

Contextual Challenges and solutions analysis

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SIMPLE: Social Innovation Models to Promote Learning
and Employability

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Contents

Executive summary	4
1. Introduction	6
1.1 Purpose and scope	6
1.2 The reason for a secondary-source-based needs assessment.....	7
1.3 Target groups and intersectional approach.....	7
1.4 Social innovation as a framework for inclusion	8
1.5 Contribution to the European knowledge base	8
2. Needs Assessment	9
2.1 Scale and dynamics of displacement	9
2.2 Demographic and family composition	9
2.3 Education and qualifications	10
2.4 The labour market and its barriers.....	11
2.5 Psychosocial issues, family relations and social integration.....	11
3. Contextual analysis.....	13
3.1 Economic context and labour market	13
3.2 Policy frameworks for integration	13
3.3 Education, training and skills	14
3.4 Employers and the private sector.....	15
3.5 Institutional ecosystems	16
3.6 Social innovation ecosystems.....	16
4. Employability and skills	17
4.1 Labour market entry patterns	17
4.2 Skills and education	18
4.3 Entrepreneurship and self-employment as inclusion pathways	19

4.4 Lifelong Learning and digital skills.....	20
4.5 Skills for resilience and adaptability	21
4.6 Outlook.....	21
5. Conclusions and policy implications	22
5.1 Overview.....	22
5.2 Structural gaps	22
5.3 Lessons from previous social innovation practices	23
5.4 Policy implications.....	24
5.5 Sustainable and inclusive integration models.....	25
References	26
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS CONTRIBUTORS	28

Executive summary

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 had many European countries rallying to support the waves of refugees arriving from the attacked territories. Efforts in the first months have focused at the provision of services responding to the immediate needs: housing and boarding, basic health and social services.

As time has passed, it became more and more evident that the refugees must find not just short-term but longer-term solutions and re-organise and re-interpret their lives in host countries. Nevertheless the integration of Ukrainian refugees into European the host societies remains a key social and economic challenge. The **SIMPLE project** addresses this by identifying and scaling social innovation practices that enhance **employability and entrepreneurship** among displaced Ukrainians, with also a focus at **women and older adults**. This report provides the analytical foundation for that work through a secondary-data-based **needs assessment, contextual analysis, and skills and employability review**.

Context and background

More than five million Ukrainians have sought protection in the EU since 2022. Most of them women, children, and older people. The **Temporary Protection Directive** granted access to residence, work, and social services, but national differences in implementation leave integration pathways fragmented. If we compare with previous recent migration waves, refugees from Ukraine arrive with a comparatively **high educational levels and professional experience**. At the same time they also face language barriers and other factors – like limited childcare access and slow qualification recognition – slow down their integration process.

Across Europe, different social innovation initiatives are in piloting or in implementation to bridge these gaps by connecting education, training, and employment support. But many remain localised and short-term, highlighting the need for better **coordination and sustainability**.

Needs assessment

Recent data (IOM 2023; Eurofound 2024) confirmed that **employment support** is the top priority for Ukrainian refugees. While most possess secondary or tertiary qualifications, many work below their skill level. Women face additional obstacles from care duties, language learning, and limited childcare. Older adults encounter digital and age-related barriers to retraining. Family stability and psychosocial wellbeing also affect employability: those with secure housing and community ties

show higher engagement in education and work. The integration measures must therefore combine all the economic, social, and mental-health dimensions.

Contextual analysis

One of the most important contextual challenge is the inefficient framework for integration support and services. Integration frameworks differ widely across Europe. While national authorities, municipalities, and NGOs all provide support, cooperation remains weak, resulting in **fragmented service delivery**. There are new and innovative elements in the **social innovation ecosystems**—like municipal innovation hubs and digital mentoring platforms—which demonstrate that linking existing actors and services can be more effective than creating new structures. Despite having such tools, the main systemic gap is **sustainability**. Many promising models disappear after project funding ends and services, solutions are discontinued.

Employability and skills

Ukrainian refugees demonstrate strong willingness to work and upskill. To support that, solutions would require faster and more efficient **qualification recognition**, **language-plus-vocation training**, and **digital competence development** are key to closing the employment gap. Entrepreneurship is another pathway: Ukrainian women show high potential for self-employment when supported through mentoring, micro-finance, and business networks. Furthermore, as a third avenue for successful integration into the economic ecosystem, there is a strong potential for women from Ukraine to take part in the business ecosystem as startappers, with business ideas that can serve a larger community or clientele than a microenterprise.

But in order to achieve that, policies must also ensure access to childcare and promote family-friendly workplaces to enable women's full participation. The building of **transversal competences** (such as communication, adaptability, and resilience) supports long-term inclusion and labour-market advancement.

Policy and practice implications

Three strategic priorities emerge:

- **Activate human capital** through targeted upskilling and faster recognition of prior learning.
- **Foster ecosystem cooperation** among public, private, academic, and civil-society actors.
- **Ensure sustainability** by integrating successful models into mainstream policies and budgets.

