

NEW PERSPECTIVES: LABOUR MARKET INTEGRATION OF DISPLACED UKRAINIAN WOMEN

A Comparative Study of Austria, Germany, and Poland ¹

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Background

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 triggered both internal displacement and unprecedented international refugee flows. Within the first three months, around 7.2 million people fled abroad. In response, the EU activated the Temporary Protection Directive² for the first time, granting displaced persons from Ukraine temporary residence rights.

As of March 31, 2025, slightly more than 4.26 million Ukrainians hold temporary protection status in the EU. **The largest host countries are Germany** (~1.19 million), **Poland** (~997,000), and the **Czech Republic** (~365,000), with Austria hosting around 81,225 – making it a medium-sized host country in both absolute and relative terms³.

Before the war, migration from Ukraine varied across host countries. Poland has already been a key destination for Ukrainian labour migrants for many years, while Germany and Austria hosted a relatively small Ukrainian diasporas. By 2021, Poland hosted over 650,000 Ukrainians, compared to 83,000 in Germany and 10,000 in Austria. The ratio of newly displaced Ukrainians with temporary protection to pre-war Ukrainian residents is about 1:1.5 in Poland, 1:13.7 in Germany, and 1:8.35 in Austria.

The **demographic profile of those displaced from Ukraine differs significantly** from previous refugee movements in the 21st century, with a **large majority being women**. As of October 2024, 45% were adult women, 23% adult men, and 32% were children. Among the women, 55% were aged 35-65.

¹ This project was funded by the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF) and co-funded by the Federal Chancellery of Austria.

² Directive 2001/55/EC.

³ <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/w/ddn-20250512-1#:text=On%2031%20March%202025%2C%20slightly.protection%20status%20in%20the%20EU>.

Labour market integration

A study published in May 2024 by the EMN and the OECD, based on 2023 data, highlights **significant differences in employment rates of Ukrainian refugees in various host countries**. At the start of 2023, employment rates ranged from just 8% in Hungary to 66% in Lithuania. In Germany and Austria, the rates stood at 25% and 21% respectively. While the OECD report did not include figures for Poland, Polish studies estimate the employment rate at around 60%, though they emphasize that many refugees hold jobs below their level of qualification. In all three countries, Ukrainian refugees have full access to the labour market.

It's important to highlight the **differences in the structure of labour markets in Germany, Austria, and Poland. Germany and Austria operate as established Western European welfare states with highly regulated labour markets**. A defining feature is the widespread use of collective agreements negotiated between employers' associations and trade unions, designed to balance power between the two sides. In Austria, approximately 95% of private employment contracts are covered by such agreements⁴; in Germany, the figure is around 49%⁵. These agreements typically include minimum wage scales and salary levels tied to specific educational and vocational qualifications—often obtained through dual vocational training systems, schools, or universities.

Poland, by contrast, **has a largely liberalised labour market**, where only about 17% of employment contracts fall under collective agreements⁶. While Poland also offers a range of regulated educational programmes, mostly through different schools, the dual training system (combining practical, on-the-job training with school-based learning) plays a much smaller role compared to Austria and Germany. Moreover, formal qualifications are generally less crucial for entering or progressing within the Polish job market.

These regulatory differences are also reflected in the institutional landscape of employment services. **In Austria and Germany, public labour market institutions**—Austria's Public

⁴ See <https://www.bmaw.gv.at/Themen/Arbeitsrecht/Entlohnung/Mindestlohn-in-OE.html#:~:text=Insgesamt%20gibt%20es%20in%20%C3%96sterreich,sind%20%C3%B6sterreichweit%20durch%20Kollektivvertr%C3%A4ge%20abgesichert>.

⁵ See <https://www.destatis.de/DE/Themen/Arbeit/Arbeitsmarkt/Qualitaet-Arbeit/Dimension-5/tarifbindung-arbeitnehmer.html>.

