

NAVIGATING THE POLISH LABOUR MARKET: REFUGEES FROM UKRAINE IN THE THIRD YEAR OF THE HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This study was prepared as part of the Supporting refugees from Ukraine in Poland on their path to self-reliance through individual protection services and improved access to livelihood opportunities project, implemented by the Polish Center for International Aid (PCPM) in partnership with the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC). It focuses on the situations of refugees from Ukraine in Poland who still needed assistance with access to the labour market in the second half of 2024. This project's aims are primarily practical: to provide ideas and recommendations useful in livelihood projects planned for the years 2024–2025. The preliminary findings have already helped in the planning and implementation of the project under which the study was conducted.

The study focuses on two topics: employment opportunities for refugees from Ukraine, and lessons from livelihood projects implemented as part of the Ukrainian response in Poland to date. In the chapter on employment, we seek answers to the following questions: How does a refugee's location of residence impact their situation on the labour market? How do age and gender affect refugees' chances of finding employment? Is starting a business a solution for job-seeking refugees? What are the main barriers to finding employment for refugees from Ukraine? In the chapter on lessons from other projects, we gather observations from activists and employees of state institutions who have been involved in the response regarding what makes a relevant and successful livelihood project at the current stage of the humanitarian response.

The study, which is intended to complement country-wide surveys and public statistics with qualitative insights, relies on primary qualitative material and a review of the available quantitative data. The primary data include focus group discussions with refugees from Ukraine and individual interviews

with representatives of labour offices, with NGOs providing support to migrants and refugees, and with employers and job agencies.¹

The study distinguishes between any employment and “ok” jobs, i.e., jobs that the refugees think are adequately suited to their needs. Regarding obstacles to finding employment of the latter kind, the report lists those already identified in other studies, such as those related to language or the poor availability of social services that could reduce the duties of caregivers to small children or persons with disabilities or chronic illnesses. The study also points to the importance of socioeconomic factors, especially social isolation and precarious work, which either cut refugees off from labour market opportunities or foster their economic integration as an underclass (i.e., taking one precarious job after another).

The report concludes that three kinds of activities should be most relevant to the needs of refugees seeking to improve their economic situation in Poland: Polish language courses, vocational training, and support in getting existing qualifications and training recognized. The report provides detailed recommendations on how to ensure that these activities are highly relevant to refugees' needs. These measures primarily include harmonizing capacity development programs with actual job requirements and conditions (e.g. offering specialized language courses rather than general, basic-level courses) as well as ensuring that project participants have sufficient conditions to invest in their own job-related development (e.g., by combining capacity development with cash assistance). A number of observations indicate that the livelihood challenges faced by refugees have a systemic nature. In such cases, the report recommends including the needed policy changes in humanitarian organizations' advocacy agendas.

¹ NGOs providing support to migrants fall into the category of employers. However, they were included in the research as expert informants on the situation of refugees only. Given its small scale and concentration in larger urban centers, employment in the third sector was not included in this market analysis.



1. GLOSSARY

BDL – Pol. Bank Danych Lokalnych, Eng. Local Data Bank

CEIDG – Pol. Centralna Ewidencja i Informacja o Działalności Gospodarczej,
Eng. Central Registration And Information On Business

FGD – focus group discussion

GUS – Pol. Główny Urząd Statystyczny, Eng. Central Statistical Office

NBP – Pol. Narodowy Bank Polski, Eng. National Bank of Poland

NRC – Norwegian Refugee Council

PUP – Pol. Powiatowy Urząd Pracy, Eng. County Labour Office

PCPM – Polish Center for International Aid

Refugee from Ukraine – We write of “refugees from Ukraine” rather than Ukrainian refugees as not all refugees from Ukraine are Ukrainian.

Special Act – Act on assistance to citizens of Ukraine in connection with the armed conflict on the territory of this country, of March 12, 2022 (Pol. ustawa z dnia 12 marca 2022 r. o pomocy obywatelom Ukrainy w związku z konfliktem zbrojnym na terytorium tego państwa) regulating, among others, questions such as the right to legal stay, access to labour market and social transfers and services.

UKR status – A legal status confirming that a refugee enjoys rights specified in the Special Act.

WUP – Pol. Wojewódzki Urząd Pracy, Eng. Voivodeship Labour Office.



2. INTRODUCTION

This report was prepared as part of the Supporting refugees from Ukraine in Poland on their path to self-reliance through individual protection services and improved access to livelihood opportunities project, implemented by the Polish Center for International Aid (PCPM) in partnership with the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC). Our first findings were shared internally and helped us design our project activities. This brief report also includes the lessons we learnt from the implementation of these findings. We hope it will be of use to any organization planning livelihood support projects targeting refugees from Ukraine in Poland.

2.1. AIMS AND SCOPE

The main aim of this assessment is practical: to inform livelihood activities targeting refugees from Ukraine in Poland in the third and fourth years of the humanitarian response, which started after the Russian invasion of 24th of February 2022. This means the report does not analyse the economic situation of refugees from Ukraine in general but focuses on members of this cohort who are currently in need of assistance.

The needs of refugees from Ukraine have been changing throughout the response. In its earliest months, sometimes called the “emergency phase” and approximately dated from February to September 2022, most refugees coming to Poland needed similar support, regardless of their demographic characteristics or social standing in Ukraine (Michalak et Al., 2024: 47–51). This included emergency shelter, medical or food assistance, legalisation of their stay in Poland, and employment opportunities. However, differences within the refugee population became more pronounced over time: some were able to immediately seize opportunities provided by the favourable legislation or the

mass mobilization of support in solidarity with the refugees in the first months of the response; on the other hand, others faced greater challenges or barriers which impacted their economic and social inclusion in Polish society. In this report, we focus on groups whose vulnerabilities or other external factors prevented them from fuller participation in the Polish economy. Members of these groups, including older people, people with disabilities or serious health problems, caregivers to family members requiring much daily assistance, or precarious workers with no time or energy for any work-related development, are more likely to require assistance, including systemic solutions, to break the vicious circles of poverty in which they often find themselves (NRC & PCPM, 2022: 21, 25–28).

In 2024, the third year of the response, the adaptation challenges faced by these vulnerable groups are often similar to those faced by other vulnerable migrants in Poland. For instance, in the Podlaskie voivodeship we broadened our research to include migrants and refugees from the Belarusian border, who outnumber Ukrainians in Podlaskie. The findings reveal similar barriers to finding dignified legal employment for both groups, while Ukrainian refugees typically benefited from comparatively better legal protection and support systems thanks to the Special Act.

This assessment is geographically focused on 7 voivodeships: Lubusz, Lesser Poland, Podlaskie, Silesia, Warmia-Masuria, Greater Poland and West Pomerania. While centred on these areas, the report also references data and findings gathered on a national level or in different locations. We owe a lot to other researchers and try to give voice to their insights and observations. Most of all, we would like to thank all the research participants for their time and valuable insights.



2.2. METHODOLOGY

Our research combines qualitative fieldwork with a desk review of the existing literature and public statistics. This allows us to provide a qualitative commentary to the recent quantitative data gathered as part of larger studies. Studies which were especially important in our research design include the economic impact analyses focused on refugees' presence in Poland conducted by the National Bank of Poland (NBP, 2023, and NBP, 2024) and Deloitte for UNHCR (Deloitte, 2024); OECD studies on the livelihoods of refugees from Ukraine (especially OECD, 2024); and public statistics gathered by Polish state institutions, which we frequently refer to in this study.

Our field research component included individual interviews and focus group discussions with several types of informants, including refugees from Ukraine, Belarusian migrants and refugees, career advisors working with migrants and refugees in Poland, representatives of NGOs offering livelihood support for refugees from Ukraine, representatives of state institutions involved in the realization or supervision of job activation programs targeting refugees from Ukraine, as well as job agencies and employers. The interviews were conducted in the seven voivodeships of the area of intervention. The table below presents more information about the research participants.

Table 1. Research methods and research participants

Key informant	Data collection tools	# Persons	Remarks
Refugees from Ukraine	4 focus group discussions	37	28 women and 9 men of the małopolskie, podlaskie, śląskie and wielkopolskie voivodeships
Migrants and refugees from Belarus	1 focus group discussions	6	3 women and 3 men of the podlaskie voivodeships
Voivodeship Labour Offices	5 individual interviews, 1 small group interview	8	WUP representatives in lubuskie, małopolskie, podlaskie, warmińsko-mazurskie, wielkopolskie, zachodniopomorskie
NGOs	5 individual interviews	5	5 NGOs in the area of intervention, including 2 Ukrainian led and 1 Belarusian led
Job and career advisors	1 focus group discussion	5	An online FGD with advisors working migrants of the whole area of intervention
Employers	13	13	Due to a low response rate most interviews were conducted during work fairs in Krakow and Katowice, the sample includes local employers (małopolskie, śląskie, zachodniopomorskie, podlaskie) and those offering jobs across Poland
Job agencies	2	2	Low response rate, interviews conducted in wielkopolskie and podlaskie



2.3. HOW THIS REPORT IS ORGANIZED

For the convenience of the reader, the report is organized around specific questions and discusses our findings from both the desk and field research at the same time. The report is divided into two chapters: finding employment, and lessons learnt from support projects. These chapters are followed by conclusions and recommendations.

In the first chapter, we discuss macroeconomic and social factors impacting the refugees' chances of finding employment. Bearing in mind that a large share of refugees are dissatisfied with their jobs, work in precarious conditions, or struggle to find a legal job, we distinguish between any employment and "ok" jobs, which the research participants defined for themselves. The chapter lists barriers to finding employment, which from the perspectives of the research participants vary for more and less acceptable jobs.

In the second chapter, we discuss ways in which livelihood support offered by state or civil society actors has addressed the identified barriers to employment. We try to gather lessons learnt from these projects to help actors involved in providing livelihood support in their activities.

Our conclusions and recommendations focus on key aspects related to the livelihoods of refugees from Ukraine in Poland who have faced more barriers to their economic inclusion than others. We also highlight matters that link this group to other migrants and refugees, thus providing a basis for the formulation of more inclusive support programs. Finally, a number of our observations point to the need for changes in state-level policies. Humanitarian organizations may consider reviewing the policies and advocating for the necessary changes.

"ok" job: We assumed that an "ok" job is a job that a research participant finds acceptable. The exact meaning of the term was different for every refugee, but what the definitions had in common was that "ok" jobs were acceptable and did not require them to compromise on what was important to them. An "ok" job is an empirical rather than a normative category. We do not employ it to define what can be beneficial or harmful about a job, but to learn whether our research participants are able to find jobs that they themselves find unharmed to their wellbeing and integrity.



3. FINDING EMPLOYMENT

About two thirds of refugees from Ukraine in Poland began working in the first year of their stay. The Special Act facilitated their immediate access to the labour market, minimizing administrative hurdles to employing members of this group. Most refugees who sought employment were successful in their search. As the Deloitte research team explains in their analysis prepared for UNHCR:

Considering their psychological stress and needs in terms of child and elderly care, refugees began entering the labour market surprisingly quickly – attaining an employment rate of 28% in May 2022 and 65% in November 2022.² By 30th September 2023 more than 10 thousand ran their own businesses according to the administrative social security ZUS data. Based on the MultiSector Needs Assessment Poland 2023 survey conducted in July-August 2023, we calculate that 80% of the income of refugee households is derived from employment, with an additional 5% coming from remittances and 2% from Ukrainian pension benefits. In economic terms, refugees from Ukraine in Poland are not receivers of social services and charity, but primarily consumers, employees, and entrepreneurs.

