MINTE

Migrant Integration Through Education

POLICY BRIEF

Digital spaces, skills and competencies of Ukrainian forced migrants in Poland

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This policy brief examines the integration of Ukrainian forced migrants in Poland following the Russian aggression on Ukraine in 2022. It highlights the systemic changes and challenges in integrating these migrants into Polish society. Key findings include the introduction of temporary protection status, which provides residency rights, access to housing, the labour market, social welfare benefits, medical assistance, and education. The brief also discusses the transition from temporary protection to other residence permits, the intended introduction of the CUKR residence card, and the establishment of Centres for Foreigners Integration (CICs). Despite these efforts, the brief identifies ongoing challenges, such as the temporary nature of regulations and the lack of a comprehensive state integration policy, which may impact the long-term integration of Ukrainian migrants. Recommendations include organizing information campaigns for host society, ensuring equal treatment of migrants and citizens, and providing accessible information and specialist services.

Introduction

This policy brief highlights key changes that have occurred in Poland regarding the integration of migrants, particularly in light of the arrival of Ukrainian forced migrants following the outbreak of the war in Ukraine on February 24, 2022. It compares the migrant integration structure before February 2022 and in 2025 - three years after the Russian aggression on Ukraine and big inflow of Ukrainian war refugees to identify the changes and the advantages and disadvantages of implemented solutions. The integration is understood here, as Bosswick and Heckmann's (2006) concept of structural and cultural integration, namely rights and the access to the economy and labour market, education and qualification systems, the housing system, welfare state institutions (including the health system), and full political citizenship as well as acquisition of language and culture of host society.

Data sources

The policy brief is based on data collected with the use of several key research methods. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 Ukrainian migrants across four Polish cities (Rzeszów, Kraków, Świdnica, Wrocław) from autumn 2022 to spring 2023. Snowball sampling was used, with participants aged 19 to 77, predominantly women (85%) with higher education. Additionally, two focus groups with Ukrainian forced migrants were organized to discuss project findings.

Expert interviews were conducted with professionals involved with migrants, including academics, representatives from international organizations, NGOs, state officials, and educational institution employees. Panel discussions during Local Advisory Board (LAB) meetings, held four times between 2022 and 2024, provided valuable insights. These meetings included various state actors, NGOs, and international organizations, aiming to gather expert feedback on project outcomes and facilitate idea exchange among stakeholders involved in migrant reception and integration. Recommendations were developed for potential inclusion in national policies.

Secondary data analysis involved mapping available information sources and services for Ukrainian forced migrants, focusing on websites operated by national, local, and NGO actors. Desk research reviewed policies and reports from international organizations (UNHCR, IOM, UNICEF) and NGOs, alongside other secondary sources. The collected material, observations, and ideas from experts and migrants were synthesized for the brief.

Before the outbreak of the war in Ukraine

At the beginning of 2022, before the full-fledged conflict in Ukraine, Poland had a highly homogeneous population, with migrants accounting for only 1.2% of the total population (EMN, 2022). In December 2021, 875,090 foreigners were registered in the Polish social insurance system. The main groups were Ukrainians (71.7%), Belarusians (8.1%), Georgians (2.75%), and Russians (1.6%) (ZUS, 2022; Bielewska et al., 2025).

The dominance of immigrants from former Soviet Union countries can be attributed to the Polish government's efforts to address emerging labour gaps since the mid-2010s. Consequently, procedures for obtaining visas for these migrants were simplified (Górny et al., 2018; Ślęzak & Bielewska, 2022). For example, in January 2022, these migrants were offered the possibility of working in Poland for up to 24 months without needing a work permit (Bielewska et al., 2025).

The period of increased migration from Ukraine to Poland - from the annexation of Crimea in 2014 to the war in 2022- resulted in a positive migration net balance for Poland for the first time since the 1990s (Okólski, 2021). However, during this time, there was no formal migration strategy document. The 2012 document was invalidated in October 2016 due to its inadequacy in addressing the unprecedented influx of refugees to the European Union and Ukrainian migration to Poland. The Council of Ministers adopted the new document *„Reclaim Control. Ensure Security. - Poland's Comprehensive and Responsible Migration Strategy for 2025-2030"* only on 15th October 2024. The sole national-level policy document from the pre-Ukrainian war period, the *Strategy for Responsible Development by 2020 (with a perspective until 2030),* published in 2017, aimed to promote economic migration to address labour shortages and counteract depopulation and demographic aging (Rada Ministrów, 2017; Jaroszewicz et al., 2024). The lack of an official migration strategy allowed right-wing governments from 2015 to 2023 to maintain Poland's openness to labour migration despite their

xenophobic rethoric and securitization of migration (Pędziwiatr & Magdziarz, 2022; Ślęzak & Bielewska, 2022). Despite the increasing immigration, research indicates that this phenomenon was perceived as temporary, and thus, integration tools were not developed at the national level (Górny et al., 2018; Ślęzak & Bielewska, 2022; Jaroszewicz et al., 2024). A good example of this lack of centralization is the websites of the Office of Foreigners which are developed separately by each region (voivodship), with no unification in design or the foreign language versions (see Bielewska et al., in press b).