- A gender-responsive approach—linking employability with childcare, mentoring, and financial literacy—is essential for effective outcomes.

Conclusions

For SIMPLE project, this means focusing on solutions and initiatives that are **transferable, small-scale, network-based/ecosystem-based**. Ideally, these strengthen employability while build social cohesion. The Ukrainian crisis has transformed Europe into a **laboratory of social innovation**, with several initiatives being tested currently or having been finalised recently. This library, repository of ideas can serve as a basis of refinement, adaptation and take -up in various new context, given if policy coherence, adequate financing, and durable cooperation is among stakeholders is achieved.

1. Introduction

1.1 Purpose and scope

The displacement of Ukrainians following Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022 has generated the largest forced migration crisis in Europe since the Second World War. According to UNHCR (2024), more than 6 million refugees from Ukraine have been recorded across Europe, with the majority residing in EU Member States such as Poland, Germany, the Czech Republic, Italy, and Spain. This unprecedented influx has prompted the need for rapid, coordinated responses to ensure not only humanitarian protection but also social and economic inclusion. Within this context, the SIMPLE project positions itself as a transnational initiative dedicated to fostering the **employability and social innovation capacity** of Ukrainian refugees—particularly **women** and **older adults**—through targeted education, skills development, and multi-stakeholder cooperation.

The SIMPLE project must take into account the broader European policy frameworks. The **Temporary Protection Directive (2001/55/EC)**, the **EU Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion (2021–2027)**, and the **European Pillar of Social Rights** all focus and emphasize on access to labour markets and education in terms of key factors of integration. But, despite this favourable institutional context, Ukrainian refugees—especially those with caregiving responsibilities or older workers with limited digital skills—face significant barriers to entering or re-entering the workforce.



The SIMPLE project aims to address these barriers with a set of evidence-based and transferable **social innovation models** that link training, mentoring, and stakeholder collaboration in the local ecosystems but also across Europe.

1.2 The reason for a secondary-source-based needs assessment

SIMPLE's research design builds on **secondary data** in order to establish a contextual foundation for action. There is an available pool of recent analytical work by reputable organisations such as the International Organization for Migration (IOM), Eurofound, the OECD, and the European Commission. Conducting a full-scale primary survey across countries at this stage would be time- and resource-intensive, while existing data already offer insights for identifying patterns, vulnerabilities, and best practices. This does not mean that data is sufficiently available in all domains, aspects of the Ukrainian migrant/refugee community's needs, and it is important to highlight that data owners and policy stakeholders should focus more on systematic data collection in order to better achieve evidence-based policy making in the field. More detailed information about special needs, intersectionality, existing network capital could offer a way to better and more fine-tuned initiatives being designed.

Nevertheless, the SIMPLE project aims to carry out work on transferability of initiatives, therefore a local primary survey and data collection would not provide in itself the sufficient evidence needed. Using secondary sources helps the consortium to **pool existing knowledge** generated by numerous EU-funded projects which have already explored pathways to refugee employability and social innovation in local contexts. By systematically reviewing and synthesising this material, SIMPLE's needs assessment aims not only to describe the present situation but also to identify **transferable insights** relevant to social-innovation policy and practice.

1.3 Target groups and intersectional approach

The SIMPLE project takes an **intersectional approach**, acknowledging that Ukrainian refugees are not a homogeneous group. It is true that women make up the majority of adults displaced under the Temporary Protection regime (estimated at around 70% of working-age Ukrainians in the EU (Eurostat, 2024)) but their experiences vary widely. The women who arrive with young children face significant constraints. Many arrive with elderly parents for whom they care for. These refugees depend on the level of available childcare and the flexibility of the labour-market in terms of part time, telework and other flexible solutions. The older women often encounter digital exclusion and age-related hiring biases. For those individuals who are well educated, their high educational qualifications may remain unrecognised in host countries, leading to underemployment and skills waste (OECD, 2023).

SIMPLE project's emphasis on **employability, entrepreneurship, and education** requires addressing these layered forms of vulnerability. The project sees and understands employability not solely as access to jobs but as a **capability-building process** that includes language acquisition, digital literacy, psychosocial readiness, and social-network formation. This inclusive understanding aligns with the theories of **social innovation** that highlight participation, co-creation, and stakeholder cooperation as drivers of sustainable inclusion (Moulaert et al., 2013).

1.4 Social innovation as a framework for inclusion

Social innovation—defined as the development and scaling of new ideas, services, and relationships that address social needs that are present but not served—offers a powerful conceptual and operational lens for refugee integration. Unlike traditional service delivery, social innovation relies on **collaborative, cross-sectoral action** that mobilises the strengths of the public, private, academic, and civil-society sectors—the so-called **quadruple-helix model** (Carayannis and Campbell, 2021).

In the context of Ukrainian displacement, such models are increasingly recognised as essential to overcoming fragmentation in service provision. IOM (2020) has emphasized that many initiatives focusing on integration of migrants remain fragile due to the fact that they lack long-term coordination among stakeholders and do not embed learning mechanisms. SIMPLE aims not only to improve individual employability and work with individual refugees but also to **strengthen the local innovation ecosystems** and institutional cooperation.

