

BEFORE 2027: URGENT POLICY ACTIONS FOR UKRAINIAN REFUGEES IN GERMANY

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Project ●●●
Return and Belonging

The temporary protection status of Ukrainian refugees in Germany expires in March 2027, while prospects for a durable peace in Ukraine remain bleak. Without providing Ukrainian refugees with clear prospects for legal integration, Germany risks a surge in asylum claims, administrative overload and the loss of labour market contributions over the next twelve months.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1 ENSURE LEGAL CERTAINTY FOR UKRAINIAN REFUGEES

Germany risks a last-minute rush of asylum claims when temporary protection expires, undermining administrative efficiency and public trust—precisely the scenario the Temporary Protection Directive was designed to avoid. The German government must urgently establish clear and reliable legal pathways for Ukrainian refugees, eliminating legal uncertainty and enabling refugees to plan their futures.

2 STRENGTHEN REFUGEES' SUSTAINABLE LABOUR MARKET INTEGRATION

Ukrainian refugees are highly qualified and experienced professionals, representing a valuable opportunity for Germany's labour market, which has around 391,000 unfilled skilled positions and an overall shrinking workforce. To unlock this potential, Germany must remove structural barriers and abandon short-term job placement in favour of a comprehensive integration strategy that delivers more sustainable labour market outcomes.

3 PROVIDE CLEAR, COHERENT AND TIMELY COMMUNICATION

Gaps in the provision of clear, up-to-date information on programme requirements, policy updates or procedural changes cause confusion among refugees. This fosters misinformation and places additional strain on administrative systems, as unclear guidance leads to repeated enquiries and unnecessary office visits, increasing operational costs. To mitigate this, the German government must establish a structured, multi-channel communication system that delivers timely, accurate and easily accessible information to Ukrainian refugees.

BACKGROUND

The end of violent hostilities in Ukraine would not necessarily trigger large-scale returns of Ukrainian refugees from Germany. Any peace may prove fragile, leaving refugees reluctant to make irreversible return decisions.

"We do not see an end to the war. Even if a ceasefire is reached, no one is confident it will hold—there is always a fear that hostilities could resume" (interview, Germany, October 2025).

Beyond security and stability, return intentions among Ukrainian refugees are shaped by employment and housing opportunities in Ukraine, concerns about conscription-related risks and societal attitudes, progress in anti-corruption efforts and the level of integration in the host country.

In Germany, the status and integration of Ukrainian refugees is currently at the centre of political debate. Advocates of stricter policies argue that the employment rate of Ukrainian refugees (36%, according to the Federal Employment Agency, July 2025) is lower than in other EU countries, and often frame this as evidence of Ukrainians' over-reliance on the German social welfare system. However, such claims disregard recent findings: Most Ukrainian refugees choose their destination country on the basis of employment opportunities rather than social assistance (Adema et al., 2025). Moreover, these arguments overlook the diverse approaches across the European Union, where countries promoting accelerated integration into low-wage sectors report higher employment rates among Ukrainian refugees (Lashchuk, 2025).

Given the ongoing war, the lack of trust in the sustainability of any potential cessation of hostilities, the influence of socio-economic and institutional factors on return intentions, Ukraine's current limited capacity to reintegrate large numbers of returnees, the expiration of temporary protection in March 2027 and the prevailing uncertainty, Ukrainian refugees may increasingly opt to apply for asylum. This could trigger a surge in simultaneous individual asylum applications, risking system overload. It may foster dissatisfaction among local and regional authorities responsible for asylum seekers, as well as within German society, particularly in light of official narratives framing the recent decline in asylum applications as a hallmark achievement of current government policies (Die Zeit, 2025). Moreover, asylum status would hinder sustainable future return by preventing short-term visits to post-war Ukraine that are essential for refugees to assess reintegration opportunities realistically and plan a well-informed, voluntary return.

1 UKRAINIAN REFUGEES NEED LEGAL CERTAINTY

The introduction of temporary protection status was a swift and effective response to the mass displacement caused by Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Beneficiaries enjoy the same entitlements as German nationals in relation to unemployment benefits, housing allowances, healthcare, access to the labour market, support measures such as language courses, child and parental benefits, as well as educational support programmes.

