

Position of the Ukrainian National Platform of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum

Preserving and restoring human capital in Ukraine: wartime challenges and UNP EaP CSF recommendations

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This position paper has been prepared by the Ukrainian National Platform of the EaP CSF to convey to Ukrainian authorities and international partners why preserving and restoring human capital must be a priority issue for Ukraine during the war and post-war recovery period. The document outlines major trends in forced migration of Ukrainians abroad and associated challenges for the country, examines the current roles of the government and EU in facilitating the return of Ukrainians, and offers recommendations aimed at bringing our fellow citizens home.

Introduction

Human capital today ranks amongst Ukraine's scarcest and most vulnerable development resources. After more than three years of full-scale war, businesses and communities are facing an unprecedented outflow of skilled labour, disrupted educational pathways, demographic losses and a stark mismatch between existing skill sets and actual labour market needs.

Sustainable national recovery and integration into the European Economic Area depend critically on preserving, developing and restoring human capital. This encompasses not just

the workforce, but the knowledge, experience, entrepreneurial initiative and social connections that underpin Ukraine's competitiveness.

Preserving and restoring human capital has emerged as one of Ukraine's key challenges during the war and post-war recovery period. Mass migration, working-age population losses, demographic decline and structural labour market shifts threaten economic development, community sustainability and the state's capacity to implement recovery policies.

According to the analytical document “[Post-War Recovery of the Labour Market in Ukraine: Trends and Threats](#)” (Federation of Employers of Ukraine, 2024), persistent problems include imbalances between labour supply and demand, personnel shortages in critical sectors, low worker mobility and limited access to retraining programmes. Meanwhile, the migration outflow of skilled professionals is exacerbating human resource shortages in communities, particularly in regions that have suffered destruction.

Despite extended time abroad, a substantial proportion of Ukrainians express willingness to return home. The highest rate appears amongst respondents in Romania — 59% of those surveyed stated they definitely or most likely plan to return. In Poland, the figure stands at 51%, in the USA at 49%, and in Spain at 48%. Conversely, Ukrainians living in Italy show the lowest willingness to return (45% report that they do not plan to return), followed by those in the USA (43%) and Germany (37%). ([Ukrainian Refugees After Three Years Abroad. Fourth Wave of Research - Centre for Economic Strategy](#))

At the same time, as Ella Libanova, Director of the Institute of Demography and Social Studies of the NAS of Ukraine, stresses, even after the war ends, only around 40–50% of Ukrainians currently abroad may actually return. In her view, other countries' experience demonstrates that rapid return only becomes possible through comprehensive state policy focused on creating jobs, providing housing and quality services, and rebuilding trust in state institutions.

Human capital issues also take centre stage in government strategic documents. Within the [Ukraine Plan](#) and the Ukraine Facility initiative, human capital is designated as one of the five key policy sectors. The document identifies the principal challenges as: shrinking working-age population, loss of skilled personnel, inadequate education levels and weak motivation amongst young people to remain in Ukraine.

These trends required comprehensive policy at both the EU and national levels, as well as civil society support focused on creating conditions for citizens' return, professional adaptation and social reintegration. This is why this **position paper focuses on assessing the**

state of human capital, identifying key challenges and formulating recommendations for effective policy to bring Ukrainians home.

The **objective** of this position paper is to:

- outline the current situation regarding human capital in Ukraine;
- identify key challenges hindering people's return and integration;
- propose practical recommendations for Ukrainian and European stakeholders on developing joint policy to restore human potential.

The document has been prepared by the Ukrainian National Platform of the EaP CSF to contribute to broader discussions on civil society's role in post-war recovery, European integration and shaping future Eastern Partnership policy.

Restoring human capital goes beyond economic survival — it is key to European integration, technological modernisation and social cohesion. Ukrainian businesses, communities and civil society must work together to stem the loss of human potential and create conditions for its development within the country.

The Ukrainian National Platform of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum calls on EU and Eastern Partnership partner states to integrate human capital into recovery, education and employment programmes as a shared priority for regional security and resilience.

Human capital within Eastern Partnership Policy

Across all key EU policy documents on the Eastern Partnership, human capital is positioned as central to resilience and recovery. European policy stresses the need to build **“resilient, fair and inclusive societies”**, where everyone can access education, employment, digital opportunities and social protection.

For Ukraine, this approach carries dual significance. On one hand, it relates to post-war reconstruction; on the other, to human potential losses driven by migration, demographic decline and war consequences. EU documents explicitly emphasise that investments in education, digital skills, SME development and vulnerable group support are key to economic growth and social cohesion.