(Deloitte, 2024: 11; see also; OECD, 2024; Lekkerkerker, 2024).

This general picture was largely confirmed in our area of intervention. In this chapter we delve into four more detailed questions:

- How does a refugee's place of stay impact their situation in the labour market?
- How do age and gender shape refugees' chances of finding employment?

- Is opening one's own business a solution for the refugees job-seekers?
- What are the main barriers to finding employment for refugees from Ukraine?

3.1. REGIONAL DIFFERENCES

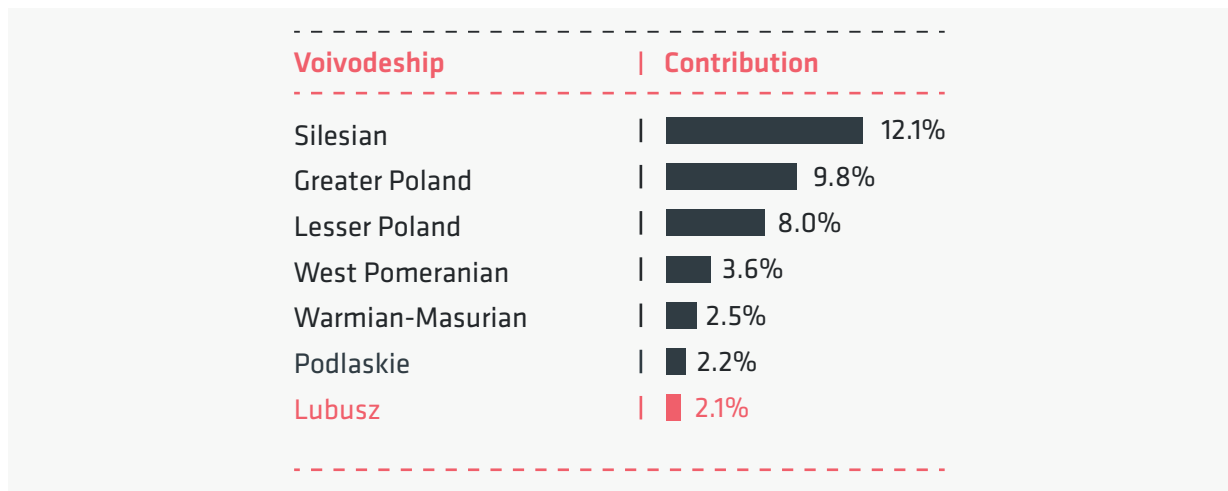
The number of job opportunities, whether for Polish or non-Polish citizens, differ between Polish voivodeships. Voivodeships with higher GDP tend to offer higher pay for salaried jobs. According to 2022 GUS data, an average salary earner in the least prosperous region earned 84% of their counterpart's salary in the most prosperous region in our area of intervention.

Similarly, where GDP was lower, the unemployment rate tended to be higher. Nationwide, about 1/3 of the registered unemployed were jobless for more than 12 months in the period in question. In voivodeships where the unemployment rate was higher, this share tended to be higher too, reaching 37.5% in West Pomerania and 43.5% in Podlaskie.

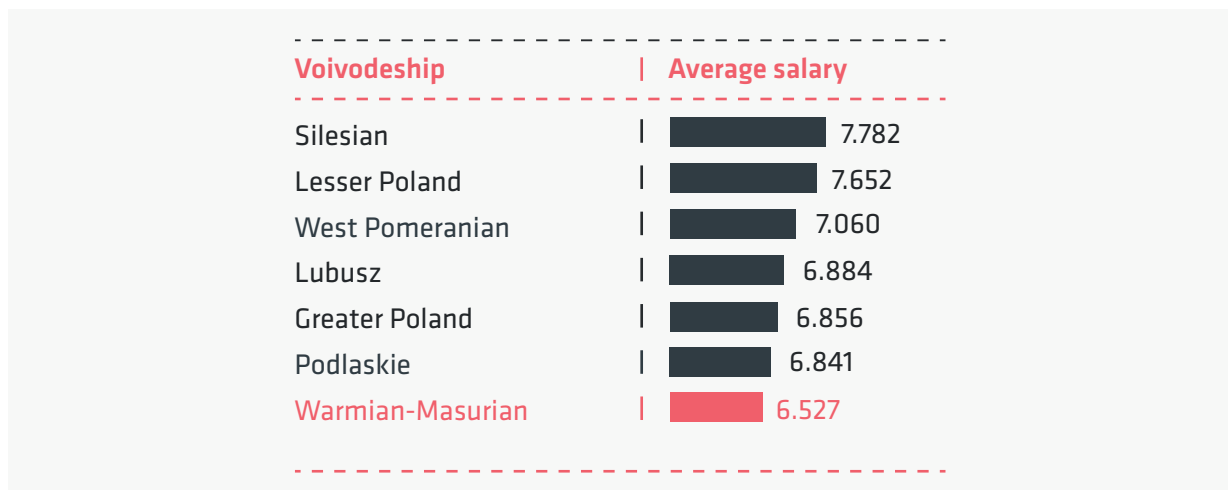
² Deloitte refers here to statistics gathered by the National Bank of Poland in 2022 and 2023 (NBP, 2022: 16-17, NBP, 2023: 14).



A. Voivodeships' contribution to the national GDP in 2022



B. Gross monthly salary by voivodeship in 2022 (incl. bonuses) in PLN

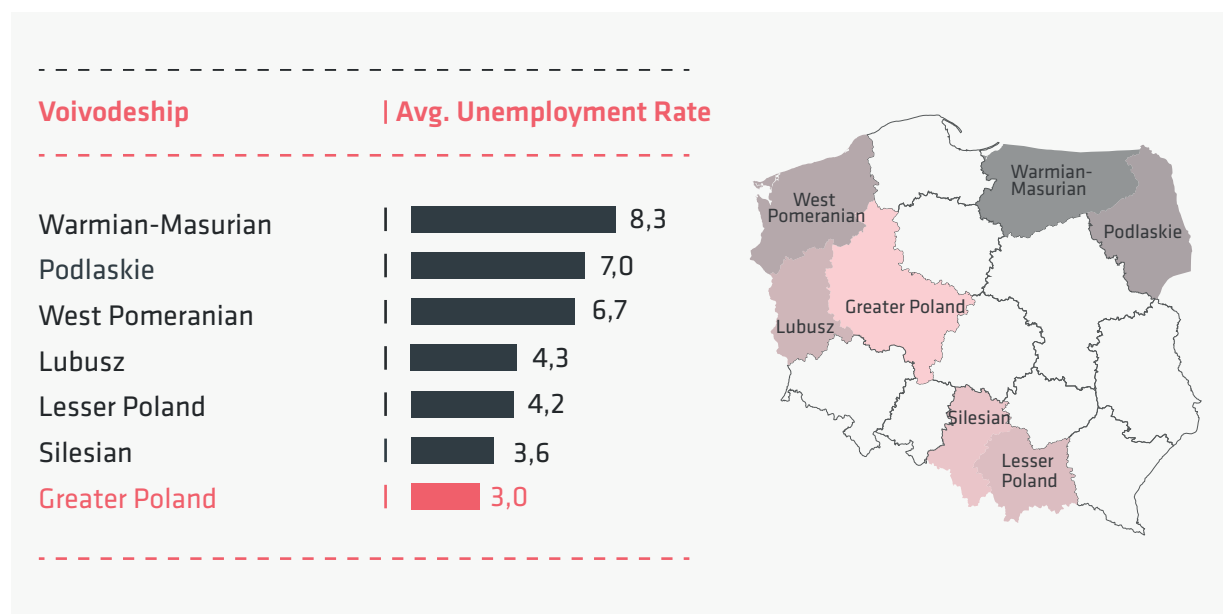


Source: GUS (Central Statistical Office)

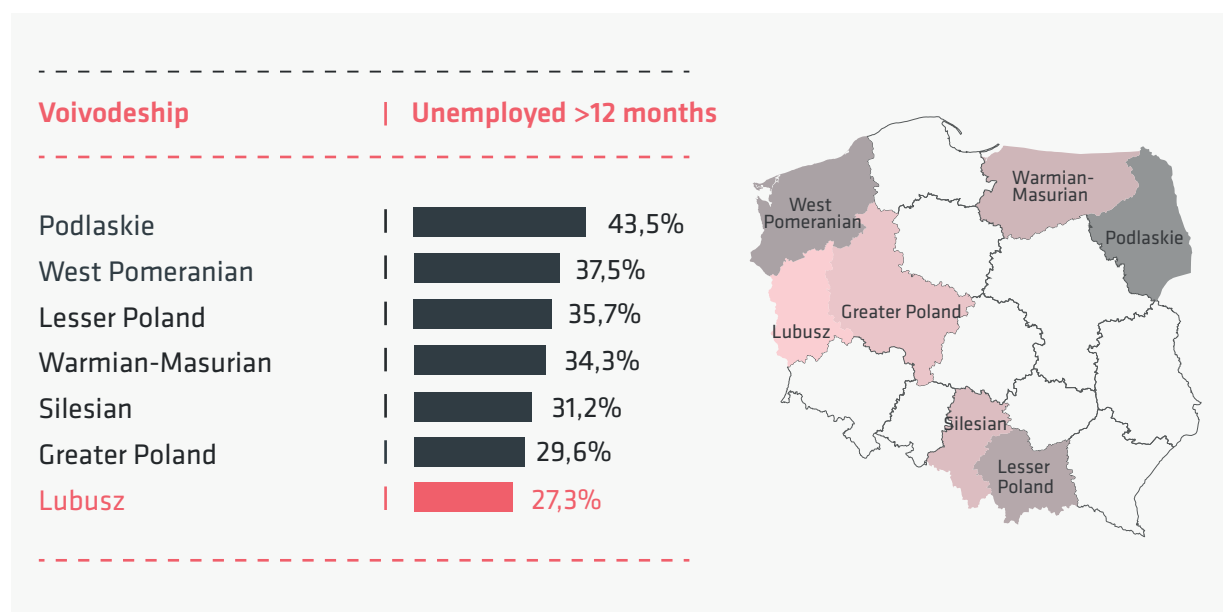


UNEMPLOYMENT RATE BY VOIVODESHIP

A. Average unemployment rate in 2023



B. Share of the unemployed for over 12 months among all the unemployed in 2023



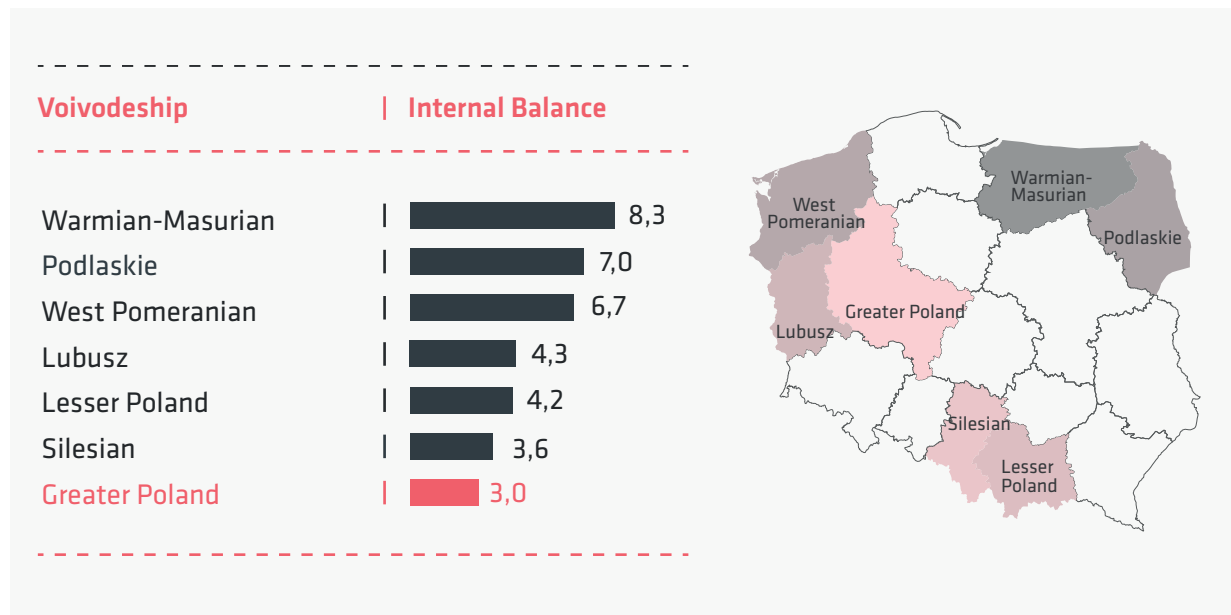
The unemployment rate is calculated for persons aged 18-59 who are without any job, able and willing to work, and no longer in education (apart from adult schools or non-stationary higher education institutions). Only persons registered as unemployed are included in the unemployment statistics.

