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The UN Refugee Agency



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TRANSITIONING FROM TEMPORARY PROTECTION: PROJECTED STAY, LEGAL PATHWAYS, AND POLICY OPTIONS FOR REFUGEES FROM UKRAINE

BACKGROUND

The full-scale war in Ukraine has triggered one of the largest refugee crises in the world. Since 2022, millions of people fleeing Ukraine have been hosted across the European Union (EU) and neighbouring countries under Temporary Protection (TP) or comparable national arrangements, which have provided immediate access to residence, healthcare, social services and employment. As of 28 February 2026, 4.4 million refugees from Ukraine held TP status in the EU.¹ Following successive extensions of the application of the Temporary Protection Directive, TP is currently applied in the EU until March 2027.

As the war endures, the dynamics of displacement are entering a new phase. Return to Ukraine remains a long-term aspiration for many refugees, with an estimated 1.4 million having returned and remained for at least 3 months since February 2022.² However, the protracted nature of the war and uncertainty surrounding the future of TP are prompting both refugees and host governments to explore alternative legal stay scenarios. In this context, planning for legal stay and inclusion during displacement is a necessary complement to return planning, ensuring that refugees remain protected, are supported to achieve self reliance, while equipped to pursue voluntary, safe and sustainable return and reintegration when conditions permit.

Across Europe, approaches to transitions from TP in other forms of legal stay vary widely. In many countries, existing pathways rely heavily on standard migration channels that do not align with the socioeconomic profiles, protection needs or vulnerabilities of refugees likely to remain. On the other hand, while asylum systems continue to play a critical role, the number of applications post-TP risks outstripping capacities, particularly in the absence of other potential routes to legal stay for more vulnerable groups. At the same time, significant information gaps on options to remain or return risk leaving many refugees ‘frozen’ and unable to

initiate informed decision making as TP approaches a potential end.

Against this background, this report examines the scale and characteristics of refugees projected to remain in host countries between the end of 2026 and the end of 2029, drawing on agent-based modelling developed by UNHCR and Brunel University of London³ and complemented by findings from UNHCR’s seventh Intentions Survey.⁴ It then highlights how the transition challenge reflects a structural mismatch between who is likely to remain, what they intend to do and the legal pathways currently available in many contexts. The report concludes with recommendations to support orderly, protection-centred transitions at scale, strengthening outcomes for refugees and host countries while supporting Ukraine’s human capital and recovery capacity.

AN INNOVATIVE METHODOLOGY: AGENT BASED MODELLING

In simple terms, the model simulates how different groups of refugees - based on age, household composition, region of origin and socioeconomic characteristics - are likely to make decisions to stay or return under different future scenarios. Rather than predicting individual behaviour, it shows how the overall scale and profile of those likely to stay may change under different scenarios.

The Agent-Based Model (ABM) simulates refugees’ return under five plausible scenarios relating to the future continuance of war in Ukraine, or the emergence of a ceasefire or fragile peace. Two different scenarios (status quo/continuing war and peace with concessions) are analysed in more detail in this report. All scenarios are constructed around a limited number of common parameters, namely: (1) the intensity and duration of hostilities; (2) the extent of territory remaining under temporary occupation; and (3), the levels of recovery-oriented investment that could reasonably be expected under each

1. Eurostat, Temporary Protection for 4.40 million in February 2026 (14 April 2026), available at: <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/w/ddn-20260414-1>
2. UNHCR, Ukraine Refugee Situation – Population Movements Factsheet #3 (forthcoming).

3. For further information, please refer to: UNHCR, Policy Brief No.2, ‘Forecasting refugee return to Ukraine amid ongoing war and uncertainty’ (February 2026), available at: <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/120890>
4. Forthcoming

situation. These scenarios are not predictive. Rather, they provide a structured, methodologically sound way to explore how refugee decision-making and behaviour may change in response to different plausible future events, based on a range of data.

