

COMMENTARY

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Author

Dawn Holland

Contact Us

Americas
+1.212.553.1658
clientservices@moodys.com

Europe
+44.20.7772.5454
clientservices.emea@moodys.com

Asia (Excluding Japan)
+85 2 2916 1121
clientservices.asia@moodys.com

Japan
+81 3 5408 4100
clientservices.japan@moodys.com

Welcoming 3.4 Million Ukrainian Women Into the EU

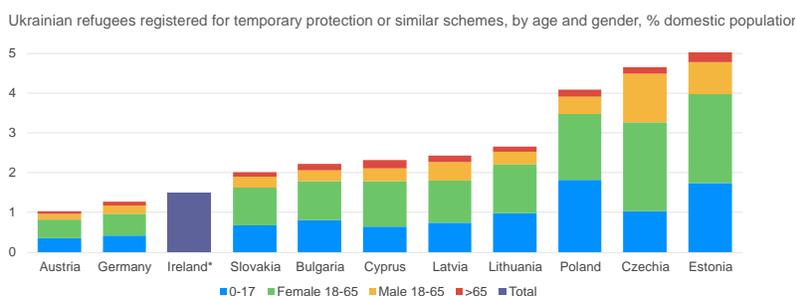
Rapid integration is key to success, and more use can be made of policies that already have reaped high returns.

- Integration of refugees from Ukraine into EU labour markets is advancing more rapidly than previous waves of refugees.
- Socioeconomic characteristics have played a role; a high proportion of adults who have fled to Europe were in work before they left Ukraine and have completed tertiary education.
- EU policy measures have also supported more rapid integration, and may offer a roadmap for the future.

A year of war has forced 30% of the population of Ukraine to flee their homes. More than 8 million refugees are recorded across Europe with a further 5.3 million people internally displaced within Ukraine. Families have been uprooted and divided. The vast majority of refugees arriving in Europe report that they had been separated from close family members as a result of their departure from Ukraine.

This is hardly surprising, as male Ukrainian citizens aged 18-60 are prohibited from travelling abroad. While there are some carveouts such as single fathers and men with three or more children, 75% of adult refugees from Ukraine are women. Nearly 40% of refugees from Ukraine are children, meaning there are a significant proportion of predominantly female, single caregiver households.

More Than 8 Million Refugees From Ukraine Across Europe



Sources: UNHCR, Eurostat, Moody's Analytics

*Gender and age detail is unavailable.

As EU border countries (Hungary, Poland, Romania and Slovakia) scrambled to provide adequate shelter, food and healthcare to meet the most immediate needs of those fleeing the Russian invasion, the EU acted quickly to facilitate arrivals from Ukraine. The EU's Temporary Protection Directive removed many of the barriers refugees typically face, providing immediate residency rights, access to the labour market, and access to housing, schools, healthcare and social benefits.

While member states have risen to the challenge, the sheer magnitude of population shocks faced in some destinations have tested their capacities to deliver on these promises. Estonia, Czechia and Poland have seen their populations rise by more than 4%. Some cities such as Rzeszów in Poland have seen their local populations jump by up to 50%. Even countries that have not been primary destinations, such as Belgium, have

seen their populations rise at the strongest rate in more than a decade.

Successful integration into society and the labour market is key to both allowing refugees to rebuild their lives and to helping the new arrivals become self-supporting. Providing the supports needed to accommodate the massive influx of refugees bears a financial cost, with cost estimates in the range of €25 billion for the EU alone in 2022. But integration into society and the labour market takes time. While the Temporary Protection Directive offered immediate access to the labour market in theory, in practice individuals face the numerous complications of finding appropriate accommodation and navigating the complexities of a foreign job market. Add caring for children and elderly dependents into the mix and it is clear that slotting into the labour market is not an easy task.

In this note we look at the extent to which the 3.4 million women who have arrived in the EU from Ukraine have started integrating into the labour market and their prospects for deeper integration.

Obstacles to labour market integration

Arrivals from the Ukraine are faced with many of the same challenges that all refugees face when seeking to enter foreign labour markets. Language barriers and unrecognized qualifications feature high on this list as well as the potential for skill mismatches with the local labour market and, of course, the heavy toll on mental health from the stresses and strains of leaving a war zone. The high proportion of single-caregiver households means that a lack of adequate or affordable childcare, especially as many children are coming from severely distressed situations, may also make it difficult to reconcile family responsibilities with work.