Source: GUS (Central Statistical Office)

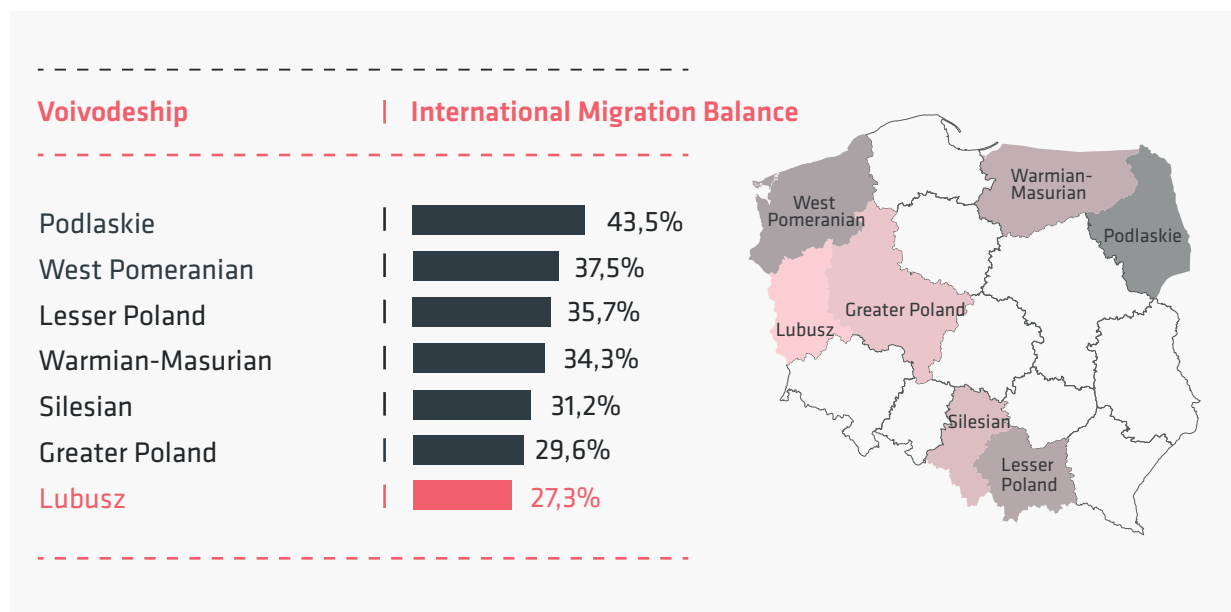


MIGRATION BALANCE

A. Internal balance in 2023



B. International migration balance in 2023



Migration balance = people who come - people who go

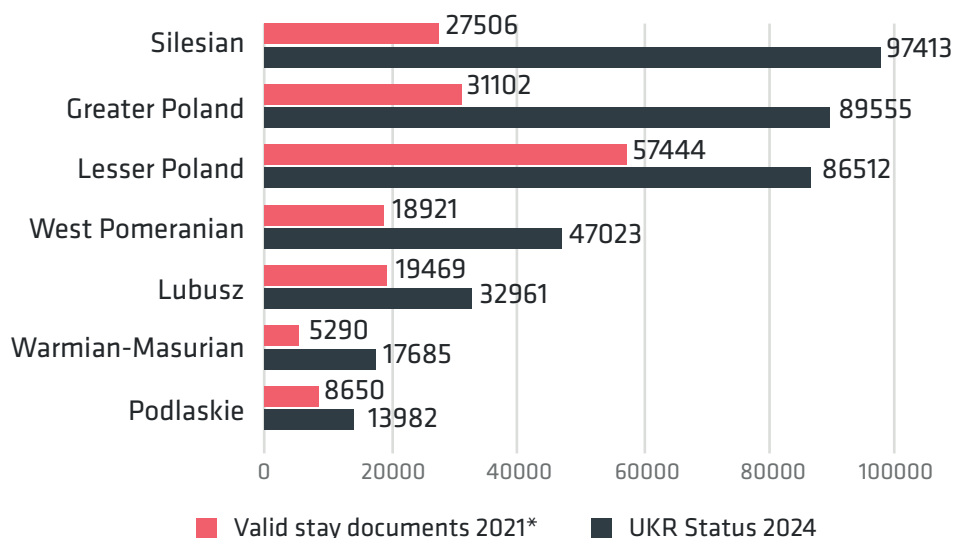
Source: GUS (Central Statistical Office)

Gromadzki and Lewandowski observed that, in 2022, refugees from Ukraine tended to settle in places where local economies were more robust and where Ukrainian communities were larger (2022: 5–6). This tendency is also visible in more recent data (see below). Apparently, refugees from

Ukraine do not differ significantly from other migrants or Poles in this regard. People in Poland tend to migrate to more prosperous regions, as is clear from the migration balance: the data for 2023 show that the balance tends to be most positive in the richest regions.



UKRAINIAN COMMUNITY IN POLAND IN 2021 AND 2024



Source: Ministry of Digital Affairs, 13.08.2024

A general demographic tendency to settle in larger cities should also be stressed, as has been confirmed in retrospective and foresight data (Potyra et. Al, 2023: 46–47). Smaller counties (powiat) tend to depopulate, thus especially losing younger inhabitants as compared to the largest urban centres, which impacts their economies.

The unemployment rate differs significantly at the county level. In recent history, high unemployment was one of the main factors incentivising local inhabitants to leave their towns or cities (Szczepaniak & Tokarski, 2018). The size of the differences between the more and the less prosperous counties (powiats) varies, thus impacting the economic outlooks of their inhabitants (GUS 2024). Consider the example of West Pomerania, where the unemployment rate at the end of June 2024 ranged from 3.5% in Szczecin to 15.8% in Białogard.³

The fact that the strength of regional economies and county economies in Poland varies means that the economic situation of refugees in Poland also varies depending on where they live, just as it varies for Poles. An inhabitant of a depopulating town is likely to face much more difficulty when looking for a job than a big city dweller in a prosperous voivodeship.

Our key informants were aware of these dynamics. “People who do not have to be here leave for other regions”, said an NGO representative in Podlaskie, a voivodeship struggling with a higher unemployment rate and slower growth than the Polish average. A representative of WUP in Warmia-Masuria shared a similar thought and provided examples of people not taking the free accommodation opportunities in this voivodeship, instead deciding to rent a flat in Warsaw, a city which is characterized by a vibrant labour market but also high costs of living.

Regional differences are not exhausted by the macroeconomic indicators cited. Regions have specific assets and invest in various branches of the economy. Significant differences are related especially to industry production, tourism, and the service or agriculture sectors.⁴ Also, historical factors, such as closer ties with Ukraine in some regions, may impact the livelihoods of refugees.⁵ In the following sections, we try to understand how refugees tackle the various labour market conditions in which they find themselves.

³ Statistics provided by WUP Szczecin.



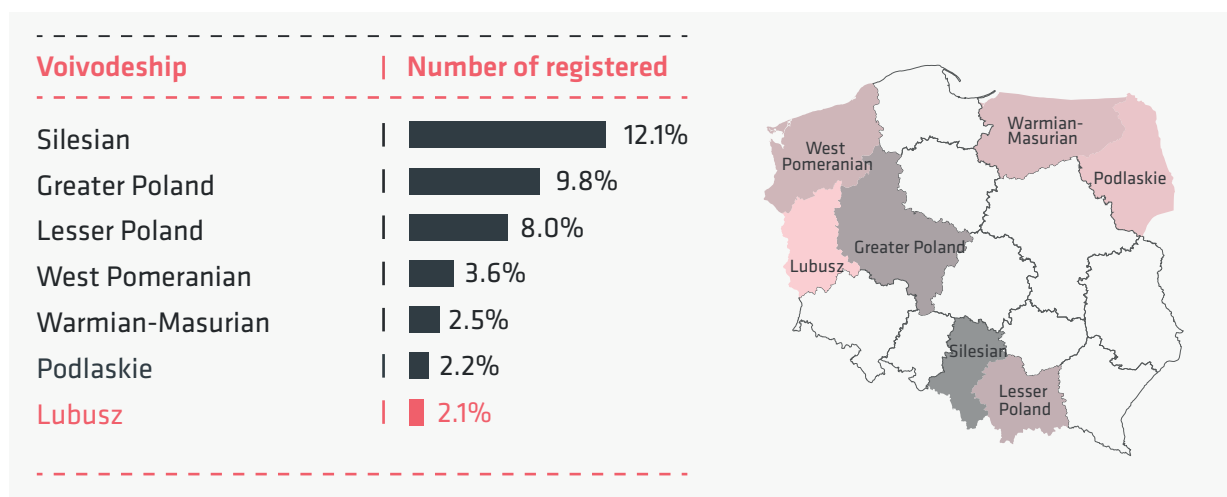
3.2. REGIONAL DIFFERENCES AND UNEMPLOYMENT RATE AMONG REFUGEES FROM UKRAINE

Not all Ukrainian citizens in Poland have the right to register as unemployed. The Special Act grants war refugees this right, but many migrants with other statuses (e.g., using the

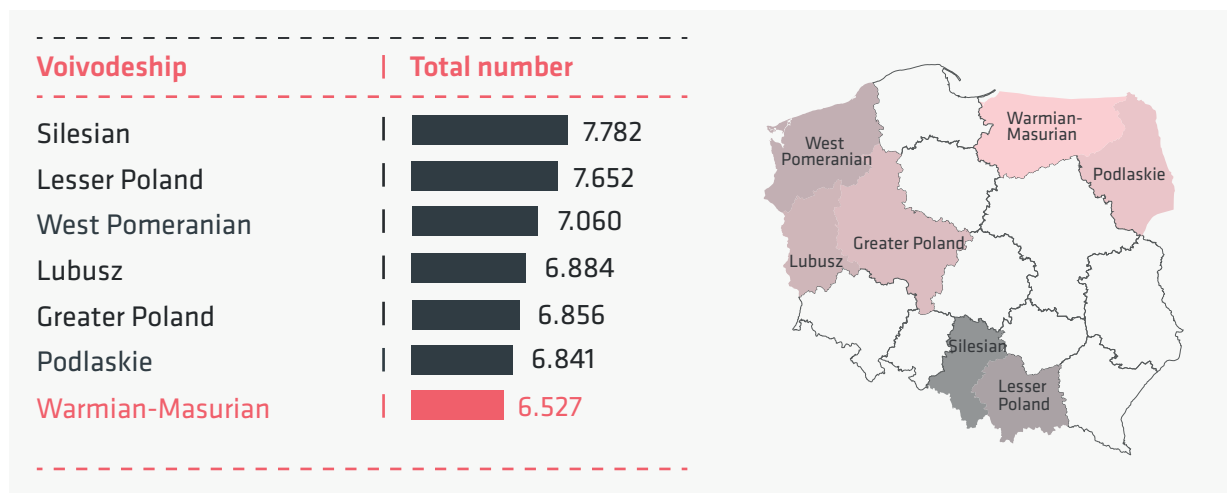
visa-free movement regulations) do not have it. As a result, 83% of Ukrainian citizens registered as unemployed in Poland as of 5th August 2024 also had UKR status.

