

Working Papers

Psychosocial Condition of Ukrainian War Refugee Women in Poland in the Third Year of War

Introduction The third year has passed since Russia launched a full-scale attack on Ukraine. The outbreak of war triggered the largest humanitarian crisis since World War II. Millions of women and children fled their country seeking refuge in neighboring states. Nearly 2 million Ukrainian war refugees arrived in Poland at the beginning of the war. Currently, approximately 1 million forced migrants remain in the country.

Eurostat data indicate that by the end of 2024, 4.2 million refugees under temporary protection were in the European Union. Poland hosts 18% of these displaced individuals. Germany has slightly more (20%). Among other European countries, 7% of refugees are in the Czech Republic, 4% in Slovakia, 3% in Romania, 4% in France, and 4% in Spain.

Today, global attention is focused on ongoing discussions between the United States and Russia regarding ending the war. Ukrainians who remained in the country or have already returned from forced migration are particularly invested in peace and cessation of hostilities.

Refugees play a crucial role in discussions about ending the war and rebuilding Ukraine. Their international professional experience can be valuable. Additionally, restoring Ukraine's demographic potential will be challenging without the return of Ukrainian women and children. Therefore, studies on refugees provide essential insights into their psychosocial conditions and future plans.

Understanding the situation of refugees, their living conditions, and adaptation strategies is also vital for the host country. On the one hand, these studies help track how refugees are coping after an extended stay in Poland. On the other hand, the latest findings indicate whether forced migrants intend to return home or integrate and establish their future in Poland.

Research Methodology Our Laboratory has conducted annual research on Ukrainian war refugees. The first survey was conducted between April and May 2022. The second survey took place in October 2023. The initial research focused on reasons for coming to Poland, adaptation strategies, and war trauma, while the second survey examined integration and mental health. The third survey, conducted in the third year of the war (January-February 2025), utilized the Computer-Assisted Web Interview (CAWI) method.

Each survey followed the same sampling method. Participants were recruited via social media, where a link to the questionnaire was posted. In this study, in addition to Facebook, Telegram

was also used for recruitment. The first survey had 737 respondents, the second had 466, while the most recent survey had 200 participants. The low response rate reflects survey fatigue among refugees. Ukrainian research firms have also noted difficulties in recruiting more than 300 participants for refugee studies. InfoSapiens' research at the end of 2024 included 203 surveyed refugees in Poland. Given this limitation, we acknowledge constraints in drawing broad conclusions from our sample. However, this is the third measurement, forming a classic replication, which strengthens the validity of findings through repeated measurements using the same method and tools in the same population. The previous studies and acquired knowledge help control the sample's basic socio-demographic parameters.

Main Findings

- The obtained data confirm previous measurements indicating that young, well-educated women from large cities, who assessed their pre-war material conditions positively, arrived in Poland.
- War refugees in Poland are primarily representatives of the middle class.
- From an economic perspective, Ukrainian refugees constitute valuable human capital that can significantly impact economic development.
- Most of the surveyed refugee women are in relationships (64%), while the remaining are single and may potentially seek partners in Poland.
- Most women left Ukraine with their children.
- In Poland, respondents must independently ensure their children's education and care, which may hinder their employment opportunities.
- One in ten refugees can count on family help with childcare, which is crucial as over one-third have observed behavioral deterioration in their children after arriving in Poland.
- Most respondents' children attend Polish schools (77%).
- Most refugees arrived in Poland shortly after the war began.
- Almost half of the respondents had never been to Poland before.
- More than half still live in the town where they first arrived from Ukraine.
- Most refugees visit family in Ukraine.
- Three-quarters of the surveyed women rent apartments or rooms, covering their expenses independently.
- Most respondents have a positive or neutral attitude toward the local population. However, similarly to last year's study, most noticed a deterioration in the locals' attitude towards them.
- Most surveyed women are employed, with a higher employment rate than the previous year.
- Nearly three-quarters of refugees work below their qualifications.
- The main challenge in job seeking is the lack of Polish language proficiency.
- Employment is often accompanied by social downgrade due to low-paid jobs below their qualifications.
- Uncertainty, inability to plan life, and longing for loved ones are the primary stressors.
- Poor financial conditions also add to daily struggles.
- Refugees in Poland feel safe and comfortable.
- Their material and professional living standards are rated low.
- A major issue is the limited access to healthcare.
- Less than half of the respondents engage in social activities, with learning Polish being the most common.
- Most refugees suffer from mental health disorders.

