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## **SUPPORTING UKRANIAN REFUGEES**

### **From Temporary Protection to Local Integration**

**Contribution to the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the CoE**

## **Abstract**

Four years into the war, millions of Ukrainians remain displaced across Europe. By April 2026 roughly 4.4 million non-EU nationals (mostly Ukrainians) were under the EU's Temporary Protection scheme, and some 6.8 million Ukrainians were displaced abroad. Initially managed as an emergency, the focus has shifted to longer-term integration. Local and regional authorities now confront sustained demands on housing, education, health, labour-market and social services, while gearing up for the eventual transition to residence status or return. Evidence from official sources highlights continued high aspirations to return home (war permitting), but persistent obstacles – notably damaged housing, employment gaps and security concerns – slow returns. Local initiatives (“integration hubs”, multilingual services, volunteer networks) and multi-level cooperation have helped. Yet challenges remain: uneven reception capacity, fiscal strain on municipalities, and risks of social exclusion, especially for vulnerable groups. To address this, we recommend maintaining coordinated TP regimes, easing the TP-to-residency transition, boosting funding for LRAs (including earmarked EU/National funds), and scaling up proven local practices (e.g. community integration centres). Protecting rights and supporting cohesion – through anti-discrimination measures, trauma-informed care and public information – is essential. This brief draws on recent EU, UNHCR, OECD, FRA, and Council of Europe analyses, and highlights illustrative cases (with sources) to guide policy.

## **Current Situation (2026)**

The war-induced displacement remains unprecedented: Europe hosts the largest refugee influx since WW2 (OECD, 2026). As of early 2026, 4.4 million Ukrainian refugees were under TP in the EU (plus sizeable flows in non-EU countries). Germany ( $\approx 1.28$  M), Poland ( $\approx 0.97$  M), and Czechia ( $\approx 0.38$  M) alone host the majority. TP status has been extended (currently to 4 Mar 2027, and proposals exist to extend to 2028). About 4.5 million were under TP by end-2025. Recognition of Ukrainian asylum claims is high in some countries (e.g.  $\sim 90\%$  in Estonia/France) but low in others (3% in Germany in 2025), reflecting shifting policies. Surveys indicate mixed intentions: roughly one-third want to return to Ukraine, one-third prefer to stay, and one-quarter are undecided. The majority planned to return eventually, but the ongoing war prevents short-term returns.

Reception capacity and public services vary widely. Many refugees rely on private accommodation (60% in FRA survey), often at cost and overcrowded (shared kitchens/bathrooms, lack of study space for children). Municipalities face housing shortages: rents and home prices have surged in key cities (e.g. Vilnius saw +24% price rise in early 2022). In some places (e.g. Prague in May 2022), makeshift camps were opened due to acute demand. Education uptake lags:  $<50\%$  of school-age children continued education in the host country, largely due to language barriers. Labour-market absorption is uneven: about two-thirds of pre-war workers found jobs, but overall two-thirds of working-age refugees remained unemployed, hindered by language, childcare, and recognition issues. Psychosocial distress is high –  $\sim 50\%$  of adults often feel depressed and nearly all experienced war-related trauma – straining health and social support systems.

## **Policy Recommendations:**

- Sustain and adapt TP protection. Continue coordinated extensions of TP and related social rights until conditions improve. Ensure TP beneficiaries have clear pathways to longer-term residence (e.g. through simplified residency or humanitarian permits).
- Plan transition early. Prepare “exit strategies” by mapping when TP will phase out, and inform refugees about legal options (work permits, asylum, family reunification) for longer-term status. Introduce counseling on residency and return options (e.g. Germany’s “Unity Hubs” counseling on return/integration).
- Ensure timely data and monitoring. Track refugee inflows, intentions, and demographics to adjust policies; use EU Commission recommendations on data sharing.
- Fund reception and services. Allocate (and ring-fence) adequate national/EU funds to local authorities for housing, schooling and health services (e.g. inclusion of refugees under EU Cohesion and RRF programmes). Enhance direct EU support (CFIU, Asylum, Migration Funds) for high-pressure areas.

### **Good Practices (cases):**

- Czech “Unity Hubs”: The Czech government set up one-stop centres (“Unity Hubs”) to assist Ukrainians with employment, language training and counseling, including guidance on voluntary return. These hubs work with NGOs and serve as information points.
- Bratislava Integration Centre (Slovakia): Bratislava opened “Blue Dot” centres co-locating border police (for TP permits), migration offices, UNHCR and NGOs. It also created a new municipal integration department. This coordination hub provides legal aid, healthcare referrals, childcare, and psychosocial support under one roof.