1.5 Contribution to the European knowledge base

The needs assessment and contextual analysis provided here aims to emphasize those factors that are currently present and hinder the successful integration of Ukrainian migrants and refugees, most importantly, women, into the host societies and their economic ecosystems. The document that follows will therefore:

- Assess the **needs and challenges** of Ukrainian refugees through the latest evidence (Chapter 2);
- Map the **socio-economic and institutional environments** shaping integration opportunities (Chapter 3); and
- Define a **skills and employability framework** guiding future capacity-building and stakeholder collaboration (Chapter 4).

2. Needs Assessment

2.1 Scale and dynamics of displacement

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 produced the most extensive refugee movement in Europe since 1945. By early 2025, **6.2 million refugees** from Ukraine were registered across Europe, and a further **3.6 million people** remained internally displaced (UNHCR, 2025). The majority reside in **Poland (apx 1.5 million)**, **Germany (ax. 1 million)**, **Czech Republic (apx. 0.4 million)**, **Italy**, and **Spain**, although virtually all EU Member States have granted protection under the Temporary Protection Directive (Eurostat, 2024).

This activation, unprecedented in scope, provided an immediate legal basis for residence, labour-market access, and basic services. but administrative and linguistic differences among national systems have created **uneven access to rights**, especially in employment and education (OECD, 2023).

The **demographic structure** of this displacement differs sharply from previous migration flows. Around **70 percent of working-age adults are women**, many travelling with children or elderly dependents (UN Women, 2024). Men of military age largely remained in Ukraine, resulting in a predominantly female-headed refugee population. This gender composition makes this migration wave rather different from previous recent ones and calls for tailored approaches in terms of economic integration and social support.

2.2 Demographic and family composition

The Ukrainian refugee population is characterised by a **high proportion of families** and a relatively small share of single adults. IOM's (2024) "Labour Market Integration of Ukrainian Refugees" survey reported that **68 percent of female respondents** were accompanied by children, while **22 percent** also cared for another dependent relative. Roughly **one in five households** includes three generations, with grandparents providing informal childcare.

Children represent about **one-third** of all registered beneficiaries of temporary protection (Eurostat, 2024). Their integration into the local education systems has progressed unevenly: Poland and Czechia report enrolment rates above 80 percent in compulsory education, while southern countries record lower participation due to language barriers and limited capacity (UNICEF, 2024). For parents—predominantly the mothers—the availability of childcare directly conditions labour-

market participation. Many rely on informal arrangements or part-time work to balance care responsibilities.

Older adults, accounting for roughly 10–12 % of arrivals, frequently join family members but remain economically inactive. Health limitations, the language barriers, and the limited recognition of pension rights restrict their participation in training or employment schemes (Eurofound, 2024).

2.3 Education and qualifications

Across multiple datasets, Ukrainian refugees exhibit an **exceptionally high educational attainment** compared with other displaced groups. IOM (2023) found that **over 60 percent** of adult refugees held tertiary qualifications, and an additional **25 percent** had completed secondary or vocational education. Women were particularly over-represented in areas like education, healthcare, and public administration.

Despite this, qualification recognition remains limited. Procedures for validating diplomas differ by country and often require certified translations, notarised copies, and supplementary exams. As of 2024, fewer than **20 percent** of Ukrainian professionals had obtained formal recognition enabling them to resume work in regulated sectors (European Commission, 2024). Many therefore accept **jobs that are much below their skill level**, contributing to occupational downgrading and income instability.

Language skills remains one of the strongest predictors of labour market success (Gathmann and Keller, IZA 13149). The Ukrainian case shows mixed outcomes. While some of the host countries have fast-tracked language access (e.g. Germany, Lithuania), others lag in offering tailored, intensive programmes. Important to note that this also depends on potential existing knowledge of the language (such as German language often being taught in the Ukrainian education system) or the similarity of languages (e.g. Polish and Ukrainian) compared to non-Slavic language groups.

Comparative studies (e.g., Dustmann and Glitz, IZA DP 11331) show **that without bridging programmes, high-skilled refugee women are at serious risk of occupational downgrading**. A 2024 OECD survey indicated that only 15 per cent of Ukrainians in the EU reported advanced knowledge of the host language, while nearly 40 per cent had attended some form of language training. Mostly older adults and inhabitants of rural areas lag behind.

Digital literacy shows a similar divide: while younger refugees often have high ICT competence, older generations—particularly women over 50—report limited digital confidence, constraining participation in online learning or job searches (IAB, 2024).

2.4 The labour market and its barriers

Labour market access has been formally granted to nearly all Ukrainian refugees under temporary protection. By late 2024, around 55 % of working-age Ukrainians in the EU were employed or seeking employment (Eurostat, 2024). The participation rate is remarkable compared with previous refugee cohorts; however, the **quality of employment** remains a central concern.