- The main coping strategy is mobilization and problem-solving efforts.
- About half of the surveyed refugees plan to return home once the war ends and it is safe.

Changes Between 2024 and 2025

- Refugees visit family in Ukraine more frequently than in previous studies.
- A slight shift in attitudes from warm to neutral among refugee women.
- A noticeable cooling in the local population's attitude towards refugees.
- More women are actively seeking jobs compared to the previous year.
- 58% of refugees can communicate in Polish, showing an improvement in language proficiency.
- There is increased interaction with the local community compared to last year.
- A significant rise in mental health disorders compared to previous studies.
- An increase in passive coping strategies aimed at shifting negative emotions to positive ones.

Socio-Demographic Characteristics of Refugees

Survey data indicate that before the war, the surveyed women had good economic conditions in Ukraine. Their financial situation was rated as good or very good by 38% and 20%, respectively. Average conditions were reported by 28%, while 11% and 3% rated them as poor and very poor.

- 73% of respondents have higher education, while 27% have secondary education.
- The average age of surveyed women is 39 years (youngest: 16, oldest: 72, most common: 44 years old).
- Half of the respondents came from cities with over 500,000 residents; 22% from cities with 100,000-500,000 residents, 13% from cities with 20,000-99,000 residents, 11% from towns with up to 20,000 people, and 4% from rural areas.
- Most respondents originate from central and eastern Ukraine.

Family Situation and Children's Education

- 20% of respondents are single; 55% are married, 9% in informal relationships, 15% divorced, and 1% widowed.
- 44% arrived in Poland only with children, 7% with parents and children, 3% with parents, children, and husband. 17% came alone, 16% with a husband, and 9% with parents.
- Most children attend Polish schools (47%).
- Over one-third of respondents observed a deterioration in their children's well-being (34%).

Stay in Poland and Spatial Mobility

The surveyed refugee women have been staying in Poland for an extended period. On average, they have been in the country for 27 months, with a median stay of 33 months and a mode of 35 months.

Almost half of the respondents (47%) had never been to Poland before, 36% had visited once or a few times briefly, 10% had previously stayed in Poland for a longer period, and only 7% had stayed for more than a year.

Most respondents (57%) continue to reside in the first place they arrived at when leaving Ukraine. About 26% have changed their place of residence once since arriving in Poland, while 17% have moved multiple times.

During their stay in Poland, 22% have visited Ukraine once, 33% have traveled back several times, and 10% visit their homeland regularly. However, 35% have not returned to Ukraine at all since arriving in Poland.

Most surveyed women (74%) live in rented apartments or rooms. Only 7% stay for free in hotels or hostels, and another 7% live in dormitory-style accommodations or shelters. A small group of respondents live in apartments paid for by someone else. Very few respondents reside with Polish (1%) or Ukrainian families (1%) or with acquaintances (1%).

Relations with Polish People

The majority of respondents have a positive attitude toward the local population, with 39% describing their feelings as "warm" and 15% as "very warm." A neutral stance was expressed by 39%, while 6% described their attitude as "cold" and 1% as "very cold."

When assessing how Polish people treat them, 5% of respondents found the attitude to be "very cold," and 18% considered it "cold." About 45% described the treatment as neutral, 27% as "warm," and 5% as "very warm."

When asked if the attitude of the local population towards them has changed, 44% of respondents stated that it had worsened. Only 3% observed an improvement, while over a quarter saw no change. For 27%, it was difficult to answer.

Employment

Among the surveyed women, 60% are employed, while 16% do not work. Some respondents are unemployed due to childcare responsibilities (8%), studies (11%), or receiving a pension (5%).

A majority (73%) work in positions below their qualifications, while 27% have jobs that match their education.

Among those surveyed, 31% are actively job-hunting, 32% are considering looking for work, and 36% are not seeking employment.

The biggest barrier to finding a job is the lack of Polish language skills (68%). Other reasons include being offered positions below their qualifications (44%), low wages (39%), and the non-recognition of Ukrainian diplomas (38%). Some respondents also cited discrimination against Ukrainian workers (35%), job competition (19%), long commutes (17%), and difficulties obtaining necessary documents (7%). Only 4% reported having no employment-related issues.

