (laughs), even better than his classmate." (Arina, Germany)

"In every family – and I can say this is generally the case – the best speaker is the child, the one who is well-educated and fully integrated linguistically. They study all disciplines in German, and have been doing so for several years. Their pronunciation, comprehension, everything is developing as part of everyday life." (Liliana, Germany)

At the same time, respondents identified a range of **barriers** that hinder language acquisition. One of the most significant obstacles is the lack of time, primarily due to work and family responsibilities.

Voices of the displaced:

"I currently have a B1 level, but I understand that it is not sufficient. However, I simply do not have time to continue with learning the language because of my child, school, extracurricular activities, and also my age – let's be honest – and concerns about my elder son. All of this completely throws me off balance." (Olga, Czechia)

"Regarding those women, who, for example, have three children, who have also applied .... she wanted to integrate and learn Polish, but she simply did not have the time. To pay for housing and support three children on their own in Poland, she works every single day, even on weekends." (Olena, Poland)

"I did not attend language classes, unlike many Ukrainians who study for free, because my work schedule was 12-hour shifts, and I simply had no opportunity to attend. So I learned the language at work, online, and through music. I do not focus too much on exams. I think I will be able to pass at least a basic level test. I graduated from university in Kyiv, where I also studied some French when I had the opportunity." (Iryna, France)

Barriers to linguistic integration also include the absence of language classes or their insufficient accessibility or quality.

Voices of the displaced:

"What would be good is if Poland offered Polish-language classes, that is. Preferably free or low-cost, or free for those in real need – but this was not the case. But this is Poland's decision, I will not comment further.[2] " (Oleksiy, Poland)

"I actually lost the motivation to learn the language because of these classes – which, thank God, I only attended for a short time. In my opinion, they are not organised in a way that allows you to actually leave and be able to speak. They are organised just to allocate funding – for organisations, for teachers' salaries, and so on – because it was honestly awful. I know that others had different experiences – some girls told me they had good teachers – but I guess I was just unlucky. " (Anna, Germany)

Another respondent suggested that language classes could be set up directly at reception centres, allowing refugees to attend regularly and learn gradually:

Voices of the displaced:

"For example, there are refugee reception points – why couldn't Polish language classes have been

2 During the first years of the full-scale war in Ukraine, various initiatives in Poland offered numerous short-term A1–B1 Polish language classes; however, a structured system of progressive language learning was not implemented (comment by Y. Kiselyova).

organised right there? People could have attended two or three times a week and gradually learned. Even older people would have learned it. That did not exist, although now, in [20]25-[20]26, there is finally a good initiative in Lublin to organise such classes for people living in reception centres, and they are slowly step-by-step learning to read and write." (Olena, Poland)

The effectiveness of such classes is demonstrated by the case of a respondent in Spain, who had access to structured language classes due to her participation in a humanitarian programme and her status as a mother of a child with a disability (cerebral palsy), which resulted in a relatively high level of integration, including stable employment and independent housing. She also highlights a sense of increased stability, even though her job is not aligned with her professional aspirations:

Voices of the displaced:

"When we were under the programme and had already been transferred by the Red Cross, we also had mandatory Spanish language classes. We had to attend them four times a week. I tried to go regularly and did not miss classes, and I also studied independently using mobile apps." (Valentyna, Spain)

In contrast, a respondent in the Netherlands, who experiences limited access to language classes, reports a strong sense of non-integration due to insufficient language proficiency:

Voices of the displaced:

"We are completely ... well, not completely, but in practice we are not integrated. Meaning, the level of language competence is very low, which makes it difficult to communicate with the local population. It does not allow us to defend our rights or interests in institutions, hospitals, schools, and so on. It is very difficult to solve problems when you speak English instead of the local language. People treat you differently and are less willing to engage with you or resolve your issues positively, because you are immediately perceived as a foreigner. So language is currently one of the most painful issues." (Roxana, Netherlands)

Employment

The employment factor is also an important indicator of integration. At the time of study, 14 out of our 20 respondents (70%) reported being employed. The majority held permanent jobs in their host countries, some working remotely. Three of our respondents testified that they were employed, but not officially, without a contract.

Based on the level of integration into the labour market, three main categories of respondents can be identified.

1**. Economically independen**t. This group includes respondents who have retained or secured employment corresponding to their professional qualifications (e.g. IT, international business), those who have integrated into transnational companies (e.g. Serhii, Poland – information security manager), and/or those who have found employment in their field and receive salaries above the average level in the host country (e.g. Iryna, France, professional chef working in a restaurant).

Voices of the displaced:

"Well, nothing has really changed for me in terms of work, because I continue working for the same company as before. Financially, of course, we were forced to rent accommodation, which is a significant expense. In terms of social integration, I think we have not had any major difficulties. We are

learning Polish, so we are not experiencing any problems with integration so far." (Oleksiy, Poland)

2. **Downshifting.** This category includes individuals that were forced to take up low-skilled manual labour (e.g. Liliana, Germany; Olena, Spain) or informal and small-scale income-generating activities, often without formal contracts, including undeclared work in Italy. Such a pathway is often characteristic of respondents in small towns with limited job opportunities and intense competition for even basic positions.

Voices of the displaced:

> *"There are jobs such as cleaning operating rooms in hospitals. It is not the kind of job you would normally choose first, but when you need to, you take it. I have friends who work there – women who used to be businesswomen – but now they do this kind of work. And even for these jobs, when someone is about to leave, the position is passed on only to acquaintances – it becomes a queue (laughs), a real queue to get the job." (Liliana, Germany)*

> *"It is physical work and the salary is not high. Even people with higher education end up in such jobs. About 90% of people working in manual labour have no opportunity to move into higher-skilled positions for better integration and to feel themselves on the level they had in Ukraine.... I cannot get a job as a teacher or even an office worker despite my higher education. Many men and women with degrees work in warehouses, in agriculture, picking apples, blueberry, strawberry, and so on." (Olena, Poland)*

A woman caring for a child with a disability explained her current employment situation:

Voices of the displaced:

> *"Right now I clean private apartments. I did not dream of doing this, but it suits me because of the flexible schedule. Even with a contract, I can call and say I have a medical appointment with my child, or I need to go to the hospital, and it is never a problem. I understand that if I worked in a factory, a shop, or a beauty salon, I would not have this flexibility. That is the only reason I stay in this job. But to earn a decent income, I would need to clean at least two or three apartments a day, which I cannot manage." (Valentyna, Spain)*

3. Vulnerable and extremely vulnerable groups. This category includes single mothers with minor children, parents of children with disabilities (e.g. cerebral palsy), individuals who lost the ability to work while in the host country (e.g. Olena, Poland – disability level 2 due to an autoimmune disease), as well as elderly respondents who are no longer physically able to work.