To ensure comparability across scenarios, all respective contextual elements are assumed to materialise by the end of 2026. This common reference point serves as a technical starting condition for the simulations and do not reflect any expectation regarding the timing of an end to the war. In the Ukraine Victory and Fragile peace with concessions scenarios, TP in the EU is assumed to end in March 2027, with refugees who remain

abroad potentially transitioning to alternative legal frameworks, such as asylum or work or study-related residence permits. Under the ongoing war (status quo) scenario, TP in the EU is assumed to continue, but with gradual and increasing transition of TP beneficiaries towards other forms of legal stay.

Simulations cover a three-year horizon, from the assumed materialisation of each scenario at the end of 2026 through December 2029. The geographic scope includes refugees hosted in the EU and Moldova, with selected results rebased where relevant to reflect the broader Ukrainian refugee population in Europe.

Scenarios and assumptions applied under the Agent-Based Model

SCENARIOS AND ASSUMPTIONS		
Ukraine victory	Ukraine reclaims the Temporarily Occupied Territories by end 2026.	TP ends in March 2027, with possible transition to alternative legal frameworks
Fragile peace with concessions	By end 2026 combat ceases, but the Russian Federation retains de facto control over the Temporarily Occupied Territories in the illegally annexed areas of Ukraine. Medium/high level of investment across government-controlled territories.	
Ongoing war (status quo)	Continued hostilities until the end of 2029, at current or increased intensity. Low investment levels with continued humanitarian interventions.	TP extended. Many Ukrainians will have shifted toward alternative existing legal frameworks (e.g. work permit; study permit; family reunification) Other Ukrainians will shift toward asylum

REFUGEES' CONTINUED STAY AND FUTURE LEGAL STATUS IN HOST COUNTRIES

This section uses ABM results to compare the projected number, distribution and profile of refugees who may remain in host countries.

Scale and distribution of remaining refugees

MAGNITUDE OF REFUGEES REMAINING IN HOST COUNTRIES PER SCENARIO	Refugees by start of simulation	Refugees remaining in host countries by end of simulation		
		Prolonged War (Status Quo)	Fragile Peace with Concessions	Ukraine's Victory
EU & Moldova	4,390,000	4,360,000	2,450,000	1,410,000
Rest of Europe	810,000	800,000	450,000	260,000
TOTAL	5,200,000	5,160,000	2,900,000	1,670,000
% of refugees		99%	56%	32%

The distribution of remaining refugees is projected to be geographically uneven, with higher proportions remaining in some Western and Northern European countries and lower shares in some Central and Eastern European countries, where greater proportions are projected to return.

Refugees in non-neighboring countries are more likely to be part of nuclear families with children - groups that are projected to be more likely to stay - while those in neighboring countries more often include single caregivers, who are more likely to return according to the model results. Differences in regions of origin also matter, as some host countries accommodate larger shares of refugees from heavily affected or temporarily occupied Eastern and Southern oblasts. Refugees originating from these areas are more likely to remain in host countries.

HOST COUNTRY	# of refugees at the start of simulation	# of stayers under the fragile peace with concession scenario	% of stayers under the fragile peace with concession scenario
Austria	80,552	39,000	48%
Belgium	90,088	51,372	57%
Bulgaria	72,888	32,848	45%
Croatia	26,218	13,290	51%
Cyprus	22,942	10,710	47%
Czechia	365,654	187,268	51%
Denmark	35,734	19,760	55%
Estonia	33,500	20,308	61%
Finland	71,098	38,284	54%
France	56,232	30,802	55%
Germany	1,183,872	789,222	67%
Greece	33,402	15,848	47%
Hungary	40,052	15,092	38%
Ireland	112,166	64,536	58%
Italy	165,088	89,752	54%
Latvia	49,186	27,080	55%
Lithuania	44,904	22,496	50%
Netherlands	123,138	67,760	55%
Poland	997,048	531,360	53%
Portugal	65,748	34,722	53%
Republic of Moldova	127,564	42,814	34%
Romania	183,516	80,504	44%
Slovakia	132,416	63,924	48%
Slovenia	10,534	6,790	64%
Spain	234,306	132,882	57%
Sweden	26,812	14,072	52%
TOTAL	4,384,658	2,442,496	56%