The Joint Declaration of the Eastern Partnership Summit (2021) confirmed that **human capital development is one of the five cooperation priorities**, whilst the EaP Multi-Annual Work Plan

2025–2027 provides for the continuation of programmes on education, youth employment, mobility and inclusive development support.

In this context, the Ukrainian National Platform of the EaP CSF plays a unique role in mobilising civil society around human capital issues. According to the EaP CSF Strategy 2022–2030, civil society organisations are key change agents that provide training, mentorship and social integration for internally displaced persons, veterans, youth and women.

A survey of members of the Ukrainian National Platform of the EaP CSF identified several challenges they face in the area of human capital. Specifically, representatives of the Platform's member organisations highlighted: uneven economic conditions across different regions and migration-driven pressure on large cities and economically stable areas; a mismatch between labour market realities and returnees' expectations despite acute labour shortages; the need for large-scale retraining programmes to bridge wartime conditions with adaptation to EU standards; the weakness of small and medium-sized enterprises that could serve as primary employers for returnees; organisational fragility of employers' associations and trade unions; war-related psychological trauma, and the absence of security guarantees.

Will Ukrainians come home, and what will it take?

The [National Bank of Ukraine](#) reports that **over 6.9 million Ukrainians are currently living outside the country**. As of 17 April 2025, the largest Ukrainian populations are found in: Germany (1.443 million), Poland (nearly 1 million), the Czech Republic (401,400), the United Kingdom (254,000), Spain (235,700), Italy (171,000), and France (70,100). Beyond Europe, approximately 560,000 Ukrainian refugees have settled. Meanwhile, Russia had 1.2 million Ukrainians with refugee status as of June 2022, whilst Belarus hosted 44,000 as of March 2025.

Sociologists and demographers warn that **the longer the war continues, the fewer people will return home**. The data confirms this trend: research by Info Sapiens commissioned by the Centre for Economic Strategy shows a growing number of those who don't intend to return home. By late November 2024, for the first time, the share of those planning to return had dropped below half. Whilst only 10% of Ukrainians had no plans to return in November 2022, this figure reached 34% by the end of 2024, according to the [research](#).

The [survey](#) results reveal diverse return strategies amongst Ukrainians, with no single approach dominating.

[Experts](#) agree that **two main factors** are essential for encouraging Ukrainians to return home:

- **Security;**
- **Quality of life**, encompassing several elements: housing, decent employment, and infrastructure, including education, healthcare and social support.

[Surveys of Ukrainians](#) on their plans to return also identify factors that would encourage such a return. The overwhelming majority (74%) of respondents cited **the definitive end of hostilities across Ukraine's entire territory** as a crucial factor. The second most common consideration was **employment opportunities in Ukraine** (cited by 45% of respondents). Around one-third of respondents also prioritised the **safety of returning to their home locality** (36%), the desire to return to their native country (31%), Ukraine's accession to the EU (30%), reuniting with loved ones in Ukraine (29%), Ukraine's accession to NATO (28%), and healthcare accessibility (28%). Fourteen percent highlighted the availability of affordable rental housing provided by the state as a key consideration for their return. A further 8% cited provision of temporary housing by the state.

Another factor influencing return decisions is the **level of integration in a given country and support from the country of residence**. Ukrainians who have relocated abroad often encounter numerous challenges, including language barriers, difficulty securing employment and housing, and educational concerns.

On 25 February 2025, the Government of Ukraine, the World Bank Group, the European Commission and the UN unveiled the joint [Rapid Damage and Needs Assessment](#) (RDNA4). The RDNA4 assessment, covering nearly three years of damage, reveals that direct losses in Ukraine have now reached 176 billion USD. The hardest-hit sectors are the housing, transport, energy, trade and industry, and education. Current estimates indicate that 13% of the total housing stock has been damaged or destroyed, impacting over 2.5 million households.

Growing damage to the **housing sector** exacerbates Ukraine's pre-existing shortage of adequate, affordable and safe housing, a particularly acute challenge for displaced persons and other vulnerable groups.

Between February 2022 and 31 December 2024, an estimated 10.4% of **education infrastructure** sustained damage or destruction. Analysis of Ukraine's education sector post-

2022 has revealed a critical teacher shortage. Migration, internal displacement and other war-related impacts have reduced the teaching workforce by approximately 12%, equivalent to 40,000 educators. This substantial loss has severely impacted education quality. Moreover, over 40% of teachers plan to leave the profession by 2030.