Most jobs are concentrated in **low-wage service sectors**—hospitality, cleaning, logistics, and caregiving. Women predominate in personal-service and care roles, even when possessing university degrees. The principal barriers include:

- **Language deficits** preventing entry to skilled occupations.
- **Delayed credential recognition** and inconsistent fast-track systems.
- **Limited childcare and transport options**, especially outside major cities.
- **Information asymmetry**—lack of knowledge about training, vacancies, and entrepreneurship support.
- **Employer uncertainty** about refugees' legal status and work-permit duration.

Underemployment contributes to reduced income security. In Germany, median monthly earnings of Ukrainian employees in 2024 were 35% below the national average (IAB, 2024). Many supplement income by taking temporary or part-time jobs while pursuing language or requalification courses.

Entrepreneurship shows early potential: Poland, Lithuania, and Czechia have registered thousands of small businesses launched by Ukrainians, predominantly women, in retail, beauty, and digital services (OECD, 2024). But these ventures often face credit constraints and lack of tailored mentoring.

2.5 Psychosocial issues, family relations and social integration

Having to fled a home country, witnessing aggression and trauma is placing an enormous psychological pressure on the refugees. UN Women and UNHCR (2023) conducted surveys that reveal that over 60 % of the respondents experienced anxiety or stress related to various factors, most importantly separation from their family, financial insecurity, and the uncertainty of ever returning home – and what

that home will be like. The highest incidence of depressive symptoms are measured at **single mothers** and **elderly refugees**.

The host countries differ widely in terms of access to psychosocial support. As for Poland and Germany, expanded municipal counselling programmes are in place but many southern and eastern regions depend on **short-term NGO projects**. In the Ukrainian communities often there is a significant cultural stigma around mental-health services which further reduces uptake.

A key factor influencing integration outcomes is **the presence of an existing Ukrainian diaspora in many EU countries**, particularly in the CEE (Central and Eastern Europe). In countries like Poland, Italy, the Czech Republic, and Germany, significant pre-war Ukrainian communities have been established and they have provided critical support structures for newcomers. These include informal job referrals, language mediation, housing assistance, and emotional support. **The diaspora often acts as a bridge between formal institutions and refugee women**, easing their navigation of unfamiliar bureaucratic and labour systems.

But it is not enough to be integrated into the diaspora to be successful in the host country's socioeconomic ecosystem. Community integration remains uneven. While Ukrainians generally report positive public attitudes, as there is a tangible support across the host countries, the barriers of language may limit deeper interaction with the host communities.

3. Contextual analysis

3.1 Economic context and labour market

The refugees and migrants from Ukraine have arrived into a European economic landscape that was far from ideal. This period coincided with a volatile macroeconomic period marked by post-pandemic recovery, energy-market disruptions, and inflationary pressure across Europe. In 2023–2024, EU GDP growth slowed to 1.4 %, while inflation remained above 5 % in several Member States (Eurostat, 2024). On the other hand, in theory, there is a favourable condition for labor market integration: there were (and are) labour shortages in healthcare, education, construction, and hospitality—sectors that overlap significantly with the skill profiles of many Ukrainian refugees (OECD, 2024).

Therefore while the EU labour market had a genuine need for workers; the structural mismatches and institutional inertia limited the speed and quality of refugee employment. Eastern EU countries such as Poland, Czechia, the Baltic States absorbed labour primarily in **low- to medium-skilled sectors**, while Western and Southern European economies offered greater diversity but required advanced language proficiency and formal recognition of qualifications (IOM, 2024).

From an economic perspective, the arrival of millions of refugees acted as both a **labour-supply shock** and a **consumption stimulus**. The European Commission (2024) estimates that Ukrainian refugees contributed between 0.2–0.4 % to GDP growth in 2023 through labour-market participation and domestic demand.

3.2 Policy frameworks for integration

At the European level, the activation of the Temporary Protection Directive (TPD) in March 2022 provided an immediate legal umbrella ensuring residence, education, and labour access. The Directive represents a milestone in EU migration governance, demonstrating unprecedented unity and solidarity. But its implementation remains decentralised, leaving discretion to Member States regarding specific integration measures.

The EU Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion 2021–2027 complements the TPD by emphasising equal access to employment, education, healthcare, and housing. It promotes partnerships among local authorities, civil society, and employers—principles central to the SIMPLE project’s logic model. The European Pillar of Social

Rights Action Plan (2021) further reinforces social inclusion as a pillar of sustainable growth, while the Council Recommendation on the Recognition of Qualifications for Refugees (2023) seeks to streamline administrative procedures.

At a strategic level, these frameworks create a supportive, though non-binding, environment for Member States. The main gap lies in the coordination of funding streams—with separate mechanisms under AMIF, ESF+, and Interreg often overlapping or duplicating efforts. As a result, while many innovative pilot projects exist, scaling and institutionalisation remain weak.