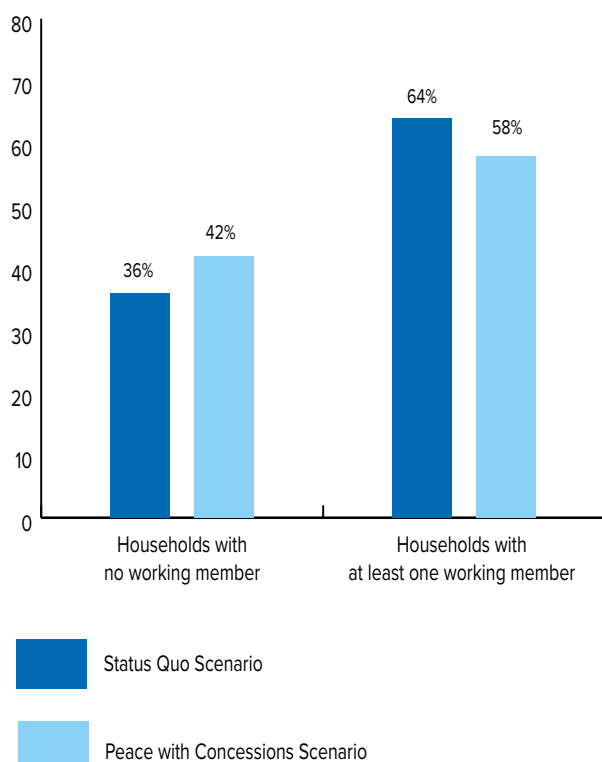
Profile of remaining refugees

ABM model results demonstrate that the population projected to remain in host countries is heterogeneous, combining a majority of households with relatively stronger socioeconomic anchoring alongside a substantial minority facing heightened and multidimensional vulnerabilities.

Predominance of socio-economically anchored households

Under both the status quo and peace with concessions scenarios, the profile of the projected refugee population remaining in host countries is characterized by a predominance of potentially less vulnerable household profiles. This group is largely composed of households with at least one working member and/or nuclear family units, which may be characterized as benefiting from greater socio-economic anchoring, including access to employment.⁵ The unification of family units in host countries and having children integrated into education systems are both projected to contribute to lower rates of return. Moreover, nuclear families are more concentrated in Western and Northern Europe, where returns are projected to remain relatively lower than Central Europe.