The **healthcare sector** faces a similarly critical situation: of the 9,925 publicly owned healthcare facilities operating before the war, 1,603 (16.2%) have been partially damaged or completely destroyed.

In 2024, **social assistance** expenditure totalled nearly 181.4 billion UAH (4.3 billion USD). Sector losses are estimated at 87.3 billion USD. These substantial losses stem from job losses and reduced household wage income, coupled with rising poverty levels — resulting in increased spending on existing means-tested social assistance programmes and additional funding needs for compensation to bereaved families and rehabilitation of persons with disabilities. The largest share of losses relates to the irreversible loss of jobs and workforce. Whilst overall unemployment is declining and real wages are reportedly rising, about one-fifth of adults employed before February 2022 have lost their jobs, and 56% have experienced income loss.

Under martial law, the **unemployment issue** has become particularly pressing, with Ukraine's working-age population declining by 40% between 2021 and 2024. Nevertheless, [experts suggest](#) the labour market has adapted to new circumstances and begun to stabilise. New sole proprietorships and companies are emerging, though Ukraine faces significant territorial imbalances in this recovery. Compared to pre-war levels, vacancy numbers have grown most sharply in Ukraine's western regions, whilst front-line areas show minimal recovery.

Ukrainian employers are grappling with a widespread staffing crisis. Ukraine faces not merely a personnel shortage, but specifically a shortage of skilled personnel. [Research by the Razumkov Centre](#) identifies Ukraine's main labour market challenges as: worker mobilisation (73.3%), personnel shortage (53.5%), and brain drain abroad (47.6%). Experts also observe a gender transformation in the labour market, with increasing numbers of women entering traditionally 'male' professions.

Since Russia's full-scale invasion began, the **shortage of skilled professionals** has become a systemic problem. This has been documented in several Ukrainian labour market studies conducted by the European Business Association (EBA). A [survey](#) conducted by the EBA in late 2024 found that 71% of companies face significant personnel shortages, 25% experience partial shortages, and only 4% report no such difficulties. In 2025, this trend has intensified:

100% of companies now report personnel shortages. The situation is most acute in smaller cities and front-line regions, which are losing out in the competition for talent to large companies and employers from 'safer' areas.

Experts identify key **challenges for post-war labour market recovery** as: migration policy (both in host countries and Ukraine itself), adapting to veterans' needs, integrating people with disabilities into the workforce, retraining and education, and workers' mental health.

The return of Ukrainians from abroad is widely seen as one of the greatest resources for addressing Ukraine's labour shortage. Another resource being actively discussed is the attraction of foreign labour, which presents both opportunities and new challenges for Ukraine.

According to numerous international legal instruments, when forced migration occurs, the main task after providing emergency aid is finding a durable solution for refugees, which can take [three forms](#): return to the homeland, local integration where the person has settled, or resettlement elsewhere. Safe return is considered the optimal outcome.

The role of Government and EU institutions in citizens' return

The Ukrainian Government's efforts to facilitate citizens' return have yet to prove effective and successful. However, they are not entirely absent. The establishment of the Ministry of National Unity of Ukraine was a failure, with its head facing corruption charges. The Ministry's remit included creating conditions for the voluntary return of citizens from abroad. In July 2025, the Ministry was dissolved, and this responsibility was [transferred](#) to the reorganised Ministry of Social Policy, Family and Unity of Ukraine. Before the Ministry of National Unity was established in September 2024, several civil society organisations had [advocated](#) for maintaining a government ministry responsible for war-affected populations, regardless of location — whether in temporarily occupied territories, liberated areas of Ukraine, or abroad.

In early 2025, the Ministry of National Unity was [allocated](#) 150 million hryvnias from the state budget to facilitate Ukrainian refugees' return under the **programme “Ensuring the implementation of tasks and measures to support Ukrainians abroad and facilitate their return to Ukraine”**. However, no public reporting on the programme's implementation has been published.

Updating migration policy with a [strategy](#) that dates back to 2017 remains a challenge for Ukraine. The 2024 updated [version](#) emphasizes that Ukraine's recovery will require

substantial human potential, making the return of all Ukrainian citizens abroad a primary state objective. The Strategy's updated goals include creating necessary conditions for the return and reintegration into Ukrainian society of citizens who are labour migrants and/or have been granted temporary protection abroad. The Strategy aims to formulate policy and create conditions to encourage Ukrainian citizens with temporary protection abroad to return home. Meanwhile, leading national experts [emphasise](#) the need to refine migration policy and develop a strategy through 2035 that, alongside facilitating Ukrainians' return, prevents youth emigration.