THE GERMAN GOVERNMENT'S POSITION ON ADOPTING SPECIFIC MEASURES UNDER THIS RECOMMENDATION REMAINS UNCLEAR TO UKRAINIAN REFUGEES, PARTICULARLY REGARDING KEY FACTORS SUCH AS SECURITY CONDITIONS AND ACCESS TO LIVELIHOODS IN UKRAINE.

According to the Central Register of Foreigners (Der Mediendienst Integration, 2026) 1,329,742 refugees from Ukraine were residing in Germany as of 31 December 2025. Of these 1,145,088 held temporary protection, 57,283 held a *Fiktionsbescheinigung* (no decision has yet been made on the application), 55,970 had submitted an application for temporary protection, 31,508 had filed a request for protection, 39,893 had not yet submitted a request for protection and had not been granted any residence title. Among adults, approximately 61 per cent are women. Nearly 360,000 are children and young people under the age of 18.

This unprecedented extension of rights—unmatched by any previous refugee group—has not, however, resolved the fundamental uncertainty surrounding long-term status that affects all displaced populations. After four years of war and repeated extensions of temporary protection, currently set to expire on 4 March 2027, the long-term residence prospects of Ukrainian refugees remain unclear. This ongoing legal ambiguity is fuelling deep concern among refugees. As one explained: “

I feel uncertain about my status. I don't know what will happen next, what new rules they might announce. Today, they help us, but tomorrow they could tell us to leave this house” (interview, Germany, July 2025).

The Council of the EU's September 2025 Recommendation on a coordinated approach to the transition out of temporary protection delegates critical decisions to individual member states without mandating uniform standards. The German government's position on adopting specific measures under this recommendation remains unclear to Ukrainian refugees, particularly regarding key factors such as security conditions and

access to livelihoods in Ukraine. As one respondent pointed out:

My husband and I have lost everything—our property, our business, our city is under occupation. If the occupation continues, where can we return to? What will we do in Ukraine? But here in Germany, we face the same uncertainty about 2027. Not knowing what lies ahead fills us with dread (interview, Germany, October 2025).

To avert a potential crisis in 2027—when the expiration of temporary protection could lead to a large influx of asylum claims, thereby undermining the core purpose of the Temporary Protection Directive—the German government must urgently establish clear and reliable legal pathways for Ukrainian refugees. Providing transparent criteria for long-term residence permits and, where applicable, access to permanent residence or other durable protection statuses would prevent systemic overload by avoiding a last-minute rush for alternative statuses. This approach would also align with the government's stated priorities of maintaining administrative efficiency and preserving public trust in migration policies. While the timeline for a durable peace in Ukraine remains uncertain, predictable legal frameworks are essential to ensure stability, dignity and the ability to plan for the future.

2 INTEGRATING UKRAINIANS IN THE LABOUR MARKET IS A WIN-WIN

Ukrainian refugees have relatively high levels of qualification and professional experience. On the one hand, this represents a potential asset for Germany's labour market, particularly in the context of demographic decline and labour shortages. Without immigration, labour force potential is projected to shrink by 7.9 million by the mid-2030s (Destatis, 2025), while the skilled labour situation remains tight, with around 391,000 unfilled positions as of June 2025 (Tiedemann & Kunath, 2025). On the other hand, supporting refugees in achieving their life goals increases their integration prospects and the likelihood of a successful, self-determined return in the future (Dinçer et al., 2025). In 2023, the German government launched the Job-Turbo programme to accelerate refugee employment through targeted language and vocational training, employer partnerships and flexible hiring incentives.

At the same time, Ukrainian refugees face significant barriers that hinder their successful integration into the German labour market. Many struggle to secure employment commensurate with their qualifications. As one respondent noted:

I want to work and so do all the Ukrainian people I know. Everyone is searching, but only a handful manage to find a job in their field here in Germany (interview, Germany, September 2025).

Some respondents reported cases where Jobcentres pressured Ukrainian refugees to accept jobs below their qualifications despite their professional backgrounds. One explained:

The Job-Turbo programme started too early—many of us, including me, were still aiming to progress to the next level of our language courses when the Jobcentre asked us to take jobs well below our qualifications (interview, Germany, October 2025).