### **Transition from Temporary Protection: Towards Integration or Return**

As the initial emergency recedes, the focus turns to durable solutions. Surveys show a majority of refugees intend to return to Ukraine when safe, but by mid-2025 only 4.1–5.8 million had returned, mostly in 2022. Returnees often had stronger pull-factors (undamaged homes, prior jobs) and fare relatively well post-return. Remaining displaced abroad face weakening return intentions over time but maintain hopes (depending on security). Key obstacles to return are housing and livelihood: destroyed housing, skyrocketing rents, mismatched job markets, and under-served rural areas are reported. Administrative barriers (renouncing host country benefits, closing businesses, travel documents) also deter returns. Conversely, many refugees (e.g. those who resettled permanently or new families) intend to stay. The EU has acknowledged this mixed picture: in 2025 the Commission proposed a Recommendation on a coordinated phase-out of TP once conditions permit (taking care not to force returns abruptly).

Challenges: Refugees hoping to return without support risk marginalization. Local authorities in Ukraine often lack capacity for reintegration (housing repairs, schools, jobs) while still facing security threats. Externally displaced families who do not return become a long-term diaspora, with integration needs in host societies and potential as a resource for Ukraine’s recovery (e.g. skilled labour, remittances). National and local governments must balance preparatory return planning (e.g. rebuilding programs, skills matching) with integration of those staying. Moreover, administrative systems in host countries need clarity on when TP beneficiaries may lose benefits upon return, to avoid deterring voluntary returns.

### **Policy Recommendations:**

- Support safe, voluntary return and reintegration: Invest in rebuilding (housing repair, local job creation) in war-affected areas. Strengthen “go-and-see” visits so displaced Ukrainians can

assess conditions (as piloted by some NGOs). Provide clear information on available housing grants, employment programs and legal aid in Ukraine.

- Facilitate legal status transitions: Enable TP holders to convert to standard residency or asylum status if they choose integration (or if returns are infeasible), avoiding an abrupt shift from “temporary” to undocumented. E.g. allow dual-residence arrangements or transitional status.
- Engage the diaspora: Recognize Ukrainian communities abroad as partners (OECD, 2026). Involve local diaspora councils and diaspora businesses in reconstruction initiatives. Provide mechanisms (diaspora bonds, tax incentives) to channel support home.
- Anticipate gender/social needs: Return/migration intentions vary by age, gender, family status (OECD, 2026). Tailor policies (e.g. special housing for elderly returnees; schooling continuity for repatriating children).

#### **Good Practices (cases):**

- Ukrainian Government – Register of Damage (Category A1.2): In early 2026, the Council of Europe’s Register of Damage opened category A1.2, allowing Ukrainian refugees abroad to claim compensation for “non-material harm” of displacement. This mechanism formally recognizes trauma of displacement and gives beneficiaries (with TP or asylum status) a pathway to potential reparations.
- Switzerland – Ease of labor mobility: Switzerland replaced its strict work-permit requirement for Ukrainian S-status holders with a simple notification system, enabling them to change jobs and move between cantons freely. This flexible approach helps sustain livelihoods for displaced Ukrainians who choose to stay.

#### **Integration Services: Housing, Education, Labour, Health, Psychosocial Support**

Local governments are on the frontline of providing basic services. Key sectoral observations include:

- Housing: Municipalities struggled to find long-term housing for refugees. Many municipalities first used emergency shelters (schools, sports halls) and then relied on private hosts or existing housing stock. For example, Hamburg expanded existing refugee centers and mobilized hotels/hostels. According to FRA’s 2022 survey, ~60% of refugees were in private housing (often poor quality), half paying rent. Crowding and lack of study space was common. High rental costs in major cities forced even employed refugees to depend on social housing. Some national programs provided rental subsidies or tax breaks to hosts (noted in UN/CoR studies).