REGISTERED UNEMPLOYED AMONG UKRAINIAN CITIZENS

A. Number of registered unemployed with PESEL UKR as of 5th August 2024



B. Total number of Ukrainians registered as unemployed as of 5th August 2024



Source: GUS (Central Statistical Office)

4 See the available GUS data at BDL: on income by business sector by voivodeship, value of agricultural production and average income from 1ha of farmlands by voivodeship. For more information on the sector of tourism, see: Gawelko et. Al, 2023.

5 An interesting case requiring further analysis may be the zachodniopomorskie voivodeship, where an especially high number of Ukrainians, Lemko and mixed families were forcibly resettled as part of Akcja Wisła (Action Vistula) in 1947. According to the NBP data, the share of Ukrainian refugees who have a job or a job promised in Szczecin was higher than the bare macroeconomic indicators would suggest in 2022 (NBP, 2022: 19); the same applies for the whole zachodniopomorskie in 2023 (NBP 2023: 40). These results may indicate local communities' higher solidarity with the newcomers, perceived as "their own". This hypothesis finds some confirmation also for other western regions of Poland in the NBP data, which were the post-war resettlement locations (NBP, 2023: 40). However, no research reliably testing this hypothesis is available to date.



Voivodeship	Average unemployment rate in 2023	Unemployment rate among refugees with UKR status - rough estimate (as of 5th Aug. 2024)
LUBUSZ	4.3	12
LESSER POLAND	4.2	25
PODLASKIE	7.0	31
SILESIA	3.6	20
WARMIA-MASURIA	8.3	22
GREATER POLAND	3.0	9
WEST POMERANIA	6.7	14

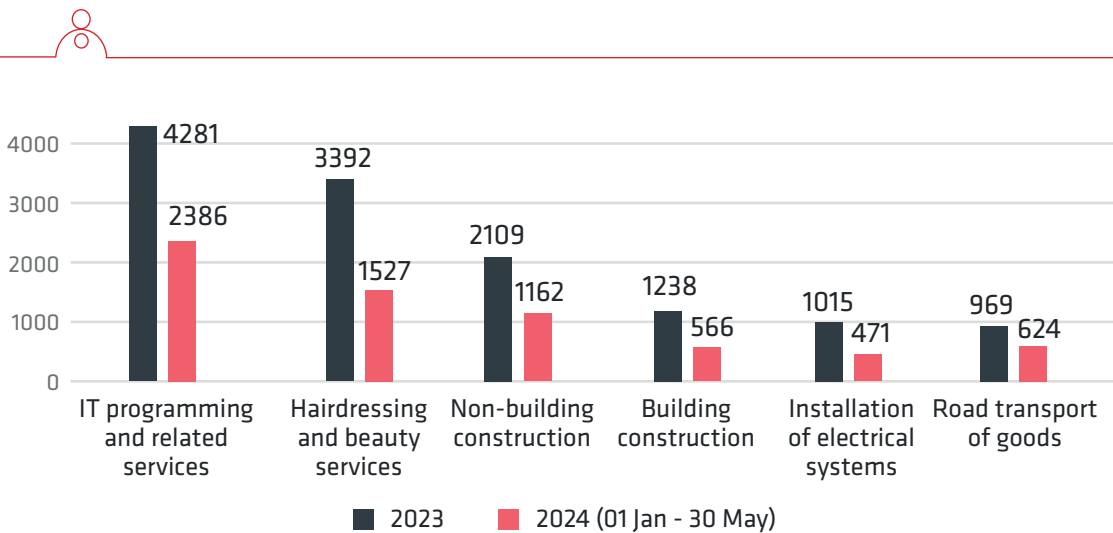
The unemployment rate among persons with UKR status cannot be found in standard public statistics, but we can provide a rough estimate of this figure by dividing the number of registered unemployed with UKR status by the number of all persons with UKR status aged 18–59 in a comparable period of time in every voivodeship. This estimate does not take into account members of this cohort who are not active members of the labour force because they are, for example, still learning or unable to undertake work. As a result, the figure is probably underestimated. In our area of intervention, the unemployment rate among refugees, thus calculated, was 1.5–3 times higher than the average unemployment rate in Poland in 2023. Here, numbers were also high in voivodeships with a lower unemployment rate (e.g., Lesser Poland and Silesian voivodeships). What could this figure indicate?

From the beginning of the response, refugees were encouraged to register as unemployed or job-seeking at county-level labour offices in order to be able to access tailored support (including individual job advisory, language courses and vocational training). Therefore, the unemployment rate may also be high in voivodeships which offer a good number of job opportunities, likely mirroring one of the job-seeking strategies of refugees (i.e., through the support of labour offices).

Both refugees and labour office representatives were aware of the fact that registering as unemployed or job-seeking is not always effective. A possible mismatch between refugees' expectations and the offer of county PUPs will be described in more detail in chapter 4.

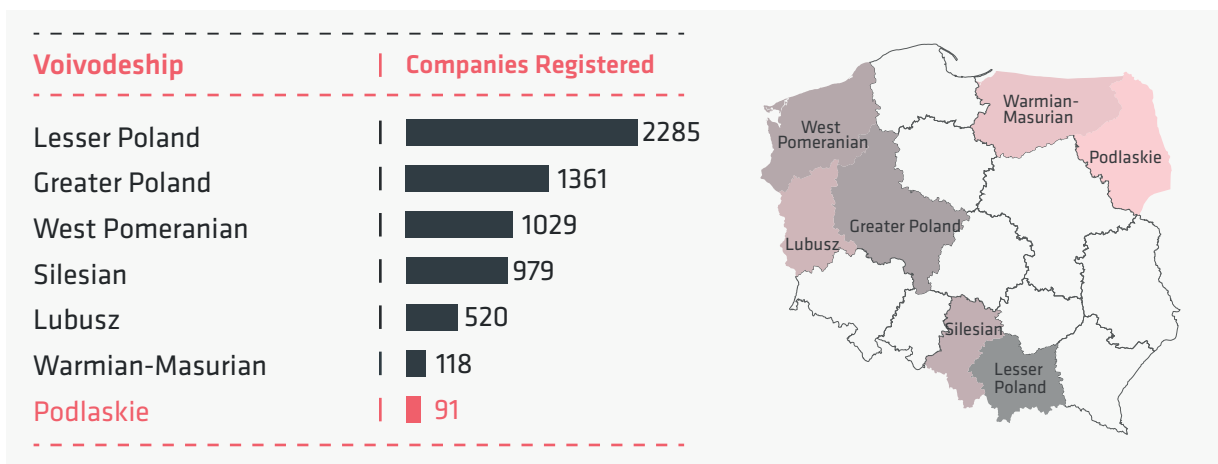
3.3. UKRAINIAN COMPANIES IN POLAND

According to InfoCredit, Ukrainian citizens established nearly 17.5 thousand companies in Poland in 2023, and 13 thousand in the first half of 2024 (InfoCredit, 2024). The number of registered businesses varies by voivodeship: most companies are registered in the most prosperous regions. At the same time, most are in the typically male-dominated sectors of IT services, construction or transport, with the beauty sector being the only exception.



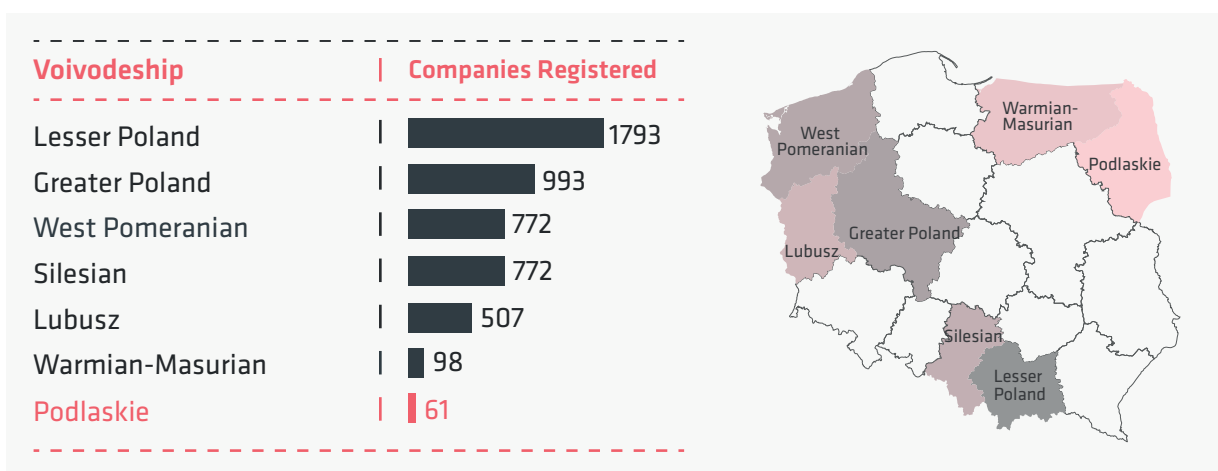
COMPANIES LAUNCHED BY UKRAINIANS IN 2023 AND 2024

A. Number of companies registered by Ukrainian citizens in 2023



Out of 17 457 companies established by Ukrainians in Poland in 2023, 14 258 (82%) were still active at the end of the year (1 191 were liquidated and 1 781 suspended). Cracow (1899), Poznan (840) and Szczecin (655) belonged to the six cities with the biggest number of companies run by Ukrainian.

B. Number of companies registered by Ukrainian citizens between 01 Jan and 30 May 2024



Out of 13 117 companies established by Ukrainians in Poland in the first 5 months of 2024, 11 694 (89%) were still active at the end of may (170 were liquidated and 421 suspended). Cracow (1549), Poznan (591) and Szczecin (471) were still in the top six.

Source: <https://www.infocredit.pl//pl/nawosci/archiwum/ukrainskimikrobyznes-w-polsce.html>



Some of these companies operated for only a few months: 18% closed down within one year in 2023 and 11% in the first 6 months of 2024. The reasons for these liquidations require separate research, but our study provides two hypotheses worth testing on a wider scale.