In other cases, refugees who hold residency permits under §24 of the German Residence Act (temporary protection status) are denied transitions to other work-related permits precisely because their current employment does not correspond to the qualifications stated in their diplomas.

The high-income requirements for certain employment residence permits pose a significant obstacle for many refugees, particularly women with childcare responsibilities or school-age children, who constitute a substantial share of the Ukrainian refugee population in Germany. Limited professional experience in spoken German prevents many job seekers from meeting the confident language proficiency requirements demanded by employers. The complexity and opacity of Germany's bureaucratic system often deter refugees from pursuing self-employment, even when they aspire to do so. As one respondent emphasised:

It is crucial that Germans see us not only as recipients of social benefits, but also as responsible taxpayers and successful entrepreneurs (interview, Germany, September 2025).

These structural barriers not only undermine efficient integration but also expose shortcomings in the Job-Turbo programme. The Federal Anti-Discrimination Agency has further revealed that Job-Turbo prioritises rapid job placement, thereby contradicting the *Bürgergeld* concept, which aims to support individuals in finding long-term, quality employment. While such an approach may temporarily improve employment statistics, it perpetuates precarious, low-wage work that fails to support meaningful integration. This creates a vicious cycle: Individuals placed quickly in mismatched roles often resign or are dismissed due to dissatisfaction, insufficient qualifications or inadequate language proficiency, and subsequently reapply for temporary protection benefits. Meanwhile, political narratives often depict refugees as 'parasitising' Germany's social system, attributing this to alleged unwillingness to work rather than to the structural policy gaps that hinder access to qualified and stable employment.

POLITICAL NARRATIVES OFTEN DEPICT REFUGEES AS 'PARASITISING' GERMANY'S SOCIAL SYSTEM, ATTRIBUTING THIS TO ALLEGED UNWILLINGNESS TO WORK RATHER THAN TO THE STRUCTURAL POLICY GAPS THAT HINDER ACCESS TO QUALIFIED AND STABLE EMPLOYMENT.

To fully unlock the potential of Ukrainian refugees for Germany's labour market Germany must abandon the simultaneous pursuit of two conflicting approaches: rapid job placement and sustainable integration. Instead, it should prioritise a model of long-term, skills-matched integration. Lessons learned from previous experience with forcibly displaced people show that the German government's comprehensive integration strategy leads to more sustainable labour market outcomes (Kosyakova et al., 2024). The state should also remove structural barriers, including lowering the minimum salary threshold for the EU Blue Card for vulnerable groups such as single mothers with dependent children. Reviving a training programme that equips refugees with the knowledge required to start their own businesses would help unlock their entrepreneurial potential and reduce dependence on social benefits. Including Ukraine in the list of countries exempt from the *Vorrangprüfung* (§26 (1) *BeschV*) would remove a critical barrier to employment for Ukrainian refugees. This shift would create a more effective integration framework, benefiting refugees and Germany's labour market alike.

3 PRIORITISING COMMUNICATION CAN MITIGATE RISKS

Since the onset of the war, German government agencies have taken significant steps to ensure accessible communication for Ukrainian refugees. The German Federal Ministry of the Interior (BMI) and the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF) jointly launched a centralised portal providing comprehensive guidance on temporary protection status for Ukrainians. The Federal Employment Agency established a dedicated website, offering detailed information on labour market access and available support programmes. The Federal Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs has actively promoted the Job-Turbo initiative.

At the same time, respondents report persistent gaps in timely and detailed information about programme requirements, updates or policy changes. This lack of clarity has led to widespread frustration and confusion. For example, one respondent described sudden, uncommunicated changes to language course eligibility:

Recently, free C1 language courses were restricted to a few professions only. I had no official notice—just rumours. By the time I found out, I had already lost the chance to enrol (interview, Germany, October 2025).

Similarly, misaligned labour market information has left many questioning the value of their training investments. As another respondent stated:

I enrolled in an 8-month state-funded training programme to become a childcare assistant—a field I was told had labour shortages. I completed the course, but now I can't find a job. They say there's actually a

surplus of assistants and a shortage of fully qualified educators. No one officially explained this to me. I spent eight months training, only to hear Germany wasted thousands of euros on programmes that don't lead to jobs. Was this all for nothing? (interview, Germany