EMPLOYMENT STATUS OF REFUGEES PROJECTED TO REMAIN IN HOST COUNTRIES

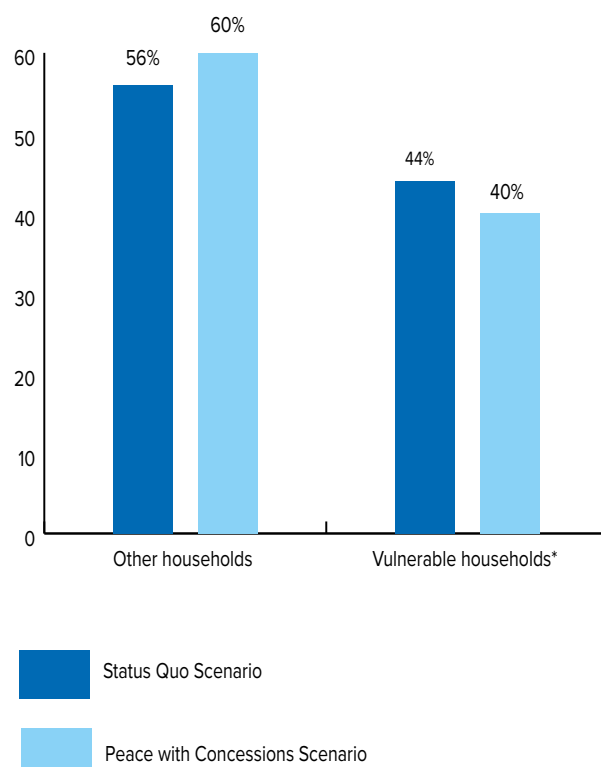


5. UNHCR, 'Labor Market Integration of Ukrainian Refugees in Europe: Employment Gaps, Skills Mismatches, and Economic Gains' (January 2026), available at: <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/120820>

Significant share of vulnerable profiles

Nevertheless, a substantial sub-set of the remaining population continues to comprise more vulnerable profiles, including households without any working member, older persons and single-adult caregivers – groups facing heightened vulnerabilities and barriers to socio-economic inclusion in host counties, as well as likely challenges in accessing essential services upon return to Ukraine given the need to rebuild the capacity of social and basic services. Women are likely to be overrepresented in this group, given lower employment rates and the disproportionate burden of caring responsibilities.⁶

PROFILE OF REFUGEES PROJECTED TO REMAIN IN HOST COUNTRIES



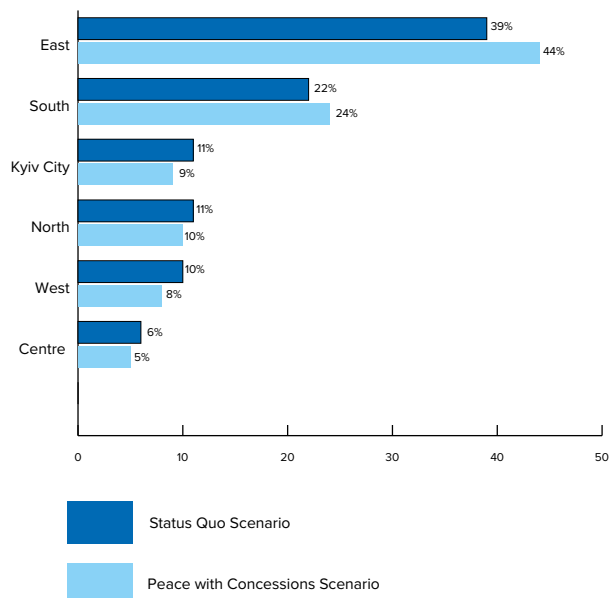
*Vulnerable households refer to households composed of older persons and households headed by single adults.

6. Ibid

Geographic origin as a determinant of continued stay

Geographic origin also significantly shapes projected decisions to stay in host countries, with refugees from Eastern and Southern Ukraine projected to form the largest share of the remaining population. Under a peace with concessions scenario, parts of these regions are assumed to remain under temporary occupation by Russia - UNHCR Intentions survey data confirms that for refugees from these macro-regions, many of whom are older or otherwise vulnerable, the end of the temporary occupation is a primary precondition for return.

REFUGEES REMAINING IN HOST COUNTRIES BY AREA OF ORIGIN*



*Due to rounding totals may not add up to 100%

Key implications

The mixed profile of refugees projected to remain in host countries has direct implications for transition planning: approaches premised solely on labour market participation, often combined with considerable income thresholds, risk overlooking the protection and inclusion needs of a sizeable segment of the remaining population.