Recognition of increasing diversity of Polish society was visible in the entitlement to additional Polish language lessons (minimum of 2 hours per week) and remedial classes (in total 5 hours per week) for migrant students age 8-18 (Ministerstwo Edukacji Narodowej, nd). There is also a website prepared by national Centre for Education Development with the materials supporting teachers who work with migrant students (https://ore.edu.pl/2015/03/wielokulturowosc-w-szkole-uczen-cudzoziemski/).

Local-level policies formed by municipalities and NGOs partially filled the gap left by central level. However, by the end of this period, NGO resources were scarce as the Ministry of the Interior and Administration limited their access to the Asylum, Migration, and Integration Fund (Czeranowska et al., 2018). Consequently, cities took responsibility for migrant integration policies. In 2017, mayors of 12 major cities signed the Declaration of Mayors on Cooperation in the Area of Migration between the Cities of the Union of Polish Metropolises to develop a proper culture of receiving migrants, whose presence was seen as beneficial for Polish cities (Unia Metropolii Polskich, 2017). The situation in different cities varied, but city-run programs included anti-discrimination workshops, intercultural education fairs, language courses (including Polish for foreigners), language exchange programs, preparation classes for pupils who did not speak Polish, events promoting multiculturalism, consultations for educational institutions on managing students who did not speak Polish, and projects addressing the security of foreigners (Ślęzak & Bielewska, 2022). Despite the centralization of migration policies, cities played an active role in migrant integration.

In summary, just before the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, Poland could be classified as a New Immigration Destination - place where a tradition of emigration was replaced with increased immigrant intake (McAreavey & Argent, 2018). However, it still lacked adequate infrastructure, resources, and a sufficient legal framework to cope with the new reality (Pędziwiatr & Magdziarz, 2022, Bielewska et al., in press a).

Following the outbreak of the war in Ukraine

Then after February 24, 2022, the influx of Ukrainians displaced by war started. Poland became a popular destination due to the long common border, cultural proximity, and existing migrant network (Amit et al. 2024; Bielewska et al. 2025). At the end of January 2023, there were 1,563,386 Ukrainians registered in Poland under the temporary protection scheme (UNHCR 2023), but in January 2025, there were roughly 957,505 of them (Statista, 2025).

On March 4, 2022, the European Council granted temporary protection status to displaced individuals from Ukraine (Council Implementing Decision, 2022). The EU established a temporary protection mechanism (Directive 2001/55/EC) that set explicit protection measures and cooperation standards among EU nations; nonetheless, national regulations varied considerably. On March 12, 2022, Poland passed a special law that granted the temporary protection status, including residency rights, access to housing, the labour market, social welfare benefits, medical assistance, and education for youths to Ukrainian forced migrants (Dz.U. 2022 poz. 583; Bielewska et al, 2025). In terms of financial support they could receive, for example, a one-time humanitarian allowance of 300 PLN (about €70), and a child assistance of 800 PLN (around €190) per child. Additionally, housing allowances of 40 PLN per day (around €10) were available for hosts offering their accommodation to Ukrainian forced migrants. In July 2024, the temporary protection status was extended by Poland until 30 September 2025, despite the European Council's decision to extended it until March 2026. However, some conditions of temporary protection were changed as the government made an attempt to limit the offered assistance. The housing allowance of 40PLN per day for individual hosts was stopped and currently Ukrainians may use only the common accommodation places run by voivodeships. The number of cases in which the Ukrainian forced migrants receive the accommodation for free was limited. The 300 PLN allowance for new arrivals is also no longer offered (MSWiA 2024). From 2025 the child allowance of 800PLN (about 200 euro) per month is linked to school enrolment (Leszczyńska, 2025).

Efforts to curtail the provision of social benefits are also evident in the redirection of Ukrainian forced migrants from their temporary protection status to alternative stay categories that do not offer the same range of benefits. As of April 2023, migrants can transition from temporary protection to temporary residence, provided they meet certain criteria (e.g., employment, education, family connections), thereby relinquishing benefits associated with temporary protection but achieving greater stability. Temporary protection status is extended for brief periods, whereas temporary residence can be granted for up to three years. Additionally, there is an initiative to introduce the CUKR residence card in Poland by 2025, which will be valid for three years (Urząd do Spraw Cudzoziemców, 2024). However, several challenges persist, including an incomplete online application system (Garbicz, 2024) and ongoing revisions to the legal framework to permit online-only applications. The CUKR card is expected to allow holders to stay outside the EU for up to six months (as opposed to the current 30 days). Moreover, it will remove the requirement for employers to register employment and enable holders to establish their own businesses. Nonetheless, benefits available under temporary protection, such as public healthcare, are restricted for CUKR holders. The state views this as advantageous because Ukrainians will have access to rights such as employment, education, and family member health insurance under the same conditions as citizens. However, retired Ukrainian forced migrants are likely to be disadvantaged by this solution and may not apply (Ślęzak Belowska et al., In press). Interestingly, Ukrainian forced migrants seem to increasingly apply for asylum and subsidiary protection. The state discourages such actions, warning that fear of conscription into the army is not a valid reason for asylum and threatening it may worsen their legal status and revoke benefits associated with temporary protection (Urząd do Spraw Cudzoziemców 2025).