⁶ Mesch, Michael, 2020. Kollektivverträge in 24 europäischen Ländern 2000 – 2017. Ursachen und Veränderungen des Deckungsgrads. In: *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* 46/3, 409-453., p. 412.

Employment Service (AMS), and in Germany, the Federal Employment Agency and local Jobcenters—**play a central role** in job placement, training, employer support, and administering unemployment benefits. Private recruitment agencies typically serve corporate clients seeking managerial or skilled personnel and are not involved in refugee integration efforts. **In Poland, informal intermediaries, private recruitment agencies, foundations, and Ukrainian diaspora organizations are more actively engaged** in helping refugees find employment.

Another key difference lies in unemployment benefits - in Poland, support for unemployed persons is considerably lower than in Austria and Germany, creating more immediate financial pressure for displaced persons to find work.

Social welfare support

Access to social support systems for displaced Ukrainians varies significantly across Germany, Poland, and Austria.

In **Germany**, refugees were integrated into the regular welfare system as early as summer 2022. Since then, they have been legally treated on par with German citizens in terms of social entitlements. This includes access to *Bürgergeld*, Germany's basic income support scheme, along with all associated benefits and support services. Access to *Bürgergeld* comes with the **obligation to register with Jobcenters**, which function similarly to Austria's regional Public Employment Service (AMS) offices.

In **Poland**, refugees were also granted equal status with Polish citizens under social law from the outset. A special law on assistance to Ukrainian refugees provided financial incentives to individual households hosting refugees (40 PLN/day, ~8 EUR) and a one-time start-up allowance of 300 PLN (~68 EUR) to each refugee. In addition, families received Poland's standard child benefit of around 500 PLN per child. However, both the **household support and the start-up allowance were discontinued as of July 1, 2024**. Refugees are now expected to become economically self-reliant through employment. Nonetheless, they remain eligible for child benefits (if the child attends a Polish school) and other social benefits under the same conditions as Polish nationals.

In **Austria**, Ukrainian refugees were not integrated into the general social welfare system. Instead, they were placed in **Basic Welfare Support** (*Grundversorgung*)—a scheme originally designed for the temporary support of asylum seekers. This support is considerably lower than standard social assistance and consists mainly of food and housing allowances, amounting to around **€ 425.- per person**. While additional earnings are allowed, they are deducted from the support amount and can quickly lead to a complete loss of benefits. For those living in social housing, gaining employment may lead to losing their accommodation within a month, creating an "**inactivity trap**" that discourages labour market entry. Only in **Vienna** and **Upper Austria** are recipients required to register and to cooperate with the public employment service (AMS).

Integration measures

In **Germany** and **Austria**, integration efforts for Ukrainian refugees have largely followed a "**Language First**" approach. The core idea is that acquiring sufficient language skills should precede labour market entry. In Germany, the key instrument is the **General Integration Course**, which includes 600 hours of language instruction and 100 hours of orientation. This course, along with a broad range of training and upskilling programmes, is available to all Ukrainian refugees.

To avoid **underqualified work**, German Jobcenters were instructed to wait until a **qualification-appropriate** placement is possible before referring refugees to jobs. In practice, this often requires German proficiency at the **B1+ or B2 level**. However, this language-first approach has come under growing scrutiny in recent years. In 2023, Germany launched the "**Jobturbo**" programme, which targets all refugee groups. It promotes **early job placement**, even before advanced language skills are acquired, and combines this with **tailored, job-specific language courses**. The programme includes **intensive support for both employers and jobseekers**. Placements are now allowed based on potential, not just formal qualifications. This means refugees may take up employment below their qualification level if there are **genuine opportunities for upward mobility** into roles that align with their skills.

In **Austria**, the Austrian Integration Fund (ÖIF) offers a wide range of **German language courses** for displaced Ukrainians. They also have access to "**value and orientation courses**", which are mandatory for recognized asylum seekers. Most language courses lead up to **B1**

level, required for fulfilling Module 2 of the Integration Agreement⁷. Some providers also offer B2 courses, including free digital options through the ÖIF.