Intended Legal Stay Pathways Among Refugees Remaining in Host Countries

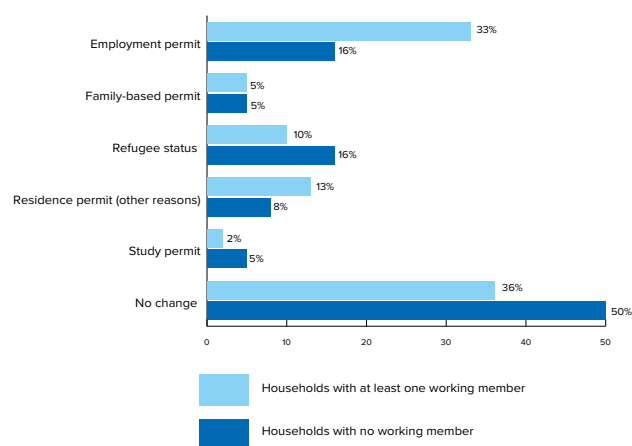
Building on the projected vulnerability and socioeconomic profiles outlined above, this section uses data from UNHCR's seventh intentions survey⁷ - conducted between December 2025 and January 2026, covering 4,389 respondents across Europe - to examine how different groups' characteristics shape their legal status intentions. The findings point to a clear divergence in intended pathways, shaped by employment status, household composition and vulnerability.

Diverging intentions: employment-based stay, asylum, or no transition

Overall, 59% of respondents with TP reported plans to change their legal status in the next 12 months. However, intended pathways vary markedly by profile.

Refugees in socio-economically anchored households - particularly those with at least one working member - are most likely to pursue employment-based residence permits. Given that such households are projected to constitute a majority of the remaining population, demand for work-related residence is likely to increase.

PLANNED LEGAL STATUS CHANGES BY HOUSEHOLD EMPLOYMENT STATUS IN HOST COUNTRIES*

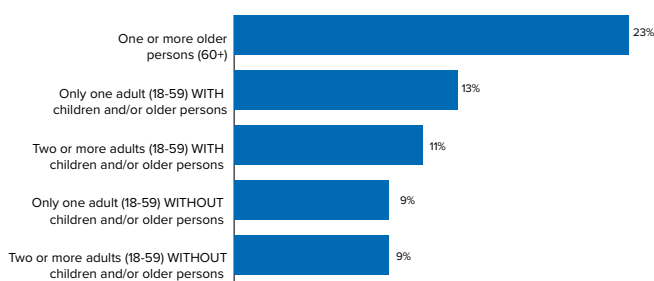


*Due to rounding totals may not add up to 100%

7. Forthcoming

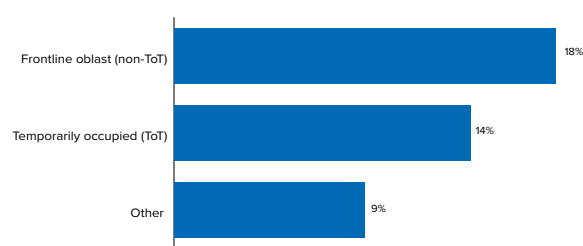
By contrast, asylum emerges as a critical pathway for more vulnerable groups, notably older persons and single adult caretakers, and refugees from frontline or temporarily occupied areas of Ukraine. For the latter group, a preference for asylum often reflects the ongoing occupation of home areas and/or widespread housing damage or destruction - both major barriers to return. Vulnerable groups continue to face socio-economic inclusion challenges, which may be further exacerbated through prolonged asylum procedures and the potential requirement of moving to reception centers.

PLANS TO APPLY FOR ASYLUM BY HOUSEHOLD TYPE*



* % of respondents in each household type selecting asylum among all stated plans to change legal status in the next 12 months.

PLANS TO APPLY FOR ASYLUM BY AREA OF ORIGIN*



*% of respondents in each area of origin selecting asylum among all stated plans to change legal status in the next 12 months.

A substantial minority - 41% of respondents - reported no plans to change their legal status in the next 12 months. This 'frozen' group largely overlaps with more vulnerable profiles, including older persons and nonworking households. Inaction is driven by a combination of expectations or hope

that TP will be extended, reluctance to alter status, limited awareness of alternative pathways and/or requiring support to pursue changes to legal status. Vulnerability, information gaps and ineligibility for alternative legal pathways combine to create a real risk of legal uncertainty, disrupted access to rights, pressure on national asylum systems and potential onward movement between EU Member States should TP end with a 'cliff edge' in March 2027 - namely, an abrupt termination of TP without bridging arrangements, grace periods or scalable alternative legal statuses that large proportions of refugees could realistically access.