Among the **barriers in finding employment**, respondents cite a number of factors. One of them is the temporary nature of the status, which requires annual renewal. This structural obstacle was highlighted in several interviews. For instance, a respondent from Belgium indicated that she had faced explicit rejections from employers solely for this reason:

Voices of the displaced:

> *"Temporary protection is short-term, so many employers say, 'Well, we need [long-term staff]... but you are under Temporary Protection. We don't know what happens next.' If you are looking for a job in June, but your protection expires in March, [they won't hire you]." (Kateryna, Belgium)*

> *"The legal status is uncertain, and, for example, employers, knowing that people's Temporary Protection is about to expire, are not always willing to hire them or may refuse to hire them at all. What I*

mentioned earlier, this legal uncertainty significantly hinders integration." (Oleksiy, Poland)

"Wherever we go, we are always told, 'Well, wait. In fact, you do not have any long-term rights. You are here only temporarily.'" (Roxana, Netherlands)

Overqualification as a barrier to employment. A recurring theme in the interviews is the experience of overqualification as a structural barrier to integration into the labour market. Several respondents described situations in which high levels of education and professional experience were perceived by employers as a disadvantage when applying for lower-skilled positions.

Voices of the displaced:

"I know how difficult it is for our people to find work here, and how the women in my team are trying to find something in their field or outside their field, and how it just doesn't work out for them, because they are too qualified for unskilled work. Just yesterday a woman told me that she finally received a reply saying, 'We are very happy about your accomplishments, but unfortunately we cannot hire you.'" (Anna, Germany)

A respondent in Belgium, who holds a bachelor's degree, reported that, although her qualifications were recognized, this did not significantly improve her employment prospects. She described a combination of structural barriers, including the Temporary Protection status, the lack of internship opportunities for people over 27, and the requirement of local work experience, which she could not obtain without first being employed.

A respondent in the Netherlands, whose education, qualifications, and academic credentials (including a PhD-level degree) are fully recognized, also described difficulties in accessing work in her field:

Voices of the displaced:

"Although Ukrainian teacher training diplomas are recognized here, meaning my diplomas are fully recognized, it is still essentially impossible to find work in my profession, even in schools. In my case, as a specialist in the humanities, it is virtually impossible. For example, mathematicians have a slightly easier situation – they can find jobs in schools because there is a severe shortage of math teachers. But in other fields it is the same situation. My colleagues who taught English, for example, also cannot find work as English teachers in Dutch schools." (Roksana, Netherlands)

Some respondents framed this situation not just as a labour market mismatch, but also as a broader structural issue. As one participant argued:

Voices of the displaced:

"The host country and the local population see you as competition, and they are not interested in having you work in positions that correspond to your level of education and experience in Ukraine. It is very strange how they look at this, and they do not want to see us in qualified jobs. They are willing to use us for unskilled labour, of course. But then the question is whether a person is willing to accept that. I, for example, am not. ... In reality, host countries are not really interested in our integration. It is enough for them that we efficiently serve the local population in supermarkets, McDonald's, or cleaning services." (Roksana, Netherlands)

Some respondents also note that even the completion of specialised, EU-funded training courses does not guarantee subsequent employment.

Voices of the displaced:

> *"There are various training courses here, which are also a form of integration. They offer internships, but not everyone is accepted, only acquaintances or people with connections. And even after these internships, not everyone obtains formal employment. Only a very small percentage, I don't know exactly how many, actually get a job afterwards. Many people then move on to another internship, and then another, and it just keeps going in a cycle." (Ihor, Poland)*

Recognition of qualifications and professional retraining. A recurring theme across interviews in some countries (Germany, the Netherlands, Poland) concerned the difficulties associated with the recognition of Ukrainian qualifications. Respondents with good backgrounds in education and healthcare reported that, despite extensive professional experience in Ukraine, they faced significant barriers to obtaining employment in their fields due to restrictive recognition procedures.

Several respondents in Germany highlighted what they perceived as the excessive rigidity of the qualification recognition system. Natalia, who has over twenty years of experience across secondary, higher, and extracurricular education in Ukraine, described being required to undertake extensive retraining because her Ukrainian diploma did not formally correspond to specific German qualification categories. In practice, this meant that substantial professional experience carried less weight than formal differences in certification terminology.

Similar concerns were raised regarding other professions. Arina (Germany) described the case of an acquaintance with extensive experience in the tourism sector, whose degree was not recognised because it had been issued by a private institution in Ukraine. Despite having strong German language skills and relevant professional experience, she encountered persistent difficulties in securing employment corresponding to her qualifications.

Another respondent noted that while Ukrainian diplomas can theoretically be recognized, the process often remains highly restrictive in practice:

Voices of the displaced:

> *"And there's another problem: for example, my diploma and my husband's diploma are not 'recognised' [the respondent uses a colloquial borrowing from the German Anerkennung ('recognition of qualifications') – I.]. No, no, more precisely, they can be recognised, but I am a teacher, and in Bavaria Ukrainian teachers cannot work in public schools." (Liliana, Germany)*

An apparent contradiction emerged in several interviews. Respondents reported that local institutions frequently acknowledged labour shortages, including shortages of teachers and healthcare professionals, while at the same time highly qualified Ukrainian specialists remained unable to enter these professions due to regulatory barriers. One respondent recalled:

Voices of the displaced:

> *"They constantly say that, just like doctors, teachers are in short supply. And it's true. Schools are trying to fill gaps wherever they can. But they still won't hire us. I spoke to the director of my son's school. He admitted they needed teachers, but he told me, 'We still need the documents.'" (Liliana, Germany)*

Many respondents did not advocate for the complete removal of qualification standards. Rather, they questioned whether highly experienced professionals should be required to spend several years in retraining programmes before being allowed to practice. Some suggested that accelerated recognition pathways could be

introduced, combining targeted language instruction with supervised workplace adaptation periods. In their view, such measures would allow receiving countries to make better use of existing professional expertise while simultaneously facilitating integration into the labour market.