Firstly, our informants believed that these small businesses often closed because they lacked capital or financial guarantees. The voivodeship labour office representatives provided a telling example: some refugee entrepreneurs tried to join county-level grant programs aimed at strengthening small businesses, but no entity was ready to provide them with the necessary guarantees, and they also had no capital of their own to ensure the viability of their business plans.

Secondly, a large number of refugees had very little knowledge of Polish business activity regulations and labour law, and they had a rather inaccurate image of what might be required of an entrepreneur. According to our interviewees at NGOs and labour offices, those who had information about registered forms of economic activity often decided these requirements were too high considering the amount of time and little capital they could invest in their small businesses. Therefore, unregistered economic activity might be a solution for these refugees in their initial economic inclusion process (nierejestrowana działalność gospodarcza).⁶

Unregistered economic activity is a form of legal economic activity with minimized administrative requirements. For instance, such business activity does not need to be registered with CEIDG, can be reported using a simple personal income tax form, and is VAT exempt. Unregistered economic activity can be a solution for individuals who earn no more than 75% of the minimum salary from their products or services, but documentation is still required:

micro-entrepreneurs using this form of activity still need to issue receipts and keep registries of their expenses and sales. If a service is ordered by a third party under a service contract (umowa-zlecenie), the third party is required to cover the social security expenses.

Regardless of the methodological limitations of the study, the data show that business activity may be too demanding to constitute a solution for most of the refugee job-seekers. A decision to launch a business is also related to the decision to settle – one that many of our refugee interviewees were reluctant to make. Many spoke of returning to Ukraine, while none spoke of a strong bond with the town or city in which they found themselves.

3.4. AGE, GENDER AND EMPLOYMENT

Slightly over 2/5 of men and 3/5 of women who were registered as refugees based on the Special Act in August 2024 in our area of intervention were of working age, i.e., 18 to 59 years (see the table below). We decided to use the “around working age” category as working age is hard to clearly delineate. Many refugees aged 60 or more look for jobs, while some young refugees (aged 18 or a few years more) are still studying and have not yet joined the labour force. Thus, the 18–60 range is an imperfect approximation but it makes it possible to find some middle ground between the Polish and Ukrainian retirement ages and raise questions related to refugees’ right to retirement. Refugees who were aged between 50 and 60 often found that their age was a barrier to finding a job. As one of them put it: As soon as you approach and say your age, they tell you 'we don't need you,' and that's it. (Ukrainian refugee, male, Greater Poland).

⁶ For more information see: Działalność nierejestrowa i inne rodzaje działalności, których nie trzeba rejestrować, Ministry of Development and Technology, <https://www.biznes.gov.pl/pl/porta/00115>.



Refugees in their late forties or fifties with higher qualifications believed, moreover, that their age was a barrier to having their competencies recognized. For instance, one participant said it did not make much sense for him to spend several years validating his medical qualifications and learning the language as he would reach the Polish retirement threshold in the meantime. He also believed that undergoing all these procedures at his age would be more difficult and more degrading to his self-esteem than giving up his medical career. Becoming a student again would require him to disregard the years of experience he already had. He had not taken an exam in years and feared he might fail those required of medical specialists attempting to have their qualifications recognized.

Many of the refugees over 60, some of whom had already retired in Ukraine, started looking for a job when they came to Poland. The Ukrainian pension, as a source of income, did not allow them even to cover their monthly food expenses. Over one fourth (26.8%) of Ukrainian pensioners received less than 310 PLN monthly, according to data from April 2024 (<https://e-ukraina.pl/emerytura-na-ukrainie-w-2024-roku/>).

Other transfers that were sometimes available to them from the Polish state budget were also insufficient to make ends meet. Employment seemed the only solution to secure their livelihood. These older participants often found that their potential employers or people assigned to support them at public institutions or NGOs were surprised by the fact that they were even looking for a job.

When I arrived in 2022, I went to the employment office because I had to find a way to live and I was 67. And they said, 'Too old - that's it, ma'am, nothing, that's all.' So I was just standing at the Red Cross. I came in January 2023. I was standing there because they were supposed to give us something. And what do you think? Their supervisor came and asked, 'Ma'am, do you need something?' I said, 'I don't need anything. I want to work.' You know, they found me a job, and I worked officially.
(Ukrainian refugee, female, Podlaskie)

The fact that older refugee job seekers were misunderstood shows that the level of social awareness related to the economic situation of this group was very low. Poles sensed these older job-seekers had a right to retirement but did not understand that many older refugees could not afford to retire. This regularity points to the need for awareness raising and advocacy.

Table 2. Refugees with UKR status by age and gender

	M			F			TOTAL
	all ages	18-59 as % of all ages	50-59 as % of age group 18-59	all ages	18-59 as % of all ages	50-59 as % of age group 18-59	
LUBUSZ	12 071	44%	6%	20 890	66%	9%	32,961
LESSER POLAND	33 520	46%	7%	52 992	63%	11%	86,512
PODLASKIE	5 251	40%	9%	8 731	63%	13%	13,982
SILESIA	37 142	44%	6%	60 271	64%	9%	97,413
WARMIA-MASURIA	6 459	40%	7%	11 226	61%	11%	17,685
GREATER POLAND	33 278	42%	6%	56 277	64%	9%	89,555
WEST POMERANIA	17 304	45%	7%	29 719	66%	11%	47,023

Source: Ministry of Digital Affairs, 13.08.2024



The table above shows that women constitute the majority of refugees in Poland, a significant proportion of which are working age. This underscores that refugees from Ukraine entering the labour market in Poland are predominantly women. To understand their employment opportunities, it is useful to compare these data with studies conducted by labour offices on jobs sought in each of the regions (Barometr zawodów). This comparison raises an important question about which jobs are sought and whether they tend to be in typically female- or male-dominated sectors, or in sectors where gender does not play a significant role.

Table 3 presents the list of jobs in demand across each voivodeship within the area of intervention; an “X” indicates the presence of demand. An analysis of this data points to several patterns. Regional differences are visible in the number of jobs or professions in demand as well as their character. In Podlaskie and Warmia-Masuria, two voivodeships characterized by slower growth, fewer jobs are in demand also in those sectors where salaries are typically low (e.g., care or education). To a degree, the list mirrors the economic “specializations” of each region, e.g., tourism in Lesser Poland and West Pomerania or the increased needs of corporate services in the richest voivodeships. Despite regional differences, there is a consistent demand for certain highly qualified but lower paid jobs in the medical and education sectors.

It should also be stressed that most jobs in the list require some qualifications. This shows not only that the situation of persons without any qualifications may be difficult, but also that some level of Polish (sufficient to communicate the qualifications a person has) may be necessary to find a job.

Lastly, the list shows that regional labour markets have more to offer to job seekers in the male-dominated sectors. Many candidates are sought for typically male-dominated technical jobs, which are usually linked to lower language requirements

and lesser formal barriers in terms of skills or diploma recognition. Jobs in the typically female-dominated sectors tend to require high qualifications while being typically underpaid (the education sector may be a good example) and inaccessible due to diploma-related requirements (some of the medical professions), or both (low paid but essential medical professions such as nurses and midwives are an excellent example). Jobs that seem to be more accessible and possibly better paid especially include office work (accounting and finance assistants), sales and customer service, but these “pink collar” jobs typically require good Polish language skills. It should be stressed that data gathered by labour offices is, for methodological reasons, likely marked by an overrepresentation of state institutions and larger businesses .

3.5. BARRIERS TO FINDING (OR ACCEPTING) EMPLOYMENT

In our research, we distinguished between any employment and “ok” jobs. We used this distinction in interviews with refugees, encouraging them to specify what may be “ok” or “not ok” about a job. Many had jobs that were unsatisfying but still accepted them because they believed them to be a reasonable compromise between their expectations and what they believed the market could offer. Still, some refugees could not find or accept a job at all, regardless of whether it was an “ok” job or not. In this section we try to explain what barriers they faced. We only consider cases in which a person is seeking work, and we realize a large share of refugees are not active members of the labour force for reasons related to health, age, education, disability, care duties, etc. At the same time, it should be stressed that illness, old age, ongoing education, disability or care duties may but do not necessarily equal inability to undertake work. However, they typically require that terms of employment can be adapted to the needs of the employee.

What may prevent those actively seeking employment from finding or accepting a job?



Table 3. Jobs and professions sought in each of the voivodeships in 2024 according to Barometr Zawodów

Sector	Job/Profession	Wielko-polskie	Zacho-dniopolskie	Lubel-skie	Mało-polskie	Ślą-skie	Pod-laskie	Warmiń-sko-ma-zurskie
Care	caregivers to older persons or persons with disabilities	×	×	×	×	×		
Constructions	construction workers	×	×	×	×	×		×
	pavers	×		×				×
	roofers and tinsmiths	×	×		×			×
	construction installation fitters	×		×	×	×	×	×
	bricklayers and plasterers	×	×	×	×	×		×
	finishing works construction workers	×	×	×	×	×		×
	concrete workers and reinforcers				×			
Drivers and operators	earthworks machine operators	×	×	×	×		×	×
	drivers of trucks and tractors	×	×	×	×	×	×	×
	bus drivers	×	×	×	×	×	×	×
	train drivers	×		×				
Education	teachers (of school subjects)	×	×	×	×	×		
	teachers of vocational skills	×	×	×	×	×	×	×
	early education teachers	×	×	×	×			
	preschool teachers	×	×	×				
	instructors of practical vocational skills	×	×	×		×	×	×
	teachers at schools for children with special needs and in integration departments	×	×	×	×	×		
	educators in educational and care institutions		×	×	×			
	pedagogists		×	×				
HoReCa	bakers	×		×	×	×		
	cooks		×					
	chefs		×	×	×	×		×
	confectioners							
Forestry	forest workers			×				
Light industry	tailors and clothing industry workers	×						
Logistics	warehouse managers and workers	×	×	×	×			
Office workers	specialists in accounting	×	×	×	×			
	independent accountants	×	×	×	×	×		×
	HR specialists			×				



Sector	Job/Profession	Wielko-polskie	Zacho-dniopo-morskie	Lubel-skie	Mało-polskie	Ślą-skie	Pod-laskie	Warmiń-sko-ma-zurskie
Medical professions	medical doctors, physicians	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
	nurses and midwives	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
	physiotherapists	X	X					X
	emergency medical technicians	X	X					
Psychologists and therapists	psychologists, psychotherapists	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
	speech therapists		X					
Sales	sales frontliners			X				
Social work	social workers		X	X				
Technical specialists and workers	locksmiths	X	X			X		X
	welders	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
	carpenters	X	X		X			X
	cutting machine operators	X	X	X				
	electricians and electromechanics	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
	car mechanics		X	X	X	X		X
	machine mechanics			X				
Uniformed services	uniformed services members	X	X	X	X	X	X	
Unskilled work	unskilled physical workers for manufacturing			X				

Source: Barometr zawodów 2024

3.5.1. SOCIAL ISOLATION FROM MARKET OPPORTUNITIES

By social isolation we mean a range of factors preventing refugees' access to labour market opportunities. We describe this isolation as social because the research shows that social ties were especially important to our interviewees in their job searches. Family, friends and acquaintances were often the ones who provided them with information, ideas and motivation to look for a job. Some refugees also relied on the "weak ties" of social media to identify job opportunities. While in some cases the job-search strategies of refugees from Ukraine may be described as overdependent on informal networks (see

point 3.6.7), we have not come across any examples of limited social ties favouring better job opportunities.