HOUSEHOLDS WITHOUT PLANS TO CHANGE LEGAL STATUS BY EMPLOYMENT STATUS IN HOST COUNTRIES*



* % of respondents in each household type indicating no plans to change legal status among all stated plans to change legal status in the next 12 months.

Structural barriers and information gaps constrain intended transitions

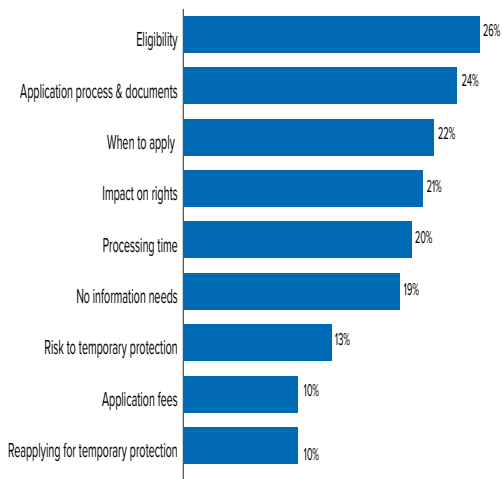
Nearly 60% of employed Ukrainian refugees surveyed are working in positions below their skill level, with the median refugee wage roughly 40% lower than that of host populations.⁸ These conditions make it difficult to meet standard requirements for employment-based permits, such as minimum salary thresholds.

Whilst 59% of TP holders intend to transition to alternative legal statuses, nearly 70% of this group lacks complete information on the necessary pathways. Key knowledge gaps include eligibility

8. UNHCR, 'Labor Market Integration of Ukrainian Refugees in Europe: Employment Gaps, Skills Mismatches, and Economic Gains' (January 2026), available at: <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/120820> Ibid

criteria, application procedures, and the timing of transitions. These information deficits represent a critical bottleneck, threatening to stall legal transitions even for motivated and well-positioned refugees.

INFORMATION NEEDS**



***Multiple responses were possible, so percentages may exceed 100%.*

Key implications

Taken together, these findings underscore that while employment-based residency may be viable for a segment of the population, significant numbers will continue to require clear, alternative residency tracks. Maintaining robust protection safeguards within these pathways is vital, particularly for the approximately 40% of the remaining refugee population projected to have heightened vulnerabilities



Implications and Recommendations for Post-Temporary Protection Planning

1. Avoid a “cliff edge” scenario: ensure continuity of legal stay and protection

Implication: Under both the status quo and peace with concessions scenarios, large numbers of refugees are projected to remain beyond the current TP timeframe. Even in a peace with concessions scenario, key conditions for return - such as housing, services, employment and demining - are unlikely to immediately meet needs at scale. Abrupt or poorly sequenced policy shifts risk overwhelming systems and prompting premature or involuntary returns, especially among vulnerable refugees. Maintaining continuity of stay until conditions permit safe and sustainable return is therefore essential to avoid protection gaps and allow time for conditions in Ukraine to support sustainable return and reintegration.

Recommendations

- ▶ Continuity of stay should be maintained beyond March 2027 without distinction based on employment status, length of stay, possession of valid travel documents, area of origin or other factors.
- ▶ Host states should avoid an abrupt end to TP and apply scenario-appropriate solutions. Under a status quo scenario, this may require a further time-bound extension of TP alongside accelerated preparation for transitions to alternative legal statuses. Under a peace with concessions scenario, an EU-coordinated bridging status should preserve legal stay, rights and access to services while recovery and transitions progress.