In October 2025, it [emerged](#) that the Ministry of Social Policy, Family and Unity is developing a **Strategy for Citizens' Return** from abroad. The document is expected to be completed this year. Officials note that voluntary return must be based on citizens' own wishes, and this aspect requires thorough elaboration in the Strategy.

Ukraine is also studying other countries' experiences, particularly the Baltic states, to develop effective return mechanisms.

A separate priority is returning Ukrainian citizens forcibly deported by the occupying country.

Various government initiatives and programmes involving government bodies are directly or indirectly aimed at creating conditions for Ukrainians' return. These include the online platform “**Ukraine is Home**”, the programmes “**Own Business**” and “**Create Ukraine**”, as well as incentives (housing, employment, social support) through the e-Housing programme and the 5-7-9% Affordable Loans Programme. A potential catalyst for citizens' return is the [law on multiple citizenship](#) adopted in June 2025, which may encourage those living abroad out of necessity to return, as they can now hold citizenship of both countries. This also applies to children born abroad, whose parents will no longer be forced to choose a single citizenship — potentially facilitating such families' eventual return to Ukraine.

The **European Union** has provided the most extensive support to Ukrainian forced migrants, but has now begun systematic preparations for their return home. In September 2025, the EU Council agreed on [general recommendations](#) for gradually phasing out temporary protection status for Ukrainian refugees, which expires on 4 March 2027. These recommendations aim to ensure refugees' return to Ukraine “when conditions permit.” Whilst the EU is not forcing Ukrainians to return, conditions for such a process are already taking shape. Thus, the EU is preparing for when circumstances allow Ukrainians to return home and help rebuild their country. Member states are encouraged to establish Voluntary Return Programmes supporting Ukrainian citizens' return and reintegration.

Meanwhile, the European Union is providing vital assistance in creating conditions within Ukraine for citizens' return. The **EU funds projects in education, vocational training, healthcare and social cohesion**, creating favourable conditions in Ukraine for returners. The EU and member states support initiatives such as Skills Alliance, which develops Ukrainians' professional and digital skills, and the recently launched Promoting Inclusive Labour Market Governance Reform in Support of Ukraine's Reconstruction and EU Accession project. The initiative aims to create a modern labour model where every Ukrainian has not just employment but decent conditions, social protection and development opportunities. [According](#) to EU Ambassador to Ukraine Kateryna Maternova, this latter project will strengthen institutions, promote social dialogue and enable workers, women, young people and veterans to participate in the country's reconstruction.

Human capital was one of four key dimensions at the latest Ukraine Recovery Conference (URC-2025) in Rome, where Ukrainians' return, reintegration and capacity development were viewed as driving forces for Ukraine's reconstruction. Human capital is a vital element of the [Ukraine Facility Regulation](#) adopted by the European Union to support Ukraine's post-war reconstruction and European integration reforms. The [Ukraine Plan](#) approved by the Cabinet of Ministers, which sets out the framework for achieving Ukraine Facility objectives, specifies that human capital recovery includes efforts to facilitate Ukrainians' return home. This is notably addressed by the Government-adopted [Demographic Development Strategy of Ukraine until 2040](#), which serves as a Plan indicator.

Conclusions and recommendations

Ukrainians' return home is a crucial factor in ensuring Ukraine's post-war recovery and development. Effectively achieving this goal requires the **consolidation of all stakeholders**, including government bodies, business, international organisations and civil society. To this end, **robust strategic and legislative frameworks** must be established that not only facilitate people's return but also ensure adequate support after they come home. Another critical factor for human capital recovery is building an effective domestic system for human capital development.

Human capital development and preservation are intimately linked to **Ukraine's post-war reconstruction and development**, as well as to **European integration** and Ukraine's accession to the EU. This is why it must remain central to the work of the Ukrainian National Platform of the EaP CSF. Through Platform members' advocacy efforts at EU level, human capital

development can be effectively integrated into future Eastern Partnership initiatives and policies. Eastern Partnership policy holds considerable potential for addressing issues such as strengthening civil society organisations' capacity to tackle human capital challenges, including employment, youth engagement, educational opportunities and retraining.

At government level, a **state strategy for the return of Ukrainians** should be developed and adopted. The Strategy must go beyond worthy goals and objectives to include concrete indicators and mechanisms that ensure adequate quality of life for returnees, including affordable housing, economic return incentives, employment programmes, and educational and psychological support.

A vital element of work on Ukrainians' return should be an **information and communication policy**, which could include establishing a unified online portal for those preparing to return.