In both countries, the majority of integration measures—language training, counselling, support, and retraining—are implemented by **established public and civil society actors** such as welfare organisations and labour market programmes. These institutions adapted existing services for Ukrainian refugees, often by hiring **Ukrainian- or Russian-speaking staff** and offering courses in those languages. In line with a **mainstreaming approach**, only a few projects were developed specifically for Ukrainian refugees.

In contrast, **Poland** has adopted a "**Work First**" approach. Because **social benefits are limited** and often fail to cover basic living costs, refugees are under greater pressure to enter the labour market quickly—even in jobs that **do not match their qualifications**. However, the employment of Ukrainians in Poland is facilitated by a long history of labour migration between the two countries, the existence of a large and well-established Ukrainian diaspora and the **linguistic proximity between Ukrainian and Polish**, which allows many to work with only limited Polish language skills.

As a result, **pre-employment language courses are rare** in Poland. Instead, refugees are expected to **learn on the job**, with language training taking place alongside employment. Moreover, **language proficiency requirements**—even in regulated professions such as **healthcare and public service**—have been significantly **lowered**. This makes **Polish language skills considerably less critical** for labour market participation than German skills are in Austria or Germany.

In Poland, much of the **integration support is delivered at the local level**, primarily by **NGOs**—especially Ukrainian diaspora organisations— and **private companies**. Funding has largely come from a publicly funded programme launched shortly before the war to support the activation of foreign workforce in Poland.

⁷ The „Integration Agreement” is a legally mandatory instrument designed to promote the integration of third-country nationals in Austria. It requires individuals to demonstrate German language proficiency and basic knowledge of the Austrian society within a given timeframe. Beneficiaries of temporary protection are exempt from this requirement.

Recognition of qualifications

The recognition of educational and professional qualifications acquired in Ukraine is a **complex and burdensome process** in all three countries studied—**Germany, Austria, and Poland**. One major challenge is that the **Ukrainian education system differs significantly** from those in EU member states, and many training programmes available in Ukraine have **no direct equivalents** in these countries.

Recognition procedures in all three countries are primarily **based on the comparison of curriculum**, offering **limited pathways to acknowledge skills and competencies** acquired through work experience or informal learning outside regulated education systems.

Additionally, in Ukraine, many individuals do not work in the field in which they obtained their formal qualifications. This mismatch makes it particularly difficult for them to navigate systems that are highly **certificate-oriented**, as recognition often depends more on the original field of study than on actual professional experience.

The responsibility for recognition is **fragmented across multiple agencies and administrative levels**, depending on the type and level of qualification. Mechanisms for **translating qualifications across educational levels**—such as applying a university diploma toward a vocational qualification—are limited. Most recognition processes rely on **individual case assessments**, with **limited use of list-based or pre-approved equivalency systems**. Procedures are often **bureaucratic, costly, and conducted exclusively in the national language**, further limiting accessibility.

As a result, many displaced individuals face **deskilling**—ending up in jobs far below their qualification level. This issue is increasingly the subject of public debate in both Germany and Austria, particularly as it affects not only refugees but also efforts to attract **highly skilled workers** from abroad.

Despite the **European Commission's recommendation** to treat Ukrainian qualifications as equivalent to those of EU member states, **neither Austria nor Germany has implemented this**. Instead, efforts have focused on **preparing refugees for the complex recognition procedures** and providing **counselling services**. Experts often argue that a **short local training programme** in a related field—even if at a lower level than the original qualification—may be a more **practical and effective pathway** than full recognition.

In **Poland**, recognition procedures are similarly complex. However, qualifications play a **less decisive role in labour market access** compared to Austria and Germany. Moreover, Poland has taken **pragmatic steps** to lower barriers by **recognising many Ukrainian qualifications**—including in **education and healthcare**—and **significantly reducing language requirements**. This has removed or reduced critical obstacles to labour market entry. In summary, two **distinct integration paradigms** emerge:

- **Germany and Austria** focus on equipping refugees to **overcome recognition and language hurdles** before entering the labour market.
- **Poland** focuses on **recognising Ukrainian qualifications** as equivalent and **reducing linguistic requirements**, thereby **lowering entry barriers** and enabling faster employment—even without strong Polish language skills.