These accounts point to a broader issue of professional re-skilling among displaced Ukrainians. While host countries invest considerable resources in long-term integration programmes, respondents argued that more flexible recognition mechanisms could enable qualified professionals to enter the labor market more quickly. Such an approach could benefit both displaced individuals seeking to rebuild their careers and host societies experiencing shortages in key sectors.

Age-based demographic segmentation as a barrier to employment. In some interviews, age (mainly 45+) was mentioned as a strong barrier to labour market access and transition to long-term residence permits. Respondents highlighted it as a key structural barrier to legal stability.

Voices of the displaced:

> *"Nothing good awaits my family because we are over forty-five. Age, age... and according to German legislation, in order for me or my husband – let alone my mother, who is already a very elderly pensioner – to switch to another residence status, we would need to have an income of around forty-six hundred euros per month. Which, of course, is impossible here. There are no such salaries, even for local people with higher education." (Liliana, Germany)*

> *"Many companies take young people, up to 27 years old, for internships. Some of them are later retained. But adults... after a certain age, unless you have really exceptional experience in a very specific field, you are simply not of interest to them." (Kateryna, Belgium)*

These accounts suggest that age operates as an additional axis of stratification within the displaced population, intersecting with legal status and labour market access. In particular, older migrants appear to face significantly reduced opportunities both for stable employment and for transitioning to more secure residence regimes.

Opportunities for self-employment and entrepreneurship. For several respondents, self-employment and entrepreneurship represented not only a source of income but also a pathway towards economic independence and long-term integration. However, interviews cited a number of perceived barriers that complicate starting (or starting over) a business in their host countries. For example, Liliana (Germany), who holds a degree in the arts and hopes to establish a private educational centre for children, described feeling overwhelmed by the administrative requirements associated with starting a business:

Voices of the displaced:

> *"But when I start collecting all these documents and dealing with all these bureaucratic procedures, it makes me tremble, because I realise that I still don't know what I'm going to face, although I already see what other people are dealing with. It's frightening, it's really frightening, because the legislation is complicated, very complicated legislation." (Liliana, Germany)*

Similarly, Arina (Germany), who used to own a large business in Ukraine and lost most of it due to the war, is attempting to rebuild her professional life in Germany. Reflecting on her experiences, she concluded:

Voices of the displaced:

> *"I understand that here it is easier to work for someone else than to be self-employed." (Arina, Germany)*

Respondents also highlighted how the regulatory and tax environment can influence future migration decisions. Iryna (France), who works as a chef in a French restaurant and has a good income but still dreams of running her own business, explained that while she had learned French and was able to communicate effectively, she found the conditions for entrepreneurship challenging:

Voices of the displaced:

> *"My plans keep changing because I understand French and I speak it, but I don't like this country... for business. If you register as self-employed here, the taxes are very high. The kind of business I run simply isn't profitable under these conditions. If I can't solve this problem soon, I will start thinking about moving elsewhere." (Iryna, France)*

Looking ahead to the possible end of Temporary Protection, Iryna stated that her future decisions would be guided primarily by economic opportunities. If peace returns to Ukraine, she will consider returning. Otherwise, she will likely seek another country that offers better conditions for entrepreneurship:

Voices of the displaced:

"Everything depends on one thing – work. Access to the stable development of my business. I no longer want to work for someone else. I've cleaned toilets here too; I'm not afraid of work. If the goal is to feed my children, I will do whatever it takes." (Iryna, France)

For this respondent, the ability to run and grow her own business has emerged as a key factor shaping her future migration trajectory. More broadly, these accounts suggest that opportunities for entrepreneurship may play an important role in decisions about permanent settlement, onward migration, or return, particularly among displaced persons with prior business experience and strong aspirations for economic self-sufficiency.

Socio-cultural integration

The socio-cultural engagement of the respondents appears as the weakest dimension of integration overall, particularly in its social component. A minority of respondents reported feeling socially integrated in their host country. These cases are predominantly among those who are employed, and for whom workplace interactions constitute the primary channel of social engagement. In this sense, employment facilitates higher levels of social integration.

Voices of the displaced:

> *"I feel like a part of society wherever I am. We are all human beings, all under God. It does not matter in which country you are. The most important thing is to be a decent human being. Things like skin colour or eye shape do not matter at all." (Iryna, France)*

However, the majority of respondents, when asked whether they felt themselves as part of local society, stated that they did not.

Voices of the displaced:

> *"No, I do not feel like I belong. I am a stranger here and this country is foreign to me. But I understand that this country can offer more to my child than his homeland... unfortunately." (Olga, Czechia)*

> *"I feel more like a tourist who is just temporarily living here. I do not feel like part of German society.*

... I also cannot say that I have integrated, because most of my social contacts are still Ukrainians. It is easier, more interesting, and more understandable for me. I only interact with Germans when it is necessary." (Volodymyr, Germany)

A smaller number of respondents, however, emphasized a sense of cultural compatibility and individual responsibility in integration processes, highlighting respect, behaviour, and language acquisition as key factors.

Voices of the displaced:

"Honestly speaking, if you know the language, behave properly, respect the country you are in, and are grateful, then there should not be any major problems. It's not a question of nationality, it's a question of the individual." (Olga, Czechia)

Limited socio-cultural engagement was more frequently reported among unemployed respondents, who tended to have fewer opportunities for contact with the local population and relied primarily on co-ethnic social networks. For example, Liliana (Germany), despite having a language certificate, reported not being employed and described a highly limited scope of interaction with the host society:

Voices of the displaced:

"Here in this city, I heard a statistic that out of seventeen thousand inhabitants, around four thousand are Russian or Russian-speaking people who arrived long ago. We even joked that we need to practice German – but where exactly can you practice it here in Germany? You would have to literally catch a German just to talk to him. We understand that we are basically living in our own little world." (Liliana, Germany)

Finally, some respondents pointed to perceived cultural differences and limited social compatibility as factors contributing to social isolation. In certain cases, even when individuals are engaged in work or study, social relations with the host society remain limited, with interactions largely confined to functional or institutional contexts rather than personal relationships.