Women often face additional challenges. The [underutilization of women](#) in the workforce in terms of time and skills is not exclusive to refugees but is a common feature of the vast majority of labour markets across the world. There are formal and informal barriers that may prevent women from working as many hours as they desire and that may compel them to accept lower-paid positions that do not match their qualifications and skills. In addition, female refugees may be particularly exposed to labour market exploitation, human trafficking, and gender-based violence.

Given all these challenges, people who expect to be displaced for only a short time may be less inclined to seek interim employment. During the first months following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, 80% of those fleeing the country stated that they intended to return to Ukraine as soon as it was safe to do so with a timeframe of a few months in mind. As the war dragged on, these attitudes shifted. Recent surveys show that 80% of refugees from Ukraine now expect to remain in their host country for an extended period. The ultimate intention is still to return home, but many will choose to remain in place until there is a full cessation of hostilities and appropriate safeguards are in place. This will be a lengthy process, requiring the reconstruction of infrastructure, homes, schools, utilities, communication networks, etc. This shift in mindset is likely to spur a greater proportion of refugees to engage with the workforce.

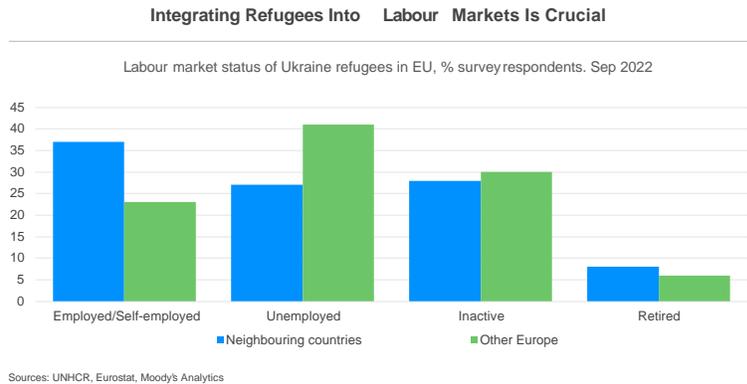
What sets this cohort apart from previous refugee waves?

There are a number of factors that set this wave of refugees apart from previous waves in Europe. First and foremost is the overwhelmingly warm welcome that arrivals from the Ukraine received in host countries. Private households opened their homes across Europe to compensate for the lack of public facilities to meet the surge in demand for accommodation. Volunteers stepped up to build and staff reception centres, collect and distribute food and supplies, and provide other forms of support and advice. Schools welcomed children and businesses, offering accommodation, food and employment opportunities.

The demographic and socioeconomic characteristics of arrivals from Ukraine also differed from past refugee waves. First, the people fleeing Ukraine are predominantly women and children. While the large number of single-caregiver households may act as an obstacle to labour market integration, female labour force participation is relatively high in Ukraine. Prior to the war, participation rates were higher than the OECD average and also higher than in some of the primary refugee host countries, including Poland. Another distinction is that Ukraine has a highly educated labour force, with 40% of people over 25 having at least some tertiary education, compared with just over 30% in the OECD. Ukrainian women account for a greater share of those who have completed a tertiary degree than men. Moreover, surveys indicate that a large majority of adults who have fled to Europe were in work before they left Ukraine and tend to have higher levels of educational attainment than the population as a whole, making them highly employable.

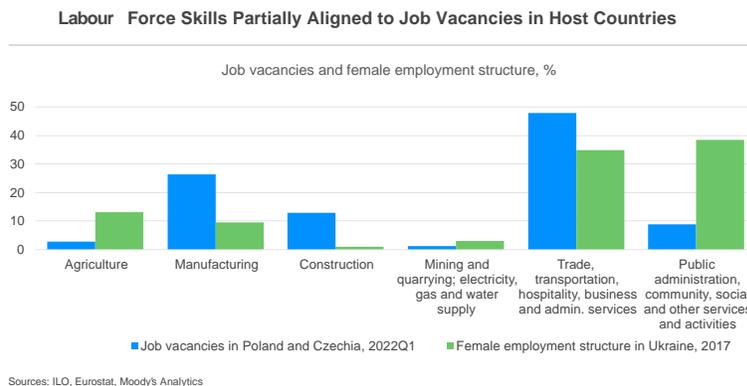
Previous engagement with the labour force and high levels of skills suggest that refugees from Ukraine may have a relatively high propensity to actively engage with the labour market. This aligns with the available

evidence, which shows that nearly 70% of Ukrainian refugees of working age in the EU had already entered the labour force by September. Not all of them had found their way into employment at that stage, and many may be engaged in the informal sector, but in the countries neighbouring Ukraine, which include Poland and Slovakia, about 40% of working-age individuals were in some form of employment or self-employment. Evidence from the [Netherlands](#), [Lithuania](#), Estonia, and the [U.K.](#) also indicates that more than 40% of working-age Ukrainian refugees are in employment.