The migration strategy adopted on 15th October 2024 *„Reclaim Control. Ensure Security. - Poland's Comprehensive and Responsible Migration Strategy for 2025-2030*" raised a lot of controversies among migration scholars and human rights activists as it announced possible "temporary and territorial suspension of the right to apply for asylum" justified by influx of asylum seekers being a threat to the state' stability (BIP 2024). The document contains a section on integration of migrants understood as multi-stages and two-sided process with its key element being the knowledge of Polish language. The implementation of the strategy includes opening 49 centres of foreigners integration (CIC) around the country, mainly for citizens of Ukraine and Belarus but with aspirations to reach as many migrants as possible. Built as one-stop shops, they will offer in one place multiple services such as first-contact assistants, courses of Polish language for foreigners, psychological and legal support, certified translations, career counselling, vocational training, integration activities for children and adults, promotion of Polish culture and traditions. CICs will also gather data on foreigners, create local integration strategies, and be places of cooperation between government and local administrations and NGOs (Kuchta, 2025). Some centres are already operating, others were met with protests from right wing activists who present them as refugee camps financed by Polish citizens and prepared for relocation of irregular migrants from other EU countries (Grzymowicz 2025) and local residents who are scared of such visions (Andrzejewski, 2025). Therefore, the government stresses the centres are financed by FAMI and they address needs of those migrants who stay in Poland legally (Zachodniopomorski Urząd Wojewódzki w Szczecinie, 2025). However, as a result of the protests, four centres planned in Małopolska region will not be opened. The local authorities argue that this region has other similar programs (PAP, 2025).

To sum up, in spite of the structural integration of the Ukrainian forced migrants visible in their access to housing, education, and the labour market, the temporary nature of the above regulations and the lack of a comprehensive state integration policy may significantly impact the integration of this group in other dimension such as cultural integration (migrants may not be willing to invest their time and effort into studying the language and culture of a place where they are only temporarily staying) and consequently also interactive and identificational integration (Bosswick and Heckmann 2006).

Policy implications and recommendations

- ✓ **Organise information campaign to explain to the host society why it is better to integrate migrants than to leave them without integration tools.** Without implementing integration tools, Polish society will not include foreigners leaving in Poland, who will create their own enclaves, speak different languages, and may pose the risk to social cohesion. It is worthwhile to organise a social campaign explaining that migrants already in Poland need to be supported and integrated.
- ✓ **Organise events for migrants and local residents.** It is important to build local communities that include migrants. This will allow residents to feel secure in their neighbourhoods and

ultimately reduce protest against CICs. This should be achieved by increasing the number of contacts between migrants and residents on an equal footing, such as through joint activities at community events.

- ✓ **Ensure equal treatment of migrants and the local population.** Make sure that services established for migrants, such as translation services or language classes, are also available to local residents. This approach will foster social cohesion rather than deepen divisions caused by migrant-only services and it will help prevent negative sentiments toward migrants.
- ✓ **Ensure that information for migrants, including online public services, is accessible to all groups of migrants and local residents.** Providing information in multiple languages, including Polish, will build transparency and ensure equal treatment of different groups of residents.
- ✓ **Avoid building integration tools exclusively for particular ethnic groups.** Services should be available to all who need them, not just to specific ethnic groups. Creating services for only one ethnic group constitutes discrimination.
- ✓ **Ensure that migrants have access to variety of specialist services they may need, such as legal aid, mediation, or mental health services for those suffering from depression or post-traumatic stress.** Migrants are not a uniform group, and their needs are diverse - ranging from age differences to education, family situation, health and mental health conditions.
- ✓ **Help highly skilled migrants gain credentials to enter the labour market.** To avoid losing human capital, migrants should be supported in transferring their qualification to the new country.
- ✓ **Provide accessible information on how to obtain permanent legal status in Poland.** Migrants need to see their stay as permanent in order to invest in integration. Prolonged temporary status discourages them from learning the language and building the skills necessary to function in a particular country. As a result, they may not integrate and could form enclaves that threaten social cohesion.
- ✓ **Monitoring and Evaluation: Develop structured procedures for overseeing and assessing integration programs and policies.** This should include gathering feedback from Ukrainian forced migrants to ensure that services are effectively meeting their needs and are adjusted based on real-time insights.

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