- **Education:** Many refugee children faced barriers to schooling. Less than half who were in education in Ukraine managed to continue in the host country; language difficulty was the main obstacle. Roughly 40% of adult refugees had never attended language classes by late 2022, slowing integration. Online schooling (via Ukrainian systems) partially filled the gap – nearly two-thirds of children continued learning online – but disrupted social integration. Host schools undertook integration classes and trauma counseling in some areas, but capacity varied.
- **Labour Market:** While refugees are generally of working age and economically motivated, labour integration has been uneven. According to the FRA (2023) and IOM (2023), labour market participation among Ukrainian refugees has increased over time, but language barriers, childcare responsibilities and the recognition of qualifications continue to limit access to employment that matches refugees' skills. On the positive side, according to the OECD (2026), an estimated 225,000–350,000 Ukrainian refugees are employed in Poland, contributing approximately 0.7–1.1% to GDP. Governments have eased work rules (e.g. Poland waived many permit requirements). Some Union-wide reforms occurred: Spain and Czechia created “Unity Hubs” offering job counseling and training, Germany prepared a hub for return/career counseling (launching 2026), and Bulgaria launched a national integration program emphasizing employment and education.
- **Healthcare:** Health needs are high. FRA survey (2022) found only 33% of adults reported good health, and half had pre-existing health problems. Half of refugees aged 16+ had trouble accessing healthcare due to language or lack of information. Some countries provided subsidized health coverage under TP. LRAs often needed to arrange mental health support: notably, in Valencia (Spain) the regional government, with NGOs, expanded psychological services for refugees.
- **Psychosocial Support:** Trauma is widespread – ~50% of respondents felt “downhearted and depressed” often since arrival. Children reported symptoms of anxiety, sleep problems (50% of ages 12–15). Yet only one-third of adults sought any mental health support, and many were denied or lacked services. Local councils and NGOs have set up psychosocial programs (e.g. community centers, helplines). For instance, some Blue Dot centres and local councils offered trauma counselling and child-friendly spaces (e.g. Zilina Lighthouse in Slovakia, Braşov AMDDDB centre in Romania).

### **Policy Recommendations:**

- **Scale up housing solutions:** Invest in social housing and subsidies to prevent price spikes (national rent support schemes, tax incentives for private hosts). Ensure local planning integrates long-term refugee housing needs, avoiding abrupt evictions. Good practice:

expanding municipal accommodation capacity through flexible use of hotels, hostels and temporary facilities, as demonstrated by Hamburg. (e.g. Hamburg's expansion).

- Boost education access: Provide free language and vocational training (e.g. municipal language centers). Guarantee enrollment of children in local schools (with tutors or translators as needed). Encourage intercultural activities (buddy schemes with local students).
- Promote labour integration: Remove work permit barriers and recognize foreign qualifications. Establish local employment hubs (like "Integration Hubs" in Spain/Czech Republic) to link refugees with employers, offer vocational training, and childcare. Extend such hubs nationwide. Partner with business chambers for job placements.
- Ensure healthcare and mental health: Allocate funding for interpretation and cultural mediation in health services. Expand mobile clinics or integrate refugees into universal health systems seamlessly. Proactively provide psychosocial support (community centers, school counselors) and train social workers in trauma-informed care. For example, public-private partnerships could fund NGO counselors in refugee-dense districts.
- Prevent exploitation: Strengthen labour inspections and information campaigns (safe job portals, legal clinics) to combat workplace exploitation. Collaborate with trade unions and local NGOs to raise awareness of rights.

#### **Illustrative Practices:**

- Hamburg (Germany) Emergency Housing: Faced with a rapid increase in arrivals, Hamburg expanded existing refugee accommodation and secured additional temporary housing through hotels, hostels and other facilities to prevent homelessness and ensure immediate reception. The city's rapid mobilisation demonstrated the importance of flexible municipal planning and coordination during large-scale displacement.
- Valencia Mental Health Initiative (Spain): The Valencian regional government, in cooperation with the Spanish Red Cross and healthcare providers, expanded psychosocial support services for displaced Ukrainians, including psychological counselling, specialised support for children and referrals to mental health professionals. This collaborative approach helped address trauma-related needs and strengthened community resilience.

#### **Financial and Administrative Challenges for Local/Regional Authorities**

LRAs carry much of the cost and organization of reception. Sudden refugee inflows strained municipal budgets for education, health, housing and social services. An EU report notes that hosting refugees exacerbated pre-existing urban housing shortages and pressured city services. For example, housing rents became so expensive that even Ukrainians in employment will have to rely on social

housing. Cities like Prague had to open camps and scale up homeless services as a result. LRAs also handle administration: registration under TP, issuing permits, schooling enrollment, and emergency social assistance. These tasks are labor-intensive and funded at national/regional cost. Moreover, fiduciary burdens arise: local taxes often do not cover extra spending (schools, healthcare) for refugees, leading to unfunded mandates.