The speed of integration into the labour market has been much more rapid compared with previous waves of refugees. The Temporary Protection Directive offers a distinct advantage in this regard, as it obviates the need for asylum. Application for asylum generally takes a minimum of three to four months and on average more than seven months, during which time employment is often prohibited. Information on labour market integration of Syrian refugees that arrived in Germany in 2015, for example, indicate that 50% of refugees had settled into employment within 46 months. To integrate 40% of a much larger cohort from Ukraine into EU labour markets within seven months is an impressive achievement.

Labour markets remain tight in the EU as a whole, suggesting that a flood of new labour market entrants could offer respite to firms struggling to find sufficient staff. Euro zone unemployment is at an all-time low, and unemployment rates are hovering at less than 3% in the import host countries of Poland and Czechia. A comparison of job vacancy statistics by sector in host countries and the prewar female employment structure in Ukraine offers some insights into how closely the skills of refugees match existing labour force needs. The new entrants into the labour force may offer relief in sectors that have struggled to fill vacant positions, such as retail, hospitality, and business and administrative services, but may be less well matched to vacancies in manufacturing and construction sectors.



Surveys have identified that a significant share of refugees from Ukraine were working in education and healthcare sectors. This presents both a challenge and an opportunity. Integration into these high-skill sectors may take longer, as recognition of qualifications and alignment of skills can be particularly difficult. But it also represents an opportunity. As populations have jumped by more than 4% in countries such as Poland and Czechia, this has put pressure on the capacities of both health and education sectors. Indeed, job vacancies had doubled in the education sector in Poland by the third quarter of 2022. Accelerating the recognition and transfer of qualifications and educational credentials in these sectors will facilitate successful integration into

the labour market and boost capacities in these vital services.

What policy measure are supporting more rapid integration?

Policy measures in Europe have removed many of the barriers that refugees typically face when forced to flee abroad. First, Ukrainian citizens have been entitled to visa-free access to the EU for a period of three months since 2017, expediting border crossings in the first days following the invasion. Second, within days the European Commission invoked the Temporary Protection Directive, awarding immediate residency rights, access to the labour market, access to housing and schools, social welfare assistance, medical assistance, and means of subsistence to all Ukrainian nationals fleeing the Russian invasion. The Commission also offered technical support to EU member states on access to EU funds to support refugees and on border management, and established the EU Solidarity Platform to coordinate the response across the bloc.

Individual member states offered a further range of country-specific measures, including job search and matching services, language courses, vocational training, entrepreneurship training, support for foreign qualification recognition, and improving access to regulated professions by streamlining recognition procedures or removing specific occupational requirements, notably in the health sector. For example, Poland and [Spain](#) have shortened the timeline for recognition of Ukrainian medical qualifications.

Access to affordable childcare is also key to facilitating engagement with host country labor markets. While some countries have introduced measures to expand access to childcare, this remains a key challenge for deeper integration.

A roadmap for the future?

The inflow of refugees from Ukraine has not yet drawn to a close. More than 1 million internally displaced persons within Ukraine have considered relocating abroad, while Russian attacks on infrastructure continue to disrupt access to heat, electricity and water, driving more civilians from their homes. With appropriate policies in place, the influx of high-skilled adult refugees will continue to deepen their integration into EU labour markets. This has the potential to ease labour market tightness in parts of Europe, especially in retail, hospitality and business services, and to boost economic growth and tax revenue.

The labour market integration of Ukrainian refugees has advanced more rapidly when compared with other refugee groups. This has been supported by policy measures. The unprecedented scale of the refugee crisis prompted close cooperation among EU member states and may offer a roadmap for handling future waves of refugees. The Temporary Protection Directive significantly accelerated administrative processes, helping to alleviate some immediate stress and speeding up the integration of refugees into society. Rapid integration is key to success, and more use can be made of policies that have reaped high returns, such as fast-tracking the recognition of qualifications, providing language training and job matching services, and providing affordable care services. It is also evident that local governments, which administer programmes, need immediate financial support from central governments.

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