While these differences help explain Poland’s higher labour market participation rates, Polish experts still view the **high level of underemployment** among Ukrainian refugees as a **major unresolved challenge**.

A gender lens

Unlike earlier refugee movements—such as those starting in 2015—the current displacement from Ukraine is **female-dominated**. Many women fled the country with their children and found themselves in the role of **single caregivers**, often unintentionally.

In Ukraine, **full-time employment for women was common**, largely due to the widespread availability of **full-day childcare**. However, in **Germany and Austria**, the **limited availability of full-time childcare** and the prevalence of **part-time employment models** for women present new and significant barriers. As a result, many displaced women are **unable to take full-time jobs**, and **part-time wages** are often **insufficient to cover housing costs**, especially in the private rental market—an issue that further hinders labour market integration.

The **professional backgrounds** of displaced Ukrainian women are diverse. Many held positions in **technical** or **managerial roles**, as well as in **education, healthcare, and caregiving** sectors. Especially in the latter fields, **communication skills** are crucial, requiring both formal qualifications and **high levels of language proficiency**. These are often seen as “**female-**

typical professions, where language plays a central role in daily work with clients and colleagues.

This creates a particular challenge for labour market entry: roles in **healthcare, education, and administration** tend to **require higher language skills** than jobs in **construction, manufacturing, or technical services**—fields with a higher proportion of men. For instance, the **minimum German language requirement** in healthcare is typically **B1 or B2**, while teaching and childcare roles (e.g. kindergarten teachers) require both **advanced language proficiency** and **formal credentials**.

Because these professions also involve **complex qualification recognition procedures**, women often face **longer integration timelines** than men. This is frequently exacerbated by a **shortage of occupation-specific language courses**. In practice, this means that **many women are blocked from accessing skilled employment**, and instead become **trapped in lower-skilled jobs**, despite their qualifications and experience.

These **gender-specific barriers** to integration must be **systematically addressed** in all three countries through **targeted policies and support measures**.

Recommendations

Legal framework for residence status

By deciding to grant **temporary protection status** with the possibility of annual renewal, the **European Union** created a residence system explicitly designed for **short-term stay**. However, over time it turned out that a large proportion of displaced Ukrainians **intend to stay in host countries long-term**. This **temporary status** often acts as a **barrier for employers**, who may be hesitant to hire individuals without long-term residence rights.

In **Austria**, legislation has opened a pathway into the regular residence system via the "**Red-White-Red Card Plus**". This transition option should be further developed to allow displaced individuals the opportunity for a **long-term residence permit** and the potential for **permanent settlement**.

- Access to the **Red-White-Red Card Plus** is tied to **strict requirements**, including a minimum duration of employment and a minimum income threshold. **Many Ukrainian refugees cannot meet these criteria**, particularly those in part-time jobs. To broaden access, the eligibility conditions—especially the required income threshold and the minimum employment period—should be relaxed.
- **Not all displaced individuals are currently able to enter the labour market** due to their age, health condition, or ongoing education or training. For these groups, there should be a **pathway to a long-term humanitarian residence**.

Transition to the regular social welfare system

In Austria, the **Basic Welfare Support scheme** (*Grundversorgung*)—originally designed for short-term stays during asylum procedures—has been used since the start of the war as the main **social support system for displaced persons**. Unlike many EU countries, that have **integrated refugees into their regular welfare systems**, in Austria, displaced persons are still within the Basic Welfare Support system, which has created an **“inactivity trap”**.