On national and local levels, implementation diverges widely. Poland prioritised rapid labour-market entry, allowing refugees to work immediately upon registration. However, long-term integration measures—such as language courses or professional requalification—remain underdeveloped. Germany integrated Ukrainian refugees into its established asylum-support structures, ensuring access to vocational training and employment agencies but requiring bureaucratic steps for benefit eligibility. Italy and Spain pursued decentralised models involving regional governments and NGOs, leading to varying service quality.

Local governments frequently act as the operational backbone of integration, managing housing, schooling, and community initiatives. but municipal capacity depends heavily on project-based EU funding, which limits continuity once grants expire.

Overall, the policy landscape can be described as fragmented but responsive: strong initial protection, but uneven pathways toward durable socio-economic inclusion.

3.3 Education, training and skills

In chapter 2 we discussed the education and skill levels of the Ukrainian target group – most of those were attained in their home country. In order to move forward in the host country's economic ecosystem, they can be further supported by education and lifelong learning systems in place, if those are capable of offering sufficient access to **training, language learning, and skills recognition**. Otherwise the Ukrainian migrants and refugees will not be able to reach stable employment/entrepreneurship.

Most host countries offer state-funded **language and integration courses**, though coverage and duration vary. Germany and Austria provide extensive language modules under national integration programmes. In the case of Poland and Hungary, host countries rely more on NGOs. Only about 45 % of working-age Ukrainians in the EU had completed at least one formal training course by the end of 2024 (Eurofound (2024)).

Vocational education and training (VET) institutions play an increasingly important role. Those countries that have elaborated dual-education systems (Germany, Austria, Czechia) have been better able to channel refugees into skill-matching apprenticeships.

There are also digital education tools on offer, such as the EU's **Digital Skills and Jobs Platform** and different national e-learning schemes. Although these have opened access for Ukrainians, their success depends on digital literacy and access to digital infrastructure, which is often a challenge for older adults, who, in particular, face barriers to online participation. For this group, personal or blended learning solutions can be effective.

The **recognition of credentials, of prior learning (RPL)** is inconsistent across the home countries, and there is no systematic EU regulation in place. Some of the Member States have introduced fast-track mechanisms for Ukrainian teachers, healthcare workers, and engineers, mostly in areas which were most suffering from shortage. On the other hand, many other professions remain regulated and there is a lengthy equivalence assessment for the credentials to be recognised. A harmonised effort on EU-level could significantly improve the integration process (European Commission, 2024).

3.4 Employers and the private sector

Employer engagement is a decisive but often underexplored dimension of integration. Surveys by the European Training Foundation (2024) indicate that small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in Central and Eastern Europe show **strong willingness to hire Ukrainians** but lack guidance on legal frameworks, diversity management, and upskilling programmes.

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives have played an important role in mobilising resources. Large firms in retail, IT, and manufacturing sectors have launched targeted employment programmes combining training and mentorship—examples include IKEA's "Work and Learn" scheme in Poland and Google's "Grow with Ukraine" digital courses. However, participation is limited to larger urban centres and requires coordination with public agencies.

Barriers to sustained private-sector involvement include:

- Administrative uncertainty regarding the **duration of temporary protection**.
- Lack of **tax or subsidy incentives** for hiring refugees.
- Limited awareness of skills potential among employers.

Creating structured channels for cooperation—such as local employment pacts or regional innovation ecosystems—can improve information flow and alignment between refugee skills and employer needs.

3.5 Institutional ecosystems

Integration operates not through single actors but within **ecosystems of cooperation** linking public, private, academic, and civil-society stakeholders—the so-called **quadruple helix** (Carayannis and Campbell, 2021). In practice, however, the density and maturity of such ecosystems vary widely across Europe.

In Central and Eastern Europe, much of the innovation in refugee support stems from **civil-society networks** rather than formal institutions. NGOs and community centres frequently fill gaps in counselling, language training, and job mediation. but their sustainability depends on short-term EU or donor funding. In contrast, Northern and Western European countries exhibit stronger **institutionalised partnerships** between local governments, chambers of commerce, and universities.

Knowledge transfer between these contexts remains limited. Evaluation studies of Horizon and Interreg projects (e.g., SIREE, FORWORK, DREAM) consistently point to weak scaling mechanisms—pilot activities end without embedding lessons into mainstream systems. The lack of **national coordination platforms** to consolidate learning and share data further fragments the landscape (IOM, 2020; Eurofound, 2024).

An important element of the institutional ecosystem is the potential of **stakeholder burnout** that is already tangible in many aspects and fields. Institutional actors and stakeholders are approached from many perspectives and new initiatives often struggling finding sufficient stakeholder support.

3.6 Social innovation ecosystems

The arrival of Ukrainian refugees has acted as a **catalyst for social innovation** across Europe, accelerating experimentation in service delivery, digital inclusion, and partnership models. Social innovation here refers to *“new social practices that meet social needs better than existing solutions and create new social relationships or collaborations”* (Murray et al., 2010).