Social isolation can arise from multiple factors, such as living in a town where income-generating opportunities are very limited, or the inability to reach a place where there is a job opening (e.g., due to poorly developed public transport, lack of a car, or disability). It can also stem from the social environment, such as a lack of other job-seeking peers, or from having very limited social contacts generally. Limited Polish language competences or ineffective use of the internet as a source of information regarding work-related opportunities also contribute to social isolation.



Other research findings underline the link between social isolation and reduced employment prospects. The National Bank of Poland (NBP) survey carried out in May 2022 indicated that people who came to Poland alone were less likely to look for a job (NBP, 2022: 16–17). In the 2023 MSNA, the employment rate of inhabitants living in collective shelters was lower than in other accommodation types, and this difference could not be explained by the higher share of retirees (Deloitte, 2023, 2). Based on our observations, this is also likely to stem from relative social isolation. This interpretation was also suggested by the career advisors interviewed, who also worked with people living in collective accommodation.

They live at OZZs (pol. Ośrodki Zbiorowego Zakwaterowania, eng. Collective Accommodation Center); they are among other people from Ukraine and they are not socially active, so they just don't adapt... ..They are not active workwise or socially..., so they also lack some external motivation to learn the language. (Career Advisor)

Most or all inhabitants of these shelters are refugees, and in many cases they struggle with finding employment that would allow them to rent a flat of their own. Shelters offer little in terms of social or work-related networking. As a career advisor stressed, in such conditions finding a job requires a great deal of internal motivation and psychological resilience. In other words, an individual refugee needs to be able to compensate for the lacking social bonds. This kind of strength is rare, especially among vulnerable groups.

3.5.2. INFLEXIBLE TERMS OF EMPLOYMENT

Inflexible terms of employment present significant challenges for refugees with special needs, such as health issues, living with disabilities, or caregiving responsibilities, thus forcing many out of the formal labour market. Where the labour market is shaped mostly by employers' expectations, flexible jobs (e.g., part time or with flexible hours)

may be more difficult to find. An example of a mismatch between local employers' job offers and the expectations of refugee job seekers was provided by several labour office representatives, who said that some of the refugees found that they were unable to accept a full-time position due to care duties, health-related challenges, or the need to generate more income (see the next point), typically by taking more than one job. These refugees preferred "something more flexible" and, according to the informants, often decided to undertake informal employment in private households, such as cleaning, baby-sitting or gardening. Another example was provided by a job agency whose representative said they offered no jobs to people with children. This representative said the agency could not ensure proper conditions for children at the workplaces to which employees were typically delegated (they offered low-skilled jobs, typically with accommodation, mainly in agriculture or construction).

3.5.3. LACK OF HOUSING CAPITAL

As the Deloitte team wrote, "The standard of living of refugees from Ukraine may be significantly lower than natives', even at similar incomes, due to their lack of housing capital. 87% of the population in Poland resided in owner-occupied housing in 2021 and 2022, according to Eurostat. As most refugees from Ukraine do not possess housing of their own in Poland, they need to rent in a relatively tight market, especially when they reside in large metropolitan areas that offer the most opportunities" (Deloitte 2024: 29, see also: IRC 2024).

This observation was confirmed by our key informants. For instance, a representative of a large retailer said that few refugees applied for jobs in their shops, although the company was open and organizationally prepared to hire refugees and migrants. This representative believed that the main reason for the prevalence of Polish citizens among candidates was related to the cost of living, which in his opinion was higher for refugees.



The refugees were not able to accept jobs at the company's stores as the salary would not allow them to cover the costs of renting a flat and sustaining a family. A number of other employees and job agencies' representatives said that refugee job seekers often asked about whether their potential employer offered accommodation. A relatively low pay level was also a reason why county labour offices' offers were assessed as unattractive by most refugees participating in the study. The labour offices' representatives were aware of the mismatch but felt there was little they could do.

Again we should mention the significance of the gender pay gap in relation to the situation of refugees from Ukraine. As explained previously (3.4), candidates for highly qualified positions in typically female-dominated public sector jobs in education, medical care or social work are sought across Poland. At the same time, pay levels in these sectors are not always sufficient to cover the expenses of a refugee household, especially when a large family has just one breadwinner. Needless to say, the aforementioned pay gap also affects men who decide to undertake the typically female-dominated jobs of nurses, midwives, school psychologists or teachers.

3.5.4. UNPREPARED EMPLOYERS

According to a share of our key informants (especially representing WUPs and NGOs), larger corporations (by which they typically meant international companies with hundreds rather than tens of employees) were generally better prepared and more open to the idea of employing migrants and refugees. They were more likely to have onboarding procedures adapted to the needs of beginner-level speakers of Polish and had more experience in maintaining effective multilingual working environments. During our interviews with employers, we learnt that this observation, although accurate in many cases, was an oversimplification.

What we found was accurate was the description of smaller companies' capacity to absorb diversity: while owners or managers were often ready to employ migrants or refugees, smaller companies' expectations were less standardized and often less compatible with this group's living situation than those of large companies. For example, candidates were expected to be ready to accept a position for a longer period of time, otherwise the employer's investment in onboarding may be too big a cost for a small company. In comparison to larger companies, smaller businesses often also expected more versatility, such as an office worker being responsible for some accounting, HR and marketing. The scope of requirements typically meant that the language-related expectations of smaller businesses for office positions were higher.

At the same time, we found the opinion that larger corporations may be more open to hiring refugees misleading. Some large corporations work as franchise networks without unified HR policies and procedures, or they give their field offices a lot of autonomy. In such cases, individual outlets of these companies may not differ much from small or mid-sized enterprises operating in Poland, and whether refugees and migrants can find an "ok" job in them is largely a matter of managers' attitudes. Also, not all corporations have policies that encourage diversity. For instance, the representative of a large global company in Silesia who was interviewed for the study said they were not employing migrants or refugees at their plant as they considered language to be too much of a barrier to ensure smooth workflow. This belief was, in our opinion, unfounded and likely marked by prejudice as the facility mainly offered low-skilled jobs in food processing.

For these reasons, we point to employers' attitudes and organizational capacity rather than the size of the enterprise as factors impacting refugees' employment opportunities.



3.6. BARRIERS TO FINDING AN “OK” JOB

We assume that refugees’ expectations of an “ok” job were shaped by their experiences and their perceptions of their opportunities in their labour market. Since negative experiences and perceptions were relatively common among this group, its expectations also tended to be low. “Ok” typically meant “good enough” rather than “good”. An “ok” job allowed them to make ends meet and maintain an adequate work-life balance. An “ok” job did not undermine their self-esteem beyond what the refugees believed to be an acceptable level of degradation of their status in the foreign labour market. The refugees generally understood that they might not be able to put all their competencies into practice until they mastered the language. They also realized expectations for similar positions in Poland and in Ukraine could be different. Hence, they accepted some level of mismatch between their previous job positions and responsibilities and their current job in Poland.

When defining an “ok” job, the refugees typically did not take into consideration the legal aspects of their employment. This question was especially sensitive for refugees who had a longer history of accepting informal employment, i.e., jobs outside the state system of labour and social rights. One job advisor who worked directly with refugees in livelihood projects described the issue as traumatizing for job seekers who experienced work-related exploitation.

How big a share of Ukrainian refugees have jobs that they find unsatisfying? According to IOM, “67% of employed respondents were satisfied with their employment situation” (IOM 2023:1). This leaves about one third who were not, adding to those who had no employment despite their efforts to find a job. The share is difficult to calculate, but these figures indicate it is far from negligible. What were, according to our interviewees, the main barriers to finding better employment or an “ok” job?

3.6.1. DISCRIMINATION

The analysis presented above (see point 3.2.) indicates that living in a smaller town or a poorer region is likely to impact the chances of finding employment. The interviews we conducted with representatives from labour offices and job agencies complicate this picture. Namely, even the less robust local economies in Poland usually have some jobs to offer, but these are typically unskilled and low-paid jobs. Being part of a labour market where Poles also struggle to find employment often means that only the least attractive jobs are available for refugees. A job agency in Podlaskie, which should be described as a less robust economy, openly said they sought migrants and refugees only for the simplest and lowest-paid physical work. Anything more attractive, they said, would be offered to Polish job seekers. A similar opinion was shared by our interviewees from the labour office in Warmia-Masuria, a region affected by long-term unemployment. This indicates that tougher economic conditions may produce forms of discrimination that are likely to be perceived by refugees as the objective labour market situation, but they actually represent a preference for hiring “our own” for more attractive positions. Opinions like the following, expressed by a refugee in Podlaskie, are a good example: “There are not enough opportunities for people with high qualifications; most available jobs are low-skilled or physical labour”. Discrimination may also arise in more direct forms related mainly to overlooking refugees’ competencies or the value of their contributions to the functioning of workplaces/companies. This not only causes frustration but also affects chances of career advancement.

“” *When I quickly learned everything and stayed to work, problems started from the Polish side – like, some Ukrainian came, learned everything, and they hadn't caught up yet. And the attitude gets worse when you start to understand and point out mistakes. Suddenly, there's aggression: 'Who are you to teach me?'. (Ukrainian refugee, Silesia)*



Belarusian migrants and refugees interviewed in Podlaskie were also disappointed that they had not experienced a similar wave of solidarity to that enjoyed by refugees from Ukraine in the first months following the February invasion. “There’s a feeling that Ukrainians are prioritized in job offers over Belarusians”, one of the interviewees believed, suggesting that – as is likely – the level of discrimination experienced by Belarusians was even greater.⁸

The available literature points to discrimination as one of the barriers to finding employment (OECD 2024, p.6, DTM, p. 3). Interestingly, a research team led by Zyzik has provided evidence that discrimination may be even greater in cases of jobs requiring lower qualifications (Zyzik et al. 2024, 6).

3.6.2. LANGUAGE

According to the available research as well as the opinions of our key informants, basic Polish language competencies were relatively common among the refugees from Ukraine from the first months of the response. In a survey by the National Bank of Poland, conducted in May 2022, only 46% of refugees from Ukraine declared they had no knowledge of Polish (NBP, 2022: 12). The data from MSNA collected by Deloitte a year later showed the share of similar declarations dropped to 21% (Deloitte 2024, p. 22). The available evidence shows that language is a bigger barrier to finding an “ok” job than to finding any job at all. As one of our interviewees put it:

Of course, apart from the language barrier, which seems the most obvious thing, there is the issue of working below one's qualifications. ...candidates who come here constantly complain about working in roles below their skill levels, which very often also stems from their language skills, because these two things are closely connected.
(Employer and job agency)

Not all of the employers and job agency representatives we talked to expected job candidates to speak Polish, and some of the refugees we talked to had jobs despite very little knowledge of Polish. Jobs also varied greatly with regard to the level of Polish they required.

A representative of a job agency in Podlaskie, offering mainly low-skilled physical work, said in our interview: Many of those from Ukraine somehow understand Polish when they come to us, at least at the level of comprehension. This level of Polish was enough for a refugee to find any job, but not always a job they found “ok”. Most refugees realized that language was a barrier to a better job. One refugee seems to express a more general opinion: You need to know Polish, and then you can try something else (Ukrainian refugee, Podlaskie).