Under the current system, any additional earnings are quickly **deducted** from the support payments and may also **lead to loss of accommodation**, discouraging employment. Moreover, outside **Vienna and Upper Austria**, recipients of Basic Welfare Support are **not required to register with the Public Employment Service (AMS)** or to cooperate with it. This creates a **structural barrier** to accessing job placement, counselling, training, and upskilling opportunities. As a result, refugees may remain in a state of **passive waiting**, unable or unmotivated to pursue labour market integration—a situation described as the **“waiting dilemma.”**

To overcome this dilemma, **displaced persons with temporary protection status should be transferred into the regular social assistance system**. This would offer several advantages:

- **Mandatory engagement with the AMS**, ensuring quicker access to job placement, guidance, and training opportunities
- **Equal treatment** with other groups who rely on public support, leading to
 - **Higher benefit rates**, improving housing options and financial stability;
 - **Better access to individual support services**, such as school support for children or initial housing support;
 - **Duty-based incentives to pursue mid-term labour market integration** and to exit the “waiting dilemma.”
- However, one important risk must be considered: Access to regular social assistance includes the duty to engage in jobs below one’s qualification level, which may result in dequalification. Therefore, a **qualification-adequate** placement should remain the primary goal. If individuals take jobs below their level of qualification, they should be offered realistic opportunities for development toward employment matching their training, thus realising a **potential-based approach** to job placement.

Reforming the system for the recognition of foreign qualifications

The recognition of qualifications acquired abroad remains a **major barrier to labour market integration**, often leading to **underemployment and dequalified employment**. To facilitate **earlier and qualification-appropriate employment**, the following reforms are recommended:

- Establish a **central recognition authority** responsible for handling recognition procedures across all types of qualifications.
- Ensure **transparency** in recognition processes, including the publication of anonymised recognition assessments to create clarity and comparability.
- Expand **list-based systems** and comparative frameworks that can complement or partially replace individual case-by-case assessments.
- Introduce **modular recognition** procedures, allowing for partial recognition of qualifications.
- Develop **bridging pathways between educational formats**, e.g. recognizing university-level education toward a vocational qualification.
- Increase the use of **portfolio-based assessments** to complement or replace traditional comparisons of curricula and certificates.

- Institutionalise and standardise **skills assessments ("competence checks")** to strengthen their signalling value for employers.
- Enable skills validation through **internships in relevant companies** and increase **financial and logistical support for participating firms**.
- **Detach language assessments from the recognition procedures** by allowing recognition processes to be conducted in English. The recognition would only become professionally valid after proof of the required German language level (as defined by the CEFR) is provided.
- Allow for **employment under supervision** or in assistant roles—potentially using English as a bridging language—in professions with legally required language standards, until those standards are met.
- Provide **individualised counselling and support** throughout the labour market integration process, with a focus on recognising foreign qualifications and acquiring job-specific language skills. This should be done through a **case management model**, where a dedicated advisor supports the individual throughout the process, managing the coordination between employers, training providers, and recognition bodies.

Better alignment of language training with labour market entry

Austria's approach to language acquisition largely follows the **"language first" principle**, meaning that employment typically begins only after refugees have spent a significant amount of time in the country attending language courses. While this model supports **long-term and qualification-appropriate integration**, it also results in **extended periods of labour market inactivity**. Employers often require **at least B1+ or B2-level German**, making early access to jobs difficult.

In practice, once a **basic language level** (A2+ or B1) is achieved, **specialised professional language** becomes more important than further general language instruction. To build this proficiency, **extended internships (minimum 6 months)** in relevant workplaces, alongside **job-related language training**, are essential.

Using **English as a bridging language** can also ease workplace integration. However, **few Austrian companies operate in English**, and many use **local dialects** as the de facto workplace language—posing additional challenges for newcomers learning standard German.

In several **regulated professions**, especially in the **education and healthcare sectors**, **legal language requirements** are set at **C1-level**. Reaching this near-native proficiency often takes **several years**, even for those with strong language skills.