**Challenges:** Many municipalities lack direct access to dedicated EU funds (which are channelled via national governments). A 2024 UNHCR policy brief notes that localities often cannot easily tap EU integration/ESF funds directly, and mayoralities struggle to align multi-level funding (UNHCR, 2024). The administrative complexity of the TP regime (short-term permits, renewals) creates backlogs: e.g., Germany and Italy needed to schedule millions of permit renewals in 2025 (Italy even removed from statistics those who didn't renew). Local social services must verify refugee eligibility for welfare, complicating workload.

### **Policy Recommendations:**

- Increase local budgets and simplify funding: Allocate earmarked grants from national/EU coffers directly to municipalities and regions based on refugee population, not just formula-based payments. Simplify procedures so cities can use e.g. ESF+/AMF or REACT funds for refugee support (leveraging the EC's 2021 integration funding toolkit). National governments should lower their fiscal contributions to enable more local spending (e.g. co-financing reimbursements).
- Streamline administration: Adopt digital registration and case-management systems. Where possible, delegate (and train) LRA staff to process TP/residency paperwork (as in Bratislava's integrated Blue Dot approach). Introduce one-stop information platforms (see case below). Coordinate with higher levels to reduce duplications (e.g. single national enrolment portal for schooling).
- Leverage multi-level partnerships: Encourage formal coordination bodies (local/regional asylum coordination committees). Share good practices via city networks (e.g. Eurocities, CPMR). Ensure local governments are represented in national asylum/migration councils so that funding and policy decisions reflect on-the-ground realities.

### **Good Practices:**

- Brussels "Ukrainians' Help" Platform (Belgium): Brussels-Capital Region quickly developed an online portal linking refugees to housing, childcare, and social services, with multilingual guidance. It coordinated city, regional and NGO resources, effectively pooling information.
- National Memorandums (Bulgaria): The Bulgarian government launched a national integration plan focusing on employment, education and social aid specifically for

Ukrainians, with dedicated funds. This central framework helps local councils plan budgets knowing national support will compensate expenditures.

## **Multi-Level Governance and Cross-Border Cooperation**

Effective refugee integration depends on coordination across government levels and borders. The EU law (2001 TP Directive) sets minimum reception standards, but Member States have latitude in implementation. A Council of Europe analysis notes that local actors often lack direct access to EU funds, creating a need for more cross-border and peer cooperation. Many local/regional authorities have forged partnerships: the Conference of Peripheral Maritime Regions (CPMR) reported that regions undertook inventories of housing and created online matching platforms for offers/demands. Cities have also engaged transnationally – many have “twinning” agreements or work with networks (e.g. UCLG, CEMR) to share know-how (UNHCR, 2024). The EC has published a toolkit for coordinated use of EU integration funds (2021-27) and many Member States set up national portals for EU fund information. However, differences in national asylum/TP laws and language can hinder cross-border learning.

Challenges: Varying rules (e.g. regarding UASC, renewals) create uneven experiences: children in Bulgaria receive different status than those in Italy or France. Inter-municipal cooperation is essential to share scarce resources (transport refugees to schools/hospitals). Cross-border regions (e.g. Poland-Ukraine, Romania-Ukraine) need joint planning for return flows and aid. Climate events or other crises (e.g. floods in 2023) could intersect with integration needs, requiring multi-level emergency plans.

### **Policy Recommendations:**

- Enhance inter-municipal networks: Foster cooperation among neighboring towns/cities (within and across borders). For example, EU Interreg projects can fund shared services (joint reception centers, language classes). Encourage “sister city” partnerships specifically for refugee support (e.g. Greek-Turkish border towns).
- Strengthen regional coordination: Regional governments should allocate integration mandates (e.g. Nordrhein-Westfalen’s coordination of hundreds of municipalities in Germany). Regional health/education agencies can provide sub-grants or technical support to localities. CPMR suggests financing cross-border actions among accession countries (UNHCR, 2024).
- Maintain EU-level guidance: The EU and CoE should continue to publish guidelines (like EC’s 2021 funds toolkit) and monitor implementation. Ensure local authorities have a voice in national budgeting for refugee programs.

- Promote knowledge exchange: Organize peer learning events for LRAs (e.g. through European Week of Regions and Cities) on topics like multicultural schooling, mobile clinics, etc. Compile a multilingual database of local good practices (housing models, integration projects) accessible to mayors.

### **Compensation Mechanism: Register of Damage Claims**

The Council of Europe has established an International Claims Register for Ukraine. In early 2026, it opened Category A1.2 (“Involuntary displacement outside Ukraine”) allowing displaced persons abroad to claim compensation for non-material harm (psychological trauma, disruption of life) caused by being forced to flee. The Register acknowledges 6.8 million Ukrainians remain displaced abroad. Under Category A1.2, any Ukrainian granted TP or asylum is deemed “involuntarily displaced” and may seek redress. This complements other categories (property loss, personal injury) in the compensation scheme.