Strong language skills were a prerequisite for many kinds of office work or direct work with customers. These skills were necessary to have specialist skills recognized officially or validated within a given work environment. In some specialized fields, English functions as the lingua franca, in other words the necessary Polish technical vocabulary may be relatively narrow. This may make adaptation easier for specialists in IT or construction than for teachers or psychologists. As we have also observed, typically female-dominated professions required better command of Polish than the typically male-dominated professions. In that sense, we should also think of these language barriers as gendered.

A coping strategy of some of the refugee women was to look for jobs that are less demanding in terms of language but are perceived as more dignified than physical work such as cleaning. One of the interviewed labour office representatives spoke interestingly about why, as she observed, many highly qualified refugee women had the ambition to become hair or

⁸ Anthropological research shows that hierarchies of migrant groups may be formed by external factors such as state policies and the dominant population’s attitudes towards migrants and refugees. It is important to be aware of such inequalities when planning humanitarian interventions and aim to mitigate them. See, for instance: Aleinikoff & Klusmeyer, 2000.



nail stylists: the jobs available to such qualified women who did not speak Polish were always below their qualifications. Many of those jobs were cooking or cleaning, which they perceived as socially degrading. A job in the beauty sector was often perceived as less degrading to their self-esteem. One interviewee also stressed that being a nail stylist may be only a step in a career, allowing a refugee to make ends meet while learning the language and validating qualifications.

The NGO and labour office representatives also said that Polish language courses were the most sought form of livelihood support they offered or referred refugees to other entities for, as is also confirmed by other research (NBP, 2022: 21; NBP, 2023: 5).

3.6.3. LOWER OR UNRECOGNIZED COMPETENCIES

In 2023, researchers from the Institute for Structural Research wrote: “More than 50% of refugee workers found work in elementary occupations (compared to 7% of the indigenous employed population). This raises concerns about a skill mismatch as a half of Ukrainian refugees have tertiary education, which equips them with skill levels above those required in elementary occupations. The occupational structure of refugee employment was very similar to the pre-war employment structure of Ukrainian workers (see Figure 4; Gromadzki & Lewandowski 2023: 7). This description points to a persisting challenge that characterizes the inclusion of refugees in the Polish economy.

The remedies recommended in the available reports include strengthening prior learning recognition systems, including diploma recognition (OECD, 2023: 24). The OECD study points out that Ukrainian refugees have many of the skills sought in the labour market (ibid.: 30). While this is an accurate

observation, we should consider the mismatch of competencies in the light of the refugees’ lack of housing capital (3.5.3) and language barriers (3.6.3). As explained previously, the salaries offered for some of the sought jobs and professions (especially in medical care and education) are relatively low, which may make such positions inaccessible to many refugees. Moreover, some skills recognition processes are time consuming and demanding (e.g., they involve a long period of learning and taking several exams).

To contextualize these observations further, let us use the baseline data for one of the activities of the project this study is part of.⁹ Based on the project participants’ declarations, their monthly expenses on rent and utilities ranged from 0 (for most participants living in shelters or with a host family) to 6,000 PLN (for those renting flats on the free market). 20% of those who had any such expenses spent more than 2500 PLN monthly on rent and utilities. 7% paid 4,000 PLN or more. The net base salary (on a fixed contract) of a nurse in Poland is around 4,900 PLN since 1st July 2024.¹⁰ While this salary is by no means low, considering the median salary in Poland,¹¹ it may not be an incentive for the sole breadwinner of a larger household to seek diploma recognition.

Diploma recognition procedures may also be time consuming and demanding in terms of language requirements. In some cases, additional professional training may be required. These requirements are often well justified but might be impossible to fulfill for a person who already has a full-time job and a family to sustain. If a procedure takes years rather than months, a person who decides to pursue it risks also losing touch with their profession.

⁹ The data come from registration interviews with participants qualified for multipurpose cash assistance. The main award criterion was their difficult financial situation.

¹⁰ “Podwyżki wynagrodzeń w ochronie zdrowia od 1 lipca 2024 - wdrożenie”, Lex Wolters Kluwer, 20.05.2024, <https://www.lex.pl/podwyzki-wynagrodzen-w-ochronie-zdrowia-od-1-lipca-2024-r,36183.html> (accessed on 17.12.2024).

¹¹ According to GUS, the salary reached 6,480.52 PLN gross in May 2024, which translates to around 4750 net on a fixed contract. https://stat.gov.pl/download/gfx/portalinformacyjny/pl/default-taktualnosci/5474/32/5/1/rozklad_wynagrodzen_w_gospodarce_narodowej_w_maju_2024_r..docx (accessed on 17.12.2024).



There are also cases in which investment in adapting one's skills to the local context may require multi-year investment in one's own development. When one's competencies are not only highly specialized but also tied to the context of the home country, attempts to rebuild one's own professional position in the new country may simply seem unreasonable. Professionals in such situations may perceive their forced migration as irreversible professional degradation:

“In general, I work remotely in Ukraine because my qualifications – I'm a lawyer in Ukraine – are not needed here in Poland [...] what the employment centres offer is terrible. Without a diploma and without knowledge of the language, they consider us as not even having finished school and just offer awful job vacancies. (Ukrainian refugee, Greater Poland)

However, the barriers to having one's skills and diplomas recognized that are mentioned in this section are surmountable. What seems most needed is support for people willing to undergo such processes in matters related to formal procedures, the costs of these procedures, the necessary language courses, as well as, in the case of the lengthiest procedures, maintaining contact with one's profession.

Some of the research participants also pointed to the market demand for certified specialists with technical qualifications. The provided examples were related mainly to transport (driving licenses) and construction (certificates for designing or installing gas or electricity systems or solar panels).

3.6.4. PSYCHO-SOCIAL BARRIERS

Psycho-social barriers to finding employment include a variety of individual and group reactions to exile and the refugees' experiences in Poland. Based on the interviews with our informants, these reactions include psychological fatigue, lack of confidence, mistrust towards employers in Poland, and misconceptions about the Polish labour market. These are often well grounded

in the refugees' experiences. For instance, mistrust or resignation may stem from various experiences of exploitative jobs.

Due to its methodological limitations, this research points to the significance of the psychosocial aspects of refugees' adaptation in Poland rather than providing exhaustive descriptions of these aspects of adaptation. Our informants provided examples worth investigating on a wider scale. Here are some of them:

- One employer said that women often applied for jobs below their competencies, which they tended not even to signal in their CV. She attributed this to lack of self-confidence, which was also identified as a reason by refugees themselves, some of whom said it – often combined with the loss of hope or motivation – prevented them from undertaking language or vocational courses that could help them find a job more in line with their qualifications. “Well, there's still no confidence. I think that if I had learned the language, if I had gone and looked for something better... if I hadn't been afraid and had confidence in myself, that I could have done more – I would have looked for something better and achieved it”. (Ukrainian refugee, Podlaskie)
- A labour office representative spoke of psychological barriers, including exile-related depression symptoms manifesting, e.g., as lack of discipline at work or lack of energy to develop one's skills (especially related to language). These symptoms may be interpreted by potential employers as unreliability or short-sightedness.
- When asked about their work-related situation in Poland during the focus group discussions, a number of participants, especially older ones, spoke of returning to Ukraine. They did not know when or if at all this would happen, but the prospect allowed them to downplay the difficulties they were facing in Poland as only temporary.



3.6.5. PRECARIOUS WORK

I sit here, working these 12–14 hours because I don't have time to learn the language, said a Ukrainian refugee in Podlaskie during the FGD conducted there. She was trying to explain how trapped she was in her job, which she found exploitive and degrading. She wanted to learn Polish to get a better job but had no time and energy to do so. She was also unable to use support offered by labour offices or aid organizations related to vocational training. The reason why precarious work can be a barrier to finding better work does not require much explanation. Supporting refugees in overcoming this may require forms of support that combine work-related support programs (such as job advisory, vocational training and language courses) with longer-term cash assistance.

3.6.6. CARE DUTIES

The available research indicates that care duties are one of the main barriers in accessing the labour market for refugees: an IOM study shows that 48% of refugees who are not active on the labour market explain that they cannot work due to their care duties (IOM, 2023: 10–11). At the same time, care duties do not affect the economic activity of all Ukrainians in Poland in the same way. Based on the NBP data gathered in 2023: “having a family or children in Poland was not a differentiating factor concerning labour market activity in the case of the pre-war migrants... On the other hand, the presence of family and children was very important in the case of the refugees” (NBP, 2023: 18). The fact that care duties hamper the economic inclusion of refugees but not so much that of Ukrainian diaspora members may stem from various factors differentiating both cohorts, such as the share of single-parent families (over four times higher in the case of the refugees) or the higher average earnings of the pre-war migrants (NBP, 2023: 11, 17). It may also point to the importance of time: the diaspora members, most of whom had been in Poland longer, had had more time to find solutions to their care duties.

The results of our study are consistent with the cited studies. All labour office representatives pointed to care duties (and insufficient institutional support) as one of refugees' main barriers to finding and maintaining employment, especially in the case of women. One of the WUPs explained that care duties made it impossible for some refugees even to enroll in their free language courses. The courses were organized outside of working hours, but that was when many working refugees started their second shift at home.

Those who came after the 24th are mostly women with children, and they have care duties. They often can't fully engage in work because they have to take care of their children, and in Poland there are also problems with access to institutional care, such as kindergartens and so on. The same goes for participating in vocational training – they also face barriers to participating because these programs run during hours when kindergartens are already closed, or there is no simultaneous provision of childcare. (Ukrainian-led NGO, Lesser Poland Voivodeship)

The FGD participants also spoke of care duties, especially the lack of accessibility to free childcare services, as a major barrier to employment, but they also provided examples of refugees' informal coping strategies.

One mother with children is looking for another mother with children; one works the night shift while the other works during the day, and it works out fine because there's no other option. (Ukrainian refugee, Silesian Voivodeship)

It should be stressed that refugees with UKR status have the same access to public childcare services and child care financial support as Poles. Nevertheless, childcare services are often scarce, especially outside the larger urban centres. What seems a bigger challenge than childcare is long-term care for persons with disabilities. Here, effective institutional solutions have largely been lacking for Poles and refugees alike (Kubicki, 2017; Kubicki et al. 2019).¹²

¹² For more information about the social assistance available to refugees from Ukraine in the first two years of the response, see: PFM, 2022.



3.6.7. JOB SEARCH TACTICS LIMITED TO ONE'S INFORMAL NETWORK

Most refugees we talked to believed that the best way to find a job in Poland was through people they knew who could recommend them or inform them about job openings. This belief contrasted with the expectations of the employers we talked to. Most expected a CV to be shared with them via email.

Smaller companies also expected CVs to be prepared by candidates. For one of the interviewees managing such a company, a CV was important as it showed a candidate had made an effort to look professional. She managed a HoReCa company and advertised vacant positions in online portals (OLX was mentioned probably most often). This is how most candidates were found. Companies and agencies offering mainly low-skilled jobs did

not have similar expectations and were fine with candidates inquiring about jobs in person. Still, none of the employers relied on their employees to search for new candidates.

It is possible that the mismatch between the refugees' job search tactics and the recruitment procedures of the employers taking part in the study is smaller than it seems. Informal networks may be used only to gather information about in-demand jobs, but CVs, application forms, interviews and other formalized procedures still need to be followed. However, overreliance on word of mouth is likely to limit refugees' access to information about the labour market.