Larger companies have so far been more likely to hire displaced Ukrainians. In contrast, **small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs)** often lack the awareness, capacity, or resources to effectively onboard refugee employees. **Targeted support measures** are needed to engage and assist these businesses.

To foster early and qualification-related labour market integration, **language learning and employment should no longer be treated as separate priorities**, but rather as **two dimensions of a single, integrated approach**. To support this paradigm shift, the following measures are recommended:

- **Better alignment between language courses and labour market needs**, including more **job-specific language training** for individuals with sufficient knowledge of German. Whenever possible, language training should be **organised in coordination with the employer** and delivered **within the company**.
- **Development and expansion of longer internships**, coupled with concurrent language instruction in the workplace.
- Where needed, **occupation-relevant dialect courses** should be offered, particularly in regions where everyday and workplace communication heavily relies on local dialects.
- **English should be used as a bridging language** for job entry, acquisition of occupational knowledge, and evaluation of foreign qualifications. To support this move, a **database of companies using English as a second working language** should be established.
- **Review legally required language proficiency levels**, particularly in education and healthcare professions, to assess their appropriateness and flexibility.
- **Mobilise and support SMEs**, including wage subsidies for hiring displaced persons and refugees, tied to mandatory participation in job-specific language courses.

Strengthening cooperation with Ukrainian actors in counselling and education

The Austrian public labour market administration follows the principle of mainstreaming offering its services to all customers within the same institutional framework. Specific labour market counselling for migrants is offered by the state-funded NGO “Beratungszentrum für MigrantInnen” (“Advice Center for Migrants”), which serves all migrants irrespective of their origin. Most labour market training and counselling initiatives for displaced Ukrainians in Austria are also implemented within **existing programmes for the labour market integration for migrants**. These often involve hiring **qualified refugees as counsellors**, developing **materials in Ukrainian or Russian**, and engaging **Ukrainians who have lived in Austria longer** as information providers or mentors.

In contrast to **Poland**, where **Ukrainian self-organisations** play a **central role** in refugee labour market integration, their involvement in Austria remains **limited**. Strengthening cooperation with these community-based organisations could bring several advantages:

- **Better outreach to highly qualified individuals**, who may otherwise remain disconnected from support systems.
- **Reducing distrust or distance** between displaced persons and public labour market or integration institutions.
- **Mobilising Ukrainian employees already working in companies** to help create internship or job opportunities for newly arrived peers (“peer-to-peer activation”).
- **Enhancing communication within the Ukrainian diaspora** about the Austrian educational system, which may be unfamiliar or misunderstood.

Ultimately, **more regular and structured cooperation** between Austria’s Public Employment Service (AMS), other integration institutions, and Ukrainian self-organisations could help **tailor integration efforts more effectively** to the actual needs and expectations of displaced Ukrainians.

Other supportive measures

Access to full-day, out-of-home childcare and affordable, stable housing are key prerequisites for successful labour market participation. The **lack of childcare options often forces refugee**

women to part-time employment, a typical labour market entry for single mothers with caregiving responsibilities. However, **part-time income is often insufficient** to cover the upfront costs of securing private rental housing. In addition, banks generally require three to six months of employment before approving loans, making independent housing even harder to attain.

For refugees in rural areas, **mobility** poses an additional challenge—particularly when job sites are located beyond the operating hours of public transport.

To support the labour market integration of displaced Ukrainian women, additional measures in the areas of childcare and housing are needed:

Improved access to full day childcare

- Ensure that women working part-time are also granted access to full-day kindergarten places, allowing them to transition to full-time employment over time.
- For access to childcare, a declared intention to seek employment should suffice. Requiring proof of employment often creates a barrier, as employers are reluctant to hire single parents without confirmed childcare.

Ensuring adequate housing support

- Expand and promote existing support programmes for securing initial housing, particularly for individuals whose part-time earnings are too low to afford rental deposits or moving costs.
- Refugees living in state-provided accommodation should be allowed to remain in their housing for at least six months after starting employment, to give them sufficient time to find a permanent residence without added pressure.

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