Between 2022 and 2025, numerous initiatives have emerged within both public and civil-society spheres. Examples include:

- **Hybrid learning platforms** offering language and vocational training (e.g., “UA Talents” or “Learning Passport for Ukraine”), which integrate e-learning with on-site mentoring.
- **Community hubs** in Poland, Germany, and Czechia combining employment counselling, co-working spaces, and psychosocial support under one roof.
- **Social enterprises** and cooperatives established by Ukrainian women, often in crafts, catering, and digital design, supported by microfinance schemes or ESF+-funded accelerators (OECD, 2024).

These practices share three common features: adaptability, stakeholder diversity, and reliance on digital tools. But most remain **localised and short-lived**, reflecting the project-based funding logic of the European innovation ecosystem. The evaluation done by the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC, 2024) emphasise that many social innovation’s potential remain underexploited because there are no strong scaling and policy mainstreaming mechanisms in place.

The Ukrainian crisis has therefore exposed both the vitality and fragility of Europe’s social-innovation landscape. While civil-society actors can repond rapidly to emerging needs, sustained impact requires **institutional embedding**—for example, through integration into municipal strategies or national employment frameworks.

4. Employability and skills

4.1 Labour market entry patterns

The employment trajectory of Ukrainian refugees across the European Union reveals a pattern of **fast entry followed by structural stagnation**.

The labour market entry of Ukrainian women has shown both encouraging signs and notable delays. As Sommerfeld (2023) points out, **asylum seekers and protection beneficiaries generally face slower labour market access than labour migrants. but** in countries like Poland, Germany, and the Czech Republic, **accelerated registration procedures and temporary protection schemes have allowed for relatively swift access to legal employment for Ukrainians**. Still, employment uptake is outstandingly low among women with young children and those without pre-existing social networks. This contrasts with male-dominated migration flows in 2015, where integration trajectories often hinged on placement in reception systems and asylum outcomes.

According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM, 2024), apx. **60–70 percent** of working-age Ukrainians sought employment within six months of arrival, facilitated by the immediate access to the labour market under the **Temporary Protection Directive**. But according to Eurofound (2024) the majority of these jobs are **below the qualification level** of the employees: 58 percent of Ukrainian women hold tertiary degrees, but only 21 percent are employed in skilled professional roles.

This **underemployment scheme** reflects structural mismatches in recognition of skills, language barriers, and social capital. In Central and Eastern Europe, Ukrainians have predominantly entered **manufacturing, hospitality, logistics, and domestic services**, while in Western and Northern Europe, more have found work in **education, healthcare, and ICT** (OECD, 2024). A key determinant is **language acquisition**: host-country language proficiency correlates directly with employment quality and stability (European Training Foundation, 2023).

Empirical data also show significant gender disparities. Across EU-27, the employment rate of Ukrainian men under temporary protection is approximately 12 % points higher than that of women (IOM, 2024). The gender gap widens with age, with women over 50 facing both ageism and skill depreciation. Many women engage in **informal or flexible work**, balancing caregiving responsibilities and employment, often resulting in precarious income and limited social security coverage.

While early employment has contributed to social inclusion, it risks entrenching **occupational downgrading** if not complemented by requalification and career progression measures. This pattern mirrors findings from previous migration waves but is intensified by the short-term legal and financial uncertainty of the temporary protection regime.

4.2 Skills and education

As an advantage compared to previous migration waves, the socio-demographic parameters and the human capital of Ukrainian refugee women, **show relatively higher levels of educational attainment** compared to other recent migrant groups (e.g. Syrian, Afghan), and often possess work experience from middle-income economies. According to Eurostat (2024) 63 percent of Ukrainian refugees have attained secondary or tertiary education, with a high share in **education, healthcare, engineering, and IT**. Recent IZA studies have found (Bratsberg et al., 2022; Kahanec and Guzi, 2022) that this makes them more comparable to intra-EU migrants than to previous third-country national refugee populations. As documented in Platonova and Urso (2012), Ukrainian women are more likely **to**

have completed secondary or tertiary education than the average among third-country nationals, with a notable share holding **university degrees**.

But three important bottlenecks constrain are in place:

1. **Credential recognition** – Formal validation of diplomas remains time-consuming and inconsistent across EU countries. Although the Council Recommendation (2023/C 115/01) encourages flexible approaches, implementation varies. As a result, thousands of qualified teachers, doctors, and engineers remain underemployed.
2. **Language proficiency** – While English proficiency is relatively high, host-country language skills often remain insufficient for most professional roles, especially in healthcare and education, though this strongly depends on previous language education (English, Spanish taught in Ukrainian schools) and language similarities (such as between Polish and Ukrainian).
3. **Skill mismatch and digital divide** – Some sectors (e.g., digital services, STEM) show growing demand, but older refugees and women outside the ICT field often lack up-to-date digital competencies (European Commission, 2024).

To address these issues, several Member States have introduced **accelerated requalification programmes** (e.g., Poland's "Fast Track for Teachers," Germany's "Healthcare Bridging Courses"). but coverage remains limited. According to the European Training Foundation (2024), fewer than 15% of Ukrainian professionals have successfully validated their qualifications.

The persistence of these barriers underscores that educational attainment alone does not guarantee employability — it must be coupled with **targeted training, language acquisition, and employer engagement** mechanisms.