4. LESSONS FROM LIVELIHOOD PROJECTS

This brief chapter aims to summarize the lessons from livelihood projects targeting refugees from Ukraine that were shared by our interviewees working for NGOs or Voivodship Labour Offices, or as Career advisors. Their observations were very similar. We summarize them as three types of recommendations concerning the approach, choice of activities, and mistakes to avoid.

4.1. APPROACH

According to the research participants, a strong livelihood project should be long-lasting and should offer various forms of support tailored to individual needs. These forms may include career advisory, language and vocational courses, coaching or psychological support and cash assistance, but the point of departure for designing an aid package should be an individual interview. Some of the research participants stressed that a share of their project participants were not yet ready to undertake a job but needed psychological support or coaching focused on job activation. In such cases, cash assistance was important as it helped these refugees engage in self-development without the risk of falling into extreme poverty. These research participants also observed that success should not be measured only by the number of people who found jobs: a person starting to look for one or coming to terms with the need to do so was also an indication that the project activities made sense.

Building linkages between the needs of job seekers and the labour market was described as generally challenging. The research participants were involved in projects aimed at supporting employers in hiring migrants and refugees (by providing information and assisting in paper work), organization of work fairs or internship programs, as well as initiatives supporting skills recognition. These projects were generally described as useful, but in most cases a job seeker's individual efforts to adapt to potential employers' expectations translated into better results

than efforts to change employers' hiring policies. One interviewee stressed that building links is important, but "we need to make sure there's a tangible gain in it for the job-seekers". In his view, well-designed skills recognition and internship programs fulfilled this condition.

4.2. ACTIVITIES

We also asked the research participants about activities they found most effective in improving the livelihoods of refugees. Although many of our interviewees stressed that much depended on individual needs, they also shared some more general observations with us.

4.2.1. POLISH LANGUAGE COURSES

According to the research participants, free language courses were some of the forms of support still most sought by refugees in the third year of the response. However, many courses were too general for refugees who already communicated efficiently in Polish. What they needed were specialized language courses adapted to the requirements of the jobs they wanted to apply for. The research participants especially stressed the need for courses related to "office Polish", including specialized vocabulary related to accounting and HR. Office work in private companies or public administration was what a large share of refugees, especially women, were interested in, but they typically needed to develop their language skills to be able to take responsibility for the (predominantly written) communication in such settings.

4.2.2. VOCATIONAL TRAINING

Vocational training was recommended by most research participants, but topics should be based on needs assessments. The vocational training topics they mentioned as adapted to refugees' needs, based on previous experiences from projects



implemented by their institutions, included HR and basic accounting, basic IT courses, technical skills (especially driving licenses and construction certificates), home and child care courses, and, in voivodeships with a robust tourism sector, basic sales and reception desk training, including English (or German in West Pomerania).

Vocational training should, ideally, be bilingual or combined with a specialized language course. The weakness of courses held in Ukrainian only was that the graduates were not always able to communicate their newly acquired skills to their potential employers and coworkers. The courses should also provide graduates with a completion certificate. If a course concerns a highly regulated job or profession, the certificate should be widely recognized and should allow these new skills to be practised professionally.

4.2.3. SKILLS, PRIOR LEARNING AND DIPLOMA RECOGNITION

Skills mismatch was stressed by most interviewees. To mitigate this, easier access to skills, prior learning and diploma recognition should be ensured, including financial support to cover the cost of the procedures and solutions that allow refugees to maintain contact with their profession in cases of lengthy and demanding procedures. The research participants often stressed their helplessness with regard to diploma recognition in medical professions. They observed that professionals were needed as much as policy changes that encourage refugees to undertake demanding diploma recognition procedures.

4.3. MISTAKES TO AVOID

Research participants also highlighted several common mistakes observed in livelihood programs, either through their own experience or by observing other projects. These mistakes mainly related to failing to adequately address critical barriers during project design. Below are several examples:

- A certified course was organized by one of the actors that allowed participants to gain skills sought in the labour market. To ensure that the teaching material was accessible to them, the course was held in Ukrainian. However, the actor did not realize the certification exams had to be taken in Polish. As a result, most participants were unable to take the exams as they did not understand the questions, thus undermining the intended outcomes of the program.

- Another actor organized vocational and language courses outside of working hours, so as to ensure that more refugees could participate. However, this inadvertently excluded people with caregiving responsibilities; for example, mothers with small children typically could not attend. The actor had no budget to cover the cost of care services for such participants.

- Programs sometimes failed due to imprecise information or the use of contact channels that the target group was unfamiliar with. As one of the research participants explained:

One of the first problems we also see as an organization that works directly with information is that there are many different programs for Ukrainians, including various programs from the labour office and employment centres, but Ukrainians don't always know how to use them. There is also a lot of confusion regarding the [legal] statuses [of the program target groups] because some of these programs are for Ukrainians with temporary protection, while others are for Ukrainians in general, regardless of their status" [...] One of the major mistakes often made here is the use of communication channels that Ukrainians are not accustomed to or do not use, such as websites of city or government institutions. (Ukrainian-led NGO, Malopolska).

As mentioned previously, some of the research participants also stressed that psychological barriers to finding a job were often underestimated. Support directed to the longer-term unemployed should, in their opinion, also incorporate elements of coaching or psychological support.



5. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1. CONCLUSIONS

Refugees from Ukraine represent a highly diverse group, particularly in terms of their livelihood situations. This report has highlighted challenges faced by those who – even three years into the response – continue to struggle to find a job or find a way out of employment that is precarious or violates labour law. Many members of this group face multiple vulnerabilities that severely limit their access to market opportunities. For example, older refugees often look for jobs because their pensions, even when combined with other social benefits, do not allow them to meet their basic needs.

Some of the barriers facing this group are structural, such as:

- a lack of housing capital, which limits refugees' ability to resign from lower paid jobs or invest in work-related development,
- lack of capital for small businesses, which impacts their chances of surviving or developing,
- low value of social safety nets, which forces individuals such as pensioners or people with disabilities to undertake work beyond their physical or emotional capacity,
- isolation from market opportunities, which may stem from structural factors, such as less robust local economies offering few job opportunities, or limited access to group transportation services.

Other barriers are often related to individual trajectories. An example of such a barrier may be the vicious cycle of precarious employment, which makes it extremely difficult for refugees to learn the language or validate their skills and apply for a better job. Many of the barriers mentioned in this report are not unique to refugees from Ukraine but are also shared by other migrant groups or even Polish citizens. Our FGD with migrants and refugees from Belarus shows that this group experiences very similar difficulties in

accessing labour market opportunities and often faces additional barriers compounded by their less favourable legal status. It is likely that other migrant groups face similar or bigger challenges, which points to the need for more inclusive policies and programs.

The research participants also indicated that irregular employment is one of the challenges they face. In some cases, such employment (e.g., undertaking non-legalized but flexible care work or jobs around the house, such as cleaning, gardening or babysitting) is a solution that refugees choose in the absence of other market opportunities. This solution affects their long-term chances of accessing social support or social transfers or legalizing their stay if (or when) the temporary protection regulations are no longer in place.

5.2. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTORS PLANNING LIVELIHOOD PROJECTS TARGETING REFUGEES FROM UKRAINE

The recommendations are ordered according to the barriers to accessing labour market opportunities that are identified in Chapter 3. The recommendations have been formulated based on the suggestions and experiences of the research participants and are meant to support all actors, whether state, local government or NGO, in designing projects adapted to the needs of refugees from Ukraine. Many of the recommendations may be adopted in other projects targeting migrants, but it should be stressed that other migrant groups are likely to face more administrative obstacles in accessing the labour market or public social services. While the inclusion of more migrant groups in livelihood projects is definitely recommendable, this research does not provide sufficient insight in those groups' situation.

Barrier	Recommendations for actors designing livelihood support projects
Social isolation from market opportunities	Consider including activities that enhance access to job markets and social inclusion. Such activities may include financing driving license courses (improved mobility), assistance for persons with disabilities (improved access), facilitating networks between job-seekers and their potential employers (through accurately targeted information or events).
Inflexible terms of employment	Not much can be done in this area without employers' goodwill, so it is crucial to identify those ready to adapt to the needs of job candidates whose lives may demand more flexible terms of employment. Programs aiming at identifying the most needed forms of flexibility and linking employers ready to offer them to job candidates may mitigate this barrier.
Lack of housing capital	Individual organizations can do little to change the housing market in Poland and make decent accommodation a widely accessible good, whether for Poles or other inhabitants of Poland. Consider joining forces with organizations and movements that address housing issues and tenants' rights. Explore ways of including matters concerning refugees in a common agenda.
Unprepared employers	Offer administrative support and awareness-raising activities to employers and encourage them to employ people with refugee or migration backgrounds. Address questions related to legal requirements associated with hiring, ways of tackling language and cultural barriers, and equal treatment.
Discrimination	Offer support to migrants and refugees in addressing cases of discriminatory treatment at the workplace.
Language skills	Include free language courses in your projects. Include specialized courses adapted for specific contexts (e.g., Polish for office employees or medical professionals). Make sure people with disabilities or care duties can attend (support them in accessing courses or arranging care services).
Lower or unrecognized skills or competencies	<p>Identify groups in need of skills or diploma recognition support and the relevant recognition procedures. Check accessibility of the procedures (costs, length, required documents and language skills). Check if institutions in charge of the procedures are ready to cooperate on supporting wider scale recognition programs targeting refugees or migrants.</p> <p>Provide comprehensive and transparent information and support to the targeted groups in accessing the procedures (this may include information, translations, support in compiling documentation and contacting institutions in charge of recognition procedures, financing the cost of procedures, involvement in creating job opportunities that allow project participants to stay in touch with their field of specialization during the recognition procedure).</p>
Psycho-social barriers	Incorporate psychological support or elements of coaching in your projects. Make sure the services are provided in the languages your project participants understand well. As much as possible, seek certified and recognized specialists with experience in working with people with migration backgrounds.
Precarious work	Consider combining language and vocational courses with cash support for people who find themselves in long-term precarious and/or exploitive work. When possible, incorporate psychological assistance in the project.
Care duties	<p>Explore the needs of project participants who have care duties. How do they tackle them? Are they using all of the forms of support available to them? What are their livelihood situations?</p> <p>Provide support in accessing the already available forms of support for persons with care duties (such as public childcare services or state financial transfers for caregivers to persons with disabilities).</p> <p>Join forces with organizations specialized in supporting caregivers, including caregivers' organizations or advocacy initiatives.</p> <p>Offer care support for participants of your activities if needed.</p>
Job search tactics limited to informal network	<p>Learn more about how your project participants look for jobs and information about job openings. Do they, like the participants of this research, rely mainly on informal networks? If so, ensure to familiarize them with the channels often used by employers, such as online portals with job advertisements.</p> <p>Provide support in preparation of CVs. They may not be necessary for every job application, but they are typically appreciated by employers even if they are not absolutely necessary.</p> <p>Make sure you do not limit information about your project to channels your target group is unfamiliar with, e.g., your website only.</p>



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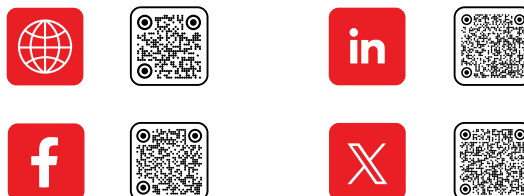
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