At the same time, these rather sharp self-assessments of non-integration should be understood in relation to how the respondents themselves define integration. For many, it implies not only adaptation, but active participation in local society, emotionally meaningful relationships with members of the host population, and recognition as "one of their own". In one case (Kateryna, Germany), a respondent compares her own limited sense of integration with earlier migrant communities that have already developed stable local networks and cultural infrastructures within the host society. This demanding understanding of integration may explain why many respondents describe themselves as "not integrated," even when their everyday practices suggest differentiated forms of social and cultural embedding and anchoring (Grzymala-Kazlowska & Ryan, 2022). In this sense, their experiences are better understood not as a complete absence of integration, but as non-linear and uneven processes of attachment and settling down, characteristic of fluid migration and drifting lives (Grzymała-Kazłowska A. & Brzozowska A., 2017) Most respondents do not live in complete isolation from the host society. Rather, they participate in Ukrainian diasporic networks, maintain contacts with other migrant communities, develop functional and sometimes friendly relations with local residents, show interest in the cultural life of the host country, and express a generally high appreciation of values associated with Western societies.

Country-specific obstacles to socio-cultural integration

Nevertheless, even integration through diasporic networks may encounter certain barriers. This was particularly visible in countries with a long-standing history of Ukrainian labour migration, where respondents some-

times pointed to tensions between the established Ukrainian diaspora communities and those who arrived after 2022 under Temporary Protection and humanitarian programmes. One respondent in Italy described a perceived lack of mutual understanding between these groups, rooted in different migration trajectories, motivations for relocation, and lived experiences.

According to respondents, such tensions are sometimes linked to perceptions of unequal access to support. While war-displaced Ukrainians have benefited from emergency protection measures and humanitarian assistance, earlier labour migrants often recall having navigated settlement and integration processes largely on their own. These differing experiences can contribute to feelings of frustration, resentment, or misunderstanding on both sides.

Voices of the displaced:

> *"I am very disappointed in Ukrainians abroad, very disappointed. We ourselves contribute to the way others think about us. Our Ukrainian mentality sometimes does everything possible to make people want to get rid of us... to drive us away, so to speak." (Olga, Czechia)*

Importantly, these perceptions were not universal among the respondents. Rather, they illustrate how displacement, migration histories, and unequal access to resources can shape intra-community relations and contribute to feelings of fragmentation within a population already affected by war and forced migration.

Another important barrier to socio-cultural integration and source of anxiety stems from the extreme politicization of migration in some host countries, where displaced Ukrainians have become a subject of political contestation and an instrument of electoral rivalry. This issue is particularly salient for respondents living in countries with relatively limited experience of ethnocultural immigration diversity, such as Poland and the Czech Republic, where Ukrainian refugees became one of the largest migrant groups after 2022 (Halkina et al., 2026). In such contexts, the politicization of migration does not occur at an abstract level but is often focused on a specific national group. As one respondent from the Czech Republic noted, this situation compels Ukrainian refugees to constantly "monitor the mood" within political circles and closely follow media campaigns in their host countries.

Voices of the displaced:

> *"I follow these legislative proposals, I follow the general mood in the Czech Senate. It's not going to get better; it's only going to get worse. And, as you know, it's the same in Poland, and in Ireland they're sending people away too. I don't think things will improve – they'll get worse, and... well, it doesn't depend on us. ... To be honest, I don't see any encouraging prospects for Ukrainians in the Czech Republic at the moment. The only exception is if you can support yourself and keep moving forward – towards a residence permit, permanent residence, and so on." (Olga, Czechia)*

A distinctive feature of the Polish context is the visible presence of historical issues in contemporary political debates, particularly the politicisation of complicated chapters of shared Polish-Ukrainian history, most notably the Volhynia tragedy. During periods of heightened political tension, these issues amplify public emotions, negative evaluations, and stereotypes concerning Ukrainian migrants. This has a direct impact on displaced Ukrainians living in Poland (Mieroszewski, 2025).

Although respondents frequently recalled with deep gratitude their positive experiences with Poles, mutual assistance, and expressions of solidarity at the interpersonal level, they nevertheless described Polish society as divided in its attitudes towards Ukrainian migrants. One respondent even attempted to estimate the scale

of what he called "hidden xenophobia," while two other respondents cited particular xenophobic incidents centred around the issue of the Volhynia tragedy. Overall, such experiences contributed to a sense of being perceived as outsiders in a country that many simultaneously regarded as culturally close. This, in turn, influenced some respondents' desire either to return to Ukraine or to move on to another European country.

Voices of the displaced:

> *"And it seems to me that it would be much easier to integrate in another country than in Poland. ... Well, first of all, there is... xenophobia here in Poland. A little bit of xenophobia. It's very hidden – you don't really see it, but it's there. And... I'd say about forty percent of Poles understand this and make use of it. They don't want us to integrate into their society." (Ihor, Poland)*

> *"Well, I think this is the first time the European Union has faced such experience, and it's impossible to foresee everything and make it work perfectly for everyone. Speaking about Poland, I think things are moving more or less in the right direction. At the very least... I'm grateful to the European Union and to Poland for providing Temporary Protection for four years. ... What I would probably expect is for Poland to pursue an information policy that does not harm immigrants but instead explains to its citizens, particularly voters, that immigrants pay taxes that help support the Polish economy, that immigrants buy goods and services that also support the economy, and that immigrants are not a burden but an opportunity." (Oleksiy, Poland)*

> *"Oh, well, what can I say? As the saying goes, visiting is good, but home is best. No matter who we are, WE ARE FOREIGNERS. In any country, we are foreigners. And that's the barrier between us and the Poles. ... This Volhynia massacre*[3] *– they keep bringing it up and reproaching us with it. So many years have passed. I wasn't even born when all of that happened. But we still feel it. And... no, I wouldn't say that all Poles are bad people. Not at all. In every country, as they say, every family has its black sheep. But most people are kind and sincere. They helped at the beginning – not only with actions, but even with words – and that made things easier. ... A lot of Ukrainians left, literally a year ago, for Canada and elsewhere because of this wave that was happening here. There was this kind of hatred towards Ukrainians. People were shouting that we had all come here, that there were more of us than of them, and so on." (Tetiana, Poland)*

> *"Poland as a state should pursue a more welcoming information policy towards immigrants – not only Ukrainians, but immigrants in general – a policy that is more truthful and fair. It shouldn't be the case that before every presidential or parliamentary election, politicians compete over who can restrict Ukrainians more. That is completely wrong. It's simply unclear... why we should be restricted at all. If we work, then how exactly are we harming Poland? If we work, integrate, and behave responsibly... There are also claims that there is crime among Ukrainians and immigrants. In reality, yes, such crime exists, but it is no higher than among Poles. The discussion should not focus on what percentage of Ukrainians are criminals, but rather compare those figures with Poles, Belarusians, Georgians, and others." (Oleksiy, Poland)*

Finally**, a housing and rental crisis** has emerged as one of the most critical structural barriers to long-term refugee integration and family stabilization. This problem is not driven by a lack of willingness among the dis-

3 While Polish political and historical discourse predominantly employs the term 'Volhynia massacre' to emphasize the genocidal nature and the premeditated killings of Polish civilians, Ukrainian historiography and public discourse more frequently refer to the 'Volhynia tragedy', framing the events within a broader context of a mutual ethnic violence of 1943–1945.

placed populations to achieve autonomy, but rather by severe national infrastructure deficits and institutional blockages within host countries. Families often cannot find housing because there are not enough apartments available, landlords demand documents confirming an impossibly high income, and state support programs are filled to capacity.