4.3 Entrepreneurship and self-employment as inclusion pathways

For refugees facing structural labour-market barriers, **entrepreneurship** represents an alternative route to socio-economic integration. Ukrainians have demonstrated strong entrepreneurial potential: before the war, women owned about **46 percent** of small businesses in Ukraine, one of the highest rates in Europe (World Bank, 2021). This entrepreneurial culture may influence positively the success of Ukrainian women in entrepreneurship in the host countries.

Across the EU, several initiatives have sought to harness this potential. In Poland, Lithuania, and Germany, **microcredit programmes** and **business incubators** (often co-financed by ESF+ or Interreg) have enabled Ukrainian refugees to launch small enterprises in catering, digital services, and crafts. The **Baltic Sea Initiative for Women Entrepreneurs (BSI4Women)**, for example, provides mentoring, access to networks, and financial literacy training for displaced women — a model that has proven effective for skill activation and self-confidence building.

The most important structural bottlenecks are:

- **There is a legal uncertainty** due to temporary protection status which strongly limits access to credit and long-term leases.
- **There are complex registration procedures** in many host countries that discourage newcomers unfamiliar with local legal frameworks.
- **As many refugee women are also carers for their children, elderly, or both, limited access to childcare and social services for the elderly** restricts female entrepreneurship potential, as business incubators rarely provide family-friendly infrastructure (UNHCR, 2024).

Nonetheless, small-scale entrepreneurship can generate significant social capital and empowerment. Refugee women entrepreneurs often act as **community connectors**, facilitating employment for peers and catalysing micro-level social innovation. Integrating entrepreneurship modules into broader employability strategies — including mentoring, cooperative models, and access to finance — therefore holds strong transformative potential.

4.4 Lifelong Learning and digital skills

In the 2020s, the European economies and societies are already strongly relying on digital ecosystems and due to this, **digital literacy is** a key factor in employability. In line with other European digital landscapes, many younger Ukrainians possess strong ICT skills, older adults often lag behind. The European Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI, 2024) estimates that 37 per cent of Ukrainian adults fall below the basic digital-skills threshold.

In response, multiple initiatives across Europe have integrated **digital upskilling** into refugee training curricula. For example:

- The “Digital Ukraine Hub” in Estonia offers bilingual online courses on office software, e-commerce, and cybersecurity.
- The EU-funded “Women Online” project (Interreg) focuses on digital marketing for displaced women entrepreneurs.

- NGOs in Spain and Italy have incorporated digital-literacy modules into language and integration courses.

Digital competence is crucial for people in times of turmoil, when basic routines and environments are not in place, because it not only facilitates employment but has a much wider impact on **resilience as a whole**. It allows refugees to connect to various social networks, access remote work, participate in online learning, and reach e-government/e-health services.

It is important to note that sustainable inclusion depends on aligning the digital training with the actual market demand. Those programmes that can integrate **soft skills, vocational modules, and employer partnerships** achieve the highest job-retention rates (OECD, 2024).

4.5 Skills for resilience and adaptability

The future of work for refugees depends on **adaptive and transversal competences**. These include communication, teamwork, cultural awareness, and entrepreneurial thinking. The ILO (2023) identifies these as “resilience skills,” critical for navigating dynamic labour markets.

In the Ukrainian context, displaced professionals frequently demonstrate high adaptability—having reorganised families, careers, and social networks under extreme pressure. This proves that structured and well-oriented training programmes could strengthen both employability and innovation potential.

Importantly, upskilling initiatives should rely on **resilience-building components**, linking technical competence with personal agency, problem-solving, and leadership. This approach not only enhances individual employability but also fosters social innovation capacities within host communities.

4.6 Outlook

The employability landscape for Ukrainian refugees illustrates both **promise and precarity**. The group’s strong human capital and motivation are offset by systemic mismatches, bureaucratic rigidity, and gendered constraints. Effective solutions must integrate three pillars:

- **Human capital activation** through targeted requalification, digital and language training.
- **Inclusive ecosystems** connecting employers, NGOs, municipalities, and education providers.

- **Empowerment frameworks** promoting entrepreneurship, mentorship, and self-determination.

Future interventions must also prioritise **sustainability** — ensuring that pilot schemes evolve into durable institutional pathways and that refugees' professional advancement is not limited to entry-level positions. Only by linking skills development to structural reforms in policy, finance, and coordination can Europe turn the temporary protection of Ukrainian refugees into a **long-term social and economic contribution**.

5. Conclusions and policy implications

5.1 Overview

Europe's response to the Ukrainian refugee crisis is **rapid and fragmented**, as it was presented in the previous chapters. On the one hand, the **Temporary Protection Directive** provided unprecedented legal access to the labour market and social services for these people, shortly after the invasion. But on the other hand, national policy variations, financial factors and weak coordination among stakeholders still create a significant constrain for **long-term integration**.