Challenges: Refugees may be unaware of this mechanism or unable to navigate it. Filing claims requires documentation of harm, which can be hard for those without legal assistance. Municipalities and NGOs could play a role in outreach and support but need resources and guidance. Also, the process is new; local governments do not directly implement it but can facilitate claims by providing evidence (e.g. residency documents, attestations of loss).

### **Policy Recommendations:**

- Raise awareness locally: Municipalities should publicize the Register through refugee centers, local integration websites and Ukrainian community groups. For instance, local Social Services or Ukrainian diaspora networks can host info sessions.
- Provide legal assistance: City lawyers or funded NGOs could offer pro bono help to complete claims. Where possible, integrate this into existing asylum/immigration assistance desks (e.g. Blue Dot hubs).
- Collect evidence: LRAs can assist claimants by verifying dates of displacement (e.g. stamping TP permits) or certifying interruption of schooling or work (for proof of life disruption).
- Coordinate with national authorities: Ensure that national/embassy channels alert TP beneficiaries of their rights to claim under the CoE scheme.

### **Illustrative Good Practice:**

- Tallinn (Estonia) One-Stop Reception Centre: Tallinn established a one-stop reception centre for people fleeing Ukraine, bringing together registration, temporary accommodation support, social assistance, healthcare referrals, education services and legal information in one

location. By coordinating municipal departments with national authorities and civil society organisations, the centre reduced administrative barriers and facilitated access to essential services for newly arrived refugees.

### **Vulnerable Groups and Social Cohesion**

Not all refugees are the same. Initial flows were majority women and children; later more men (fighters) and returnees shuffled profiles. Vulnerable subsets include unaccompanied minors, the elderly, disabled, Roma, LGBTQ+ individuals, and trauma survivors. For example, FRA notes high mental health needs especially among children. Women, who led many refugee households, face risks of exploitation and gender-based violence (GBV) in transit and host environments. Social cohesion concerns have emerged: in some areas, local communities fear long-term pressure on jobs/services, leading to isolated incidents of discrimination or intolerance. However, widespread solidarity (citizen hosting, charity drives) has also been observed. The Council of Europe's recommendations stress combating racism and xenophobia and ensuring universal support.

Challenges: Meeting diverse needs requires tailored measures. Displaced elderly may need medical support or assisted living; unaccompanied minors need guardianship (national laws vary). Persons with disabilities may be left behind in fleeing. Minority groups (e.g. Crimean Tatars, Roma) may face double vulnerability. Community tensions can arise if refugees are seen as competing for scarce resources. Integration must therefore foster mutual understanding and protect at-risk groups.

### **Policy Recommendations:**

- Targeted support: Establish dedicated programs: e.g., family reunification assistance, day-care for refugee children (to allow mothers to work), mobile units for homebound elders, and inclusive school curricula. Ensure refugee children with special needs (disabilities, trauma) have places in local special education or therapy services.
- Anti-discrimination efforts: Enforce legal protections vigorously. Integrate refugees into local anti-racism campaigns. Collect and respond to hate speech incidents. (CoE's Handbook on Fighting Discrimination, can guide local policies.)
- Community integration: Organize community events (cultural festivals, sports) that mix locals and refugees, building social ties. Support Ukrainian cultural centers and language exchanges. Promote positive narratives (as UNHCR suggests, highlight refugees' contributions to reconstruction and host economies).
- Mental health and social work: Train social workers and teachers in trauma-informed approaches. Fund volunteer programs pairing local mentors with refugee families. Use schools and clinics as contact points to identify vulnerable individuals early.

**Good Practices:**

- **Žilina Lighthouse (Slovakia):** The municipal Point of Safety Žilina Lighthouse, established as part of the UNHCR-supported Blue Dot initiative and now integrated into Slovakia's Point of Safety Network, provides counselling, legal information, employment and social support, as well as community activities that bring together Ukrainian refugees and local residents. Operated by the City of Žilina in partnership with the Slovak Humanitarian Council and Ukraine House Žilina, the centre illustrates how municipalities and civil society can jointly support long-term integration.
- **Brussels Childcare Initiative (Belgium):** Faced with many refugee mothers, Brussels subsidized places in municipal daycare and expanded after-school programs. Child-friendly reception centers with play areas eased stress for families. These measures helped mothers seek employment and integrated children into the community.

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