Daily Life Challenges

The most significant challenges faced by refugee women include constant uncertainty and a lack of clear future plans (61%), separation from loved ones remaining in Ukraine (57%), and insufficient financial resources (46%).

Other concerns include fear and anxiety for the safety of friends and family in Ukraine (35%), difficulty with the Polish language (31%), unpleasant treatment by Polish people (22%), problems dealing with institutions and offices (16%), childcare difficulties (7%), and poor housing conditions (6%).

Quality of Life

On a five-point scale, the highest satisfaction ratings were given to:

- Personal safety in their current place of residence (83%)
- Public transportation (76%)
- Housing conditions (66%)

Lower satisfaction was reported in:

- Leisure activities (54%)
- Contact with other Ukrainians in Poland (53%)
- Personal education (53%)
- Children's education (50%)
- Communication with family in Ukraine (45%)

The lowest levels of satisfaction were recorded for:

- Employment (37%)
- Healthcare services (32%)
- Family financial situation (30%)
- Wages (26%)

Polish Language Proficiency

When asked about their Polish language skills:

- 40% said they speak quite fluently but occasionally lack vocabulary.
- 22% understand Polish but do not speak it.
- 19% know some words and can communicate in stores or on the street.
- 18% are fluent and have no problems speaking.

Social Participation

Regarding activities during their stay in Poland, respondents most commonly reported:

- Learning Polish (57%)
- Attending cultural events (41%)
- Establishing contacts with the local population (33%)

Less frequent activities included:

- Workplace integration (30%)
- Volunteering (27%)
- Participation in support groups (25%)
- Skills training courses (18%)

Sporadically, refugees reported contact with parents of schoolchildren (18%) or participation in religious ceremonies (14%). About 14% did not engage in any activities.

Mental Health

Using the GAD-7 anxiety scale:

- 16% showed no anxiety.
 - 39% had mild anxiety.
 - 23% had moderate anxiety.
 - 22% had severe anxiety.
- (*Mean = 9.3, SD = 5.2*)

Depression, measured by the PHQ-9 scale:

- 13% had no depressive symptoms.
 - 32% had mild depression.
 - 22% had moderate depression.
 - 27% had moderately severe depression.
 - 7% had severe depression.
- (*Mean = 11.1, SD = 5.8*)

Stress levels, measured by the PSS-10 scale:

- 1% had low stress.
 - 19% had moderate stress.
 - 80% had high stress.
- (*Mean = 22.3, SD = 3.5*)

Coping with Stress

Among the surveyed women:

- 39% have sought psychological help.
- 60% try to stay motivated and solve problems actively.
- 55% engage in activities that distract them and improve their mood.
- 43% find comfort in the thought that "things could be worse" but at least they are safe.
- 37% seek social support and advice from others.
- 28% take sedatives.
- 21% find comfort in prayer.
- 14% feel helpless and give up.
- 5% use alcohol or other substances to cope.

Future Plans

Among the respondents:

- 31% plan to stay in Poland permanently.
- 31% intend to return to Ukraine after the war.
- 13% want to stay in Poland and obtain citizenship.
- 11% plan to stay in Poland for a while, earn money, and then return.
- 5% want to go back home immediately as they can no longer endure staying in Poland.

Some respondents will decide based on their children's education, while others consider moving to another European country. Some remain undecided.

When asked what would encourage them to return to Ukraine, they most frequently mentioned:

- The definitive end of the war (61%)
- Absence of military actions and air raids (40%)
- Well-paid jobs in Ukraine (34%)
- Elimination of corruption (31%)
- Improved living standards in Ukraine (28%)
- A desire to live and develop in Ukraine (27%)
- Love for their homeland (23%)

Less frequently cited reasons included:

- Negative treatment by Polish people (15%)
- End of war in their region (15%)
- Restoration of local infrastructure (12%)
- Lack of affordable housing in Poland (12%)
- Liberation of their hometown (8%)
- Financial assistance from the Ukrainian government (6%)
- Expiration of temporary residence permits (5%)
- Withdrawal of social benefits (1%)

One in ten refugees does not intend to return.

The biggest barriers to returning include:

- Lack of safe living conditions in Ukraine (78%)
- Lack of well-paid jobs (37%)
- Better living conditions in Poland (24%)

Other obstacles include destroyed homes (14%), employment opportunities in Poland (14%), better professional opportunities for women (11%), and lack of access to quality healthcare (6%).