Ukrainian refugees, particularly **women and older adults**, represent a **demographically and educationally strong but underutilised group**. The high rate of tertiary education, professional experience, and digital awareness contrasts sharply with the occupational downgrading and precarious employment conditions faced in host countries. This underemployment is not due to lack of skills but to institutional, linguistic, and administrative barriers that prevent effective matching of human capital with market demand.

Nevertheless, the crisis has introduced and initiated **new forms of social innovation**, creating a laboratory of practices that work with employment support, community engagement, and digital inclusion. Still these efforts remain largely **localised and project-based**, underscoring the difficulty of scaling up successful models across borders. The absence of sustainable financial and policy frameworks has prevented these micro-level innovations from translating into systemic transformation.

5.2 Structural gaps

Three major structural deficits stand out across the European integration landscape:

- Integration measures are distributed across ministries, municipalities, NGOs, and private actors with overlapping mandates but limited

cooperation. The quadruple helix—government, academia, business, and civil society—remains conceptually accepted but rarely operationalised. This **institutional fragmentation** weakens strategic continuity, undermining the cumulative impact of otherwise well-designed initiatives.

- **Skills recognition deficit**, namely the non-recognition of Ukrainian diplomas and professional experience remains the most persistent barrier to upward mobility. Even in countries with expedited procedures, recognition is slow and administratively burdensome. This leads to skill waste, particularly in critical sectors like healthcare and education, where demand for qualified labour is high.
- Integration projects are overwhelmingly dependent on **short-term EU or sporadic funding cycles**. Once funding ends, successful pilots often collapse due to lack of structural embedding in national or municipal budgets. There is minimal use of financial instruments—such as revolving funds or social impact bonds—to sustain long-term integration models.

These deficits form a systemic triangle that limits scalability: **projects innovate but do not institutionalise, actors collaborate but do not coordinate, and funds invest but do not sustain.**

5.3 Lessons from previous social innovation practices

Despite the above limitations, the Ukrainian crisis has yielded valuable insights into the **mechanisms that enable social innovation** to drive integration:

- **Hybrid delivery models** that blend online and offline approaches—such as digital training combined with local mentoring—achieve wider outreach and stronger retention rates.
- **Ecosystem brokerage**, where intermediary organisations connect refugees to existing service providers, enhances efficiency and avoids duplication.
- **Participatory co-design** of services involving refugee communities fosters ownership, ensuring solutions are culturally relevant and user-centred.
- **Cross-sectoral partnerships**, especially between local governments and NGOs, create adaptive service ecosystems capable of responding to fluctuating needs.

These features collectively define a **second-generation model of social innovation**, moving beyond experimentation toward institutional integration. They

demonstrate that even within resource constraints, social impact can be amplified through **networked governance**, **knowledge sharing**, and **digital scalability**.

However, for these models to mature, they require supportive policy environments—clearer legal frameworks for refugee entrepreneurship, improved funding continuity, and more consistent national strategies for validation and employment transition.

5.4 Policy implications

At the European level, policy coherence is the central challenge. There are instruments like **AMIF**, **ESF+**, **Erasmus+**, **Interreg**, and **Horizon Europe** that already provide complementary funding streams to various aspects (social support, education, policy learning, research, etc.) they operate under distinct administrative logics.

A higher level of coordination among these funders or at least a shared monitoring system, could strengthen the impacts from the use of these instruments. In addition, the European Commission could also promote the **mainstreaming the social innovation solutions**. If Member States are encouraged and motivated to link refugee integration with broader labour-market and digital-transition policies, both the refugee communities but the European economy and society as a whole can benefit.

At the national level, reforms should focus on:

- Simplifying and accelerating **qualification recognition** procedures, with mutual recognition agreements and bridging programmes tailored for Ukrainian professionals.
- Embedding **gender-responsive measures** in integration policies, ensuring women have equal access to re-skilling, childcare, and entrepreneurship support.
- Encouraging **municipal innovation labs** as intermediaries between local authorities, NGOs, and private actors, capable of piloting and institutionalising successful initiatives.
- Establishing **public-private partnerships** for refugee employment, leveraging corporate social responsibility (CSR) frameworks to co-finance training and apprenticeships.

Additionally, there is a strong case for developing a **European knowledge repository** of integration practices, similar to the Interreg or EaSI databases, but dedicated specifically to social innovation for refugee employability. This would

prevent duplication of efforts and allow scaling of proven methodologies across regions.

5.5 Sustainable and inclusive integration models

The overarching implication of the analysis is that **integration must be understood as an innovation ecosystem** rather than a sequence of isolated projects. This requires long-term vision, multi-actor collaboration, and adaptive governance.

A sustainable integration model would rest on three pillars:

- **Human capital:** Building on refugees' existing skills and educational backgrounds through rapid validation, modular re-skilling, and personalised employment pathways.
- **Ecosystemic cooperation:** Strengthening interlinkages between policy, education, business, and civil society actors to ensure continuous knowledge exchange and reduce duplication.
- **Financial and institutional sustainability:** Shifting from ad hoc project funding to multi-annual, performance-based investment frameworks, enabling successful innovations to become permanent public services.

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