Voices of the displaced:

> *"The Netherlands is a small country, very densely populated. There is a housing shortage here even for local residents. It is very difficult to find a rental. On top of that, there are certain requirements for renting a home – your income has to be 3.6 times higher than the rent. So even with an average salary you cannot afford to rent housing under these requirements. That is the first issue. The second issue is that even if all Ukrainians wanted to rent housing, there simply is not enough of it physically available. Right now, Ukrainians are living in conditions that are actually unacceptable and completely inhumane. Yes, for a temporary stay of two or three months it may be fine, but when people are living like this into the fifth year – five people sharing one room, and not always from the same family, with no personal space and simply not enough room for a normal life or for rest – these are not normal living conditions. I think that if people had the financial means to rent and if the housing actually existed, most of them would choose to rent. So the problem is not only that Ukrainians do not want to rent housing. The problem is that the state itself has limited housing capacity in general." (Roksana, Netherlands)*

> *"I know there is a program ... where they help people integrate, they refer you to different classes according to your skills, and they also provide housing support. But for some reason, no matter how many times I've asked, they won't transfer me there. They keep saying there are no spots available." (Solomia, Italy)*

Solomia's case in Italy illustrates how the lack of access to housing and/or employment can trigger a chain of consequences that, in practice, significantly hinder integration. Solomia discusses the complete **absence of systematic support for single mothers with children.** She has found herself in a legal and housing deadlock due to the mismatch between her circumstances and the requirements of the rental market. Because she is unable to combine full-time employment with the schedule of her child's kindergarten (and, by the time of the study, school), she cannot secure formal employment with a sufficiently high income. Without such income, real estate agencies and landlords refuse to rent her an apartment. As a result, she is forced to rent a room informally ("in nero"), which deprives her of the right to obtain official residence registration (residenza). The lack of residence registration, in turn, blocks access to state child benefits and financial assistance, creating a self-reinforcing cycle of bureaucratic exclusion. She also expresses criticism of the housing allocation system for Ukrainian refugees, pointing to a complete lack of transparency and accountability within the refugee accommodation structures ("they just don't like you, and suddenly there are no places available"). In addition, she criticizes the practice of relocating families to remote regions in the middle of the school year, arguing that such moves disrupt the already fragile integration that children have managed to achieve.

FACTORS OF HOPE

The question of hope and footholds turned out to be one of the most difficult for our respondents: some of them asked for additional clarification about what exactly is meant. Overall, their answers unfolded within the coordinates of guilt associated with being abroad and a sense of belonging to a broader community of Ukrainian refugees, bound together by the shared experience of forced displacement. In this context, hope was often articulated for the respondent through a search for meaning: why are they abroad, and for whom are they

here? To a lesser extent, and often only after additional follow-up questions, respondents spoke about sources of hope connected to national and European policies, migration regimes, and future legal decisions.

The respondents' hopes rest on several pillars. The most important of these is the respondents' own sense of agency. This is grounded in the understanding that the period of forced migration has become a time of extraordinary trial for our interlocutors, but simultaneously also a time of certain opportunities that can be taken advantage of given a proactive stance, faith in one's powers, and gradual, step-by-step movement toward one's goals.

Voices of the displaced:

> *"I know one thing, that I, well... I mustn't give up, because my younger son is watching me, because my mother is with me. If I give up, I'll be letting them down. So I know one thing, that I need to... well, you understand, I can't even cry, because I don't want to show my weakness to my family. I can't do that, because, well, I'm always either with them or at work. But I know that I won't give up, I'll... well, I'll get to the end of this path and I hope (smiling) that I'll get there with dignity." (Olga, Czechia)*

> *"Thank God I'm healthy, that I have two arms, two legs, I can, I know I'll find work for myself." (Kateryna, Belgium)*

> *"Well, yes, so I was very lucky with the management and with being able to handle the work they gave me, plus the fact that I was always proactive. I mean, I had to do something, and I came up with tasks for myself at work, that's how I started leading tours, adult ones, for kids, didn't matter which, working through German texts, preparing, putting groups together, those exhibitions, all of that was my own initiative, and probably because they saw that I wasn't just sitting around with my li'l paws folded, maybe that became one of the factors that got me redirected this way [given permanent employment]." (Anna, Germany)*

As a rule, such goals were predominantly tied to employment and professional self-realization. But in cases where self-realization proved unattainable, a way out was found in reorienting one's goal-setting toward a gradual improvement in the quality of life. A former top manager of a large company in Ukraine, who after relocation lost almost the entirety of her business, is having a hard time coping with the radical changes to her familiar way of life:

> *"I've set myself small ones now, I don't, I don't have such big goals anymore. Here I am, step by step, you know, from one small goal to another small goal, I get it now, that's how I live." (Arina, Germany)*

> *"When you have work, you work, and you allow yourself to rent a place to live. Doesn't matter, a room, an apartment, a house, I feel like, in the future an improvement would just be, say, switching to some better job. And, well, maybe also changing your accommodation for something, accordingly, you have a better job, a higher salary, and accordingly you can make your accommodation better, rent something better for yourself, or other things like that." (Valentyna, Spain)*

Community and transnational agency. The respondents' agency was not limited to individual strategies of survival or self-realization. An important component of it was the aspiration to combine one's personal goals with a broader social good: helping other Ukrainians and building diaspora communities, supporting Ukraine, participating in volunteer initiatives, maintaining ties with the homeland, and representing Ukrainian culture in host societies. For example, Olga, who used to be deputy director of an NGO in Ukraine, continues, after relocating to the Czech Republic, to be just as actively engaged in that same organization's office in Prague:

Voices of the displaced:

> *"By nature, I just can't, you know... sit within four walls, being afraid of everything, so right away we found this little community of Ukrainians, who'd already arrived here, there was this volunteer headquarters that had opened here. And which invited... Thank God for social media, there was Telegram, Instagram, Facebook – they invited people to come together, to get to know each other, and, you could say that this volunteer organization or foundation, brought us together like that, and first we started volunteering a little, collecting things for our guys, all kinds of hygiene supplies, didn't matter, like, some underwear or whatever, sending things to Ukraine, or helping people here, who, you know, with kids, low-income families, there were also a lot of elderly people, with groceries, with food like that." (Natalia, Poland)*

> *"...civic engagement is my civic duty. So, right now, over the period that I've been in Prague, our representative office here has already sent eight hundred thousand euros' worth of surgical instruments to Ukraine, to hospitals around the whole country. I've also personally been involved in rehabilitating Ukrainian servicemen here in the Czech Republic, in a private clinic, Darkov, so this is my civic engagement, this is my civic duty. But as for my actual job, I work at a private company. To be honest, we sell charcoal for restaurants, for grills." (Olga, Czechia)*

> *"Well, honestly, I like our, how do you say... Ukrainian... kind of diaspora. I can't say it's all, well, beautiful, perfect, but I'm specifically talking now about the one we're building, those people who consciously try and make an effort to maintain interaction with each other, communication, and who move away from those, like, unstable, contentious, various unclear relationships that can arise among our own people, well, so, these small little groups of people who maintain friendly relations and support one another – I like those. And I believe that starting with yourself you can build some kind of stronger diaspora, one you can build a future with, you can plan something with." (Solomia, Italy)*

Anna from Germany demonstrated a high degree of agency by co-creating and coordinating a wide range of community initiatives for displaced Ukrainians in Germany. Since 2023, she has been actively involved in running a Ukrainian book club and a grassroots community space that hosts cultural, educational, therapeutic, and social activities for both adults and children. Beyond supporting local integration and social cohesion, she also mobilizes resources for humanitarian assistance to Ukraine, coordinates volunteer initiatives, and advocates for greater visibility of Ukrainian language and culture in local institutions (Anna, Germany). The respondent stresses that she does not want to remain merely a beneficiary of outside help. She seeks to create networks of mutual support and to influence the agenda of the local Ukrainian community by proposing initiatives that stem from the real needs of displaced persons.

Voices of the displaced:

> *"Not to act as, if I can put it this way, a consumer, right, of what they're doing, but as an organizer, as, well, if it can be done as an equal among equals. I mean, not like they're doing something and we, I show up, and it's like, 'Hello. Got anything?' – 'Here you go,' that I can also do something, I'm active too, I want to somehow influence what's happening." (Anna, Germany)*

As a consequence of this proactive stance, the experience gained through forced migration itself, faith in one's own strength, reliance on the strength of the community, and a sense of solidarity with others were becoming important anchoring points and sources of hope for the future. One respondent conveyed this through a proverb: "One man in a field is not a warrior" [a Ukrainian saying roughly equivalent to "there's no strength in numbers of one"].

"If we suddenly have to flee from Germany (laughing), then I know what needs to be done in a new place. You need to bring people together, that's it (laughing). And I know how it's done. I know what can be offered, and I already have A LOT of experience with this, that's why. We came here with two backpacks. In one backpack were my husband's official papers, in the other, well, a few things and his medications. So I don't know what could happen that we wouldn't be able to handle together. Maybe, of course, it'll happen, I don't want to know, but, yeah." (Anna, Germany)

However, the most common answer to the question about anchors of support in forced migration concerned children. The overwhelming majority of female respondents with minor children named them as their main source of support and motivation to keep going despite the uncertainty.

"Well, probably just the kids and nothing else." (Roksana, Netherlands)

"My only support is my children, that's what's keeping me here, it's my son's treatment, and that's it, basically, all my bouts of depression, they pass, because I understand that... I need to here and now, and as fast as possible, and to get as much as I can, and do as much as I can with him, because the results, there were results back in Ukraine too, but given the situation we're in, we wouldn't have been able to get this kind of treatment, for instance, the way we get it here, and I don't know if you can call it a source of support, but it's a huge motivation for me to be here." (Valentyna, Spain)

"The kids, if it weren't for the kids (with tears in her voice), I would have... (sighs heavily), I would have given up already." (Olga, Czechia)

"The children. I'm very glad, I'm very calm and I'm also very grateful, that they're doing fine. That my children are alive and healthy. ... How they are developing, growing up. That's it. That's probably the only real source of support right now. But of course I, I also lean on myself, in that I'm studying, that I'm always busy with something, that a lot of things excite me. I meet other, amazing Ukrainians, with whom you also keep each other going... I mean, people give you inspiration everywhere, and also you yourself are a support for yourself, because you imagine, what you want and you add that to your life. And that's incredible." (Kateryna, Belgium)

"The children. I'm here in France for the sake of the children. I'll be honest, I'll tell you truly, that it's simply all for them. So that they get an education and so that they have a peaceful sky over their heads. Everything for the children. And that shock that I went through as a mother, while I was at home, – it's what gives me this strength, to plan something, to be here and make decisions in the moment." (Iryna, France)

Respondents also named, among the important family sources of support, the awareness that their family had stayed together, which was especially significant in comparison with the experience of families separated by forced migration:

Voices of the displaced:

"But the main support for all of us is really the legal one, that there's protection, it's a temporary protection, which, even if short-term, still gives... an understanding of your status abroad. The first support, the second support is financial, work, but, if you also look at it from the family's point of view, it's still important that we ended up together. Well, like, our family, because a lot of families have been torn apart, even though we're torn apart too, but at least our family, well, at least mom, dad, son, we are together." (Oleksiy, Poland)

"It's good that the husband is here at all and there's support, because here in Poland, honestly, I wouldn't recommend it, like, for myself. ... If I'd been alone, given that I've become disabled, because until I went to the rheumatologist and they prescribed me medication, I couldn't even unscrew a bottle of water, like that. And cooking food myself, things were becoming so complicated, that I couldn't even wash my own hair for example." (Olena, Poland)

At the same time, disagreement within the family, particularly regarding long-term planning for the future, could become an additional source of emotional tension and vulnerability. In families with young children, in the absence of support from relatives, forced migration often heightened material dependence on the working partner. In one such case, an interview with a woman who was not working and was barely integrated into local society took place in her husband's presence and effectively turned into a hidden family discussion about return plans, in the voicing of which the woman was asserting her own agency. In another case, the dependent partner was the husband, who was contemplating further migration to a different country, hoping that this would help resolve the tension within the family.

Respondents without children, as well as male respondents, more often tied their sources of support to faith in Ukraine's victory and the expectation that the war would end.

Voices of the displaced:

"What gives confidence? The confidence that Ukraine will hold out, and our guys will drive out all that filth, and we'll go back home, to our own native land." (Svitlana, Poland)

Another important source of strength for respondents was the support of the host country's population. It is worth noting that even when the question concerned support from government institutions, the overwhelming majority of respondents talked first about support from ordinary people – colleagues, volunteers, acquaintances, or random representatives of the local society.

"It's the people who help you. People are always such a treasure, everywhere. And if you're able to communicate with people, I think life will just be easier for you." (Kateryna, Belgium)

"An acquaintance of mine (smiling), who's like my little angel here from Poland, yeah, who... helped me here too, invited me to these courses with an internship, so that I could at least be somehow actively taking part in things here." (Olena, Poland)

"There are different kinds of people. For me the division of people is – there are people, and, you could say, I'm sorry, sub-humans, you know? And it doesn't matter what nation, what nationality, right? We have different people, and here too there are different people. I met SO many good people in Poland, I have SO many acquaintances, here in Lublin. From that association, Słyszymy Sercem, who really know how to feel with their hearts, who really helped a lot, even when I was crossing the border, I started crying. Why? Look, there are tables set up, free bananas, free food, soup, coffee, girls volunteering, standing there. I arrived at the bus station, same thing, they're giving the kids something to eat too, helping out. Plus, I lived at a refugee centre, and saw there too how much help Poland was providing. So right now, yeah, it's hard for me, but when I lived at the refugee centre, I felt that protection, you know. Even though there, both I was working and my husband was working, too." (Olena, Poland)

The interview question about support from the host nation evoked in respondents strong feelings of gratitude. This support was characterised as "titanic" and "incredible" care, which gave people basic mental grounding

and optimism. Respondents from all countries pointed to various forms of government support during the initial period of their stay: medical care, financial payments, integration courses, housing, and access to education, including adult education. At the same time, respondents emphasized that support from local residents was even greater. However, respondents also spoke of a noticeable weakening in the intensity of assistance over time, and in the cases of Poland and the Czech Republic they linked this to a gradual shift in public and political sentiment, which came up particularly in responses to the questions about future plans and factors of hope.

A woman talking about her early stay in Germany describes the colossal support thanks to which she quickly integrated and found official, permanent employment right away in 2022:

Voices of the displaced:

> *"It's the BEST, as far as I know anyway, in principle, system of support for migrants that exists, because I can't imagine what it's like in other countries, like, at all. Because here that... benefits, how do you say it in Ukrainian, I forget, payments, let's just say payments, those payments that we received at the beginning, when we were, well, dependent on the state, when we didn't have jobs, they truly helped us survive." (Anna, Germany)*

> *"My own state never took care of me the way the German state has. I mean at first... what shocked me here, in a good sense, I couldn't understand what I was getting this money for, what they were paying my insurance for. ... For example, even me, the first summer we lived here, that's [20]22, they even paid me, because they had this law, for all Germans, 200 euros per person because there had been COVID. ... I really feel socially protected here. It's very comfortable. ... Here it's just good no matter what." (Arina, Germany)*

> *A respondent from Belgium, describing Temporary Protection, simply said that "everything gets done, just perfectly." (Kateryna, Belgium)*

> *"Huge gratitude to the state institutions, to the state regarding medical care. Ukrainians under Temporary Protection have very good medical insurance that covers everything, and, well, except dentistry. And we don't pay for it. That's wonderful. Because it's a huge saving for your finances, which are tight as it is. There's also big help, right now – it's with housing." (Roksana, Netherlands)*

In their assessments of government support, respondents were essentially describing how Ukrainian refugees had been put on equal footing, in terms of rights, with citizens of the host countries. This allowed them to access not only targeted assistance but also a broad range of social rights, protections, and services. Such a full scope of rights was perceived as an unprecedented instance in migration policy, which, in the respondents' view, set displaced Ukrainians apart from other categories of European migrants. At the same time, the possible end of the Temporary Protection regime and fears about losing the right to work and about continuing integration were seen as evidence of a lack of consistency in European policy. According to one respondent, such a policy seemed short-sighted: in her view, Ukrainians were ready to "repay" the host nation with their labour, and depriving them of the chance to legally stay and work would mean losing the investment already made in supporting them:

Voices of the displaced:

> *"They've invested so much money in us, really, yes, supported us, and now to just up and not create the conditions for us to be able to work it off somehow, yeah, that's kind of silly. But anything can happen." (Liliana, Germany).*

Respondents felt that such a policy could hit the vulnerable categories of migrants especially hard. The dependence of health insurance on employment, as well as the scaling back of full access to medical services for people with disabilities, were perceived as a threat to life itself, as one respondent from Poland attests:

> *"I wished that Europe and in general, they would all think about vulnerable people, about their... that they wouldn't be left to fend for themselves, because as they say, 'Let your państwo [state] take care of you,' that it just wouldn't be like that, that people would just understand that there's a war going on with us, and that such people also want to live and have a right to life. The same goes for women, even just a little bit of support, also social, some support for the family, if it's a mother with many children and no husband, so they could survive. Just survive." (Olena, Poland)*

This uncertainty about the future was tied to the very nature of Temporary Protection itself, which often drove respondents, when answering the questions about hopes and anchors of support in the future, to veer away and talk about living one's life "one day at a time," about emotional swings, and about doubts whether the steps already taken toward integration even made sense. Respondents keenly felt how dependent their lives were on political instability and the broader geopolitical situation. The war had made them politically sensitive: they perceived political shifts and fluctuations in international support not as abstractions, but as factors that directly affected their personal fate. In response to these fears, respondents, when speaking about factors of hope, often appealed to universal values and to a belief that the world is, after all, capable of stopping a catastrophic course of events.

Academic research as a form of social therapy**.** At the end of her interview, Solomia (Italy) can barely hold back tears as she notes that her very participation in this survey gives her hope that Ukrainian refugees "haven't been completely abandoned to their fate." This underscores the importance of our research not only as scholarly work, but also as a form of social therapy and a space for respondents to be heard.

CONCLUSIONS

The study reveals that the Temporary Protection regime, as an instrument of emergency humanitarian response of the EU, has imposed a number of specific characteristics onto the process of integration of Ukrainian migrants displaced by the war. As of April-May 2026, the temporary nature of this legal framework has become a primary driver of uncertainty, fundamentally shaping the integration and future trajectories of displaced Ukrainians.

As of the time of the study, Ukrainians displaced to the EU have moved beyond the initial stage of adaptation shock caused by forced displacement. In terms of integration, a process of social stratification has become evident: relatively successful rapid adaptation among children, alongside gradual linguistic and labour market integration of working-age and skilled adults (which also creates prospects for future regularisation), occurs in parallel with a systemic erosion of social support for the vulnerable groups (persons with disabilities, single mothers, individuals aged 45+ without high incomes, and pensioners). During this transitional period, state policies in EU countries appear to be oriented towards the pragmatic selection of economically "useful" migrants, while gradually marginalizing those dependent on social assistance.

The lack of a clear, predictable legal transition after the expiration of TP acts as a major structural impediment. The absence of official, reliable information regarding possible pathways after TP expires creates a strategic vacuum. Even respondents who are employed or pursuing education lack a strategic vision of their future after Temporary Protection. In particular, it remains unclear whether time spent under this status will be recognised as part of the legal residence period required to obtain long-term or permanent residence. This institutional silence discourages long-term settlement and fuels anxiety (fears of forced return or "expulsion," and raises doubts about whether their integration efforts will ultimately prove worthwhile) and increases the vulnerability of migrants to disinformation and amateur advice, highlighting an urgent need for proactive, state-level communication strategies. Consequently, institutionalizing official counseling channels is imperative to mitigate the destabilizing impact of amateur "guidance" and targeted disinformation within displaced communities.

Current status is still perceived by respondents as a temporary phenomenon and the main factors keeping them in their host countries are the hope for further legal residence in Europe during the war. Families with children maintain a "child-centric" strategy, their decision to remain in the EU is made through the prism of children's safety, their educational trajectories, and prospects for integration into the host society. For the sake of their children's future, respondents are willing to tolerate professional de-skilling, instability, and the shifting policies of host nations. This orientation is further reinforced by European migration policy, which opens up broad opportunities for children and guarantees them social protection.

The research highlights that the integration process is not smooth and uniform across the EU. In countries like Poland and Czechia, the politicization of migration and shifting public discourse directly affect the lived experience of Ukrainians. The introduction of specific national pathways (e.g., the CUKR permit in Poland) demonstrates how political priorities dictate the boundaries of inclusion, with certain vulnerable groups bearing the brunt of structural barriers. This environment reinforces the perception that legal status is contingent on political climate rather than individual merit.

The study concludes that while Temporary Protection remains an essential humanitarian instrument for majority of the respondents, especially those from vulnerable groups, providing a set of critical tools initial for

adaptation, it has simultaneously evolved into a certain structural barrier for deep integration. For those who have spent several years in the EU, the perpetual 'temporariness' of this legal framework has become a destabilizing factor that hinders strategic planning and long-term settlement. To address this, EU member states should move beyond the current liner (like "one-size-fits-all") approach toward a more differentiated policy that preserves the protection of vulnerable groups while offering a transparent, predictable roadmap for those ready to move towards more permanent legal statuses. Without such institutionalized clarity, the persistent state of liminality will continue to undermine the integration efforts of long-term displaced persons, turning their temporary displacement into a permanent state of strategic uncertainty.

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ANNEXES

List of Tables

Table 1. Socio-demographic profile of the respondents

	Name (names are changed)	Age	Sex	Hosting country	Education	Employment	Special circumstances (ex.: disability)	Family circumstances in emigration	Number of children in emigration	Language profficiency / certificate
1	Anna	36	f	Germany	Higher	yes	-	with husband and sister		yes / B2
2	Liliana	47	f	Germany	Higher	-	-	with husband, son and mother	1	yes / B1
3	Arina	49	f	Germany	Higher	-	Daughter with a disability	Separated family; husband and son in Ukraine		basic level / –
4	Natalia	50	f	Germany	Higher	yes		With adult son and pensioner mother		yes / B2
5	Ivan	21	m	Germany	student	yes		With mother and grandmother	-	yes / B2
6	Volodymyr	21	m	Germany	student	-		With part of the family	-	yes / C1
7	Sofiia	46	f	Germany	Higher	yes		With part of the family	-	yes / B2
8	Oleksiy	52	m	Poland	Higher	yes	-	With wife and son	1	yes / has passed B2 exam, is waiting for the certificate
9	Ihor	46	m	Poland	secondary	-	-	With wife and two children	2	yes / –
10	Tetiana	36	f	Poland	secondary	-	-	With husband and daughter	1	has enrolled in the course / –
11	Svitlana	55	f	Poland	Higher	yes	-	With adult daughter		yes / –
12	Olena	38	f	Poland	Higher	yes	Has disability (Group 2)	With husband and two children	2	yes / B2
13	Olesia	49	f	Poland	Higher	yes		Separated family; husband in Ukraine and adult son in Europe		yes / –
14	Valentyna	46	f	Spain	Higher	yes	Son with Cerebral palsy (CP)	With two children, (adult daughter 19, works)	1	yes / A2
15	Olga	50	f	Czechia	Higher	yes	-	With son and pensioner mother. Separated family; husband and son in Ukraine.	1	yes / B1
16	Kateryna	46	f	Belgium	Higher	-	-	With two children. Separated family; husband in Ukraine.	2	yes/ B1
17	Iryna	34	f	France	Higher	yes	-	With husband and two children, pregnant.	2+	B1-B2 self-assessed / –
18	Yurii	21	m	Austria	student	yes		-	-	B2 self-assessed / –
19	Solomia	42	f	Italy	Higher	yes		With a child	1	yes / –
20	Roxana	40	f	Netherlands	Higher	yes		With husband and two children	2	attending a B1 course / A2

Research Project Report
October 2026

doi:10.2870/7100945
ISBN:978-92-9466-880-6
QM-01-26-409-EN-N

Publications Office
of the European Union