2. Urgently plan and implement large-scale transition pathways aligned with refugee profiles

Implication: A transition strategy centred on employment-based residence is only partially viable at scale. Asylum systems will continue to play a critical role, but post-TP applications risk outstripping national asylum system capacities in the absence of broader transition pathways and might set back inclusion processes.

Recommendations

- ▶ Host states should accelerate the development of simplified, longer-term residence options which provide comprehensive coverage of the population projected to remain, including permits with reduced qualifying criteria and administrative burdens.
- ▶ Host states are encouraged to consider recognising time spent under TP to count towards eligibility for longer-term or permanent residence, amending national legal frameworks where necessary.
- ▶ Transition frameworks should explicitly include accessible pathways for refugees currently facing structural barriers to transition into other forms of legal stay, including older persons, single caregivers and those outside the labour market.
- ▶ All transition pathways must retain robust protection safeguards and ensure continued access to core rights, including employment, housing, healthcare and other key social protection benefits. Restricting access to such rights may risk additional pressure on national asylum systems and contribute to premature returns, particularly among vulnerable groups.

3. Capacitate national asylum systems

Implication: UNHCR Intentions Survey data indicates sustained interest in asylum among specific groups, notably older persons and refugees from frontline or occupied areas. Asylum will continue to play a critical role in TP transitions and States should plan for sustained demand.

Recommendations

- ▶ National asylum systems should be adequately capacitated and prepared to manage applications from TP beneficiaries, even in the absence of new large-scale arrivals.
- ▶ States should consider simplified or accelerated procedures for manifestly well-founded claims, alongside sufficient resourcing to avoid backlogs and safeguard procedural quality.

4. Strengthen EU-level coordination and sequencing of TP transitions

Implication: Given the scale and cross-border implications of TP transition, uncoordinated national approaches risk creating secondary movements and uneven system pressure.

Recommendations

- ▶ Enhanced EU-level coordination—on timelines, minimum safeguards, and transition options—would support more predictable and equitable outcomes, thereby reducing the impetus for secondary movements within the EU.

5. Enable informed, voluntary and gradual decision making

Implication: Refugees require additional information and support to reach informed and voluntary decisions on whether to remain in host countries or return to Ukraine. High interest in legal transition coincides with significant information gaps. Many refugees lack clarity on eligibility, procedures and rights attached to different statuses. Further clarity is also required on the ability to visit Ukraine and maintain connections with family and communities. These gaps undermine voluntariness and effective planning.

Recommendations

- ▶ Host states, with support from UNHCR and partners, should prioritise timely, targeted and accessible information provision on return to Ukraine and legal pathways in host countries, including eligibility, procedures, timelines and implications for rights.
- ▶ Host states should safeguard the right to conduct visits to Ukraine without loss of legal status. The ability to maintain close contact with family and community in host countries is associated with higher return intentions in the longer term.

6. Socio-economic inclusion is no longer a policy choice, but a structural necessity

Implication: The scale of refugees projected to remain in host countries, combined with persistent rates of non-employment, underemployment and skills mismatch, means that socio-economic inclusion is no longer a contingent or optional policy objective. Enhanced socio-economic inclusion brings fiscal and economic gains for host countries whilst strengthening refugees' self-reliance and livelihoods assets – also supporting Ukraine's human capital base and its capacity for recovery, reconstruction and long-term resilience.

Recommendations

- ▶ Host governments, together with development and humanitarian partners, should prioritise measures that raise refugee employment rates and address underemployment, including accessible and progressive local language training and support systems that remove practical barriers such as childcare, effective skills recognition, upskilling and bridging courses and improved job matching.
- ▶ For the substantial minority of refugees facing barriers to employment - particularly older persons, single caregivers and persons with specific needs - inclusive social protection, access to services and other tailored measures remain essential to mitigate protection risks and prevent returns driven by destitution or exclusion.

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UNHCR Regional Bureau for Europe

rbeext@unhcr.org

www.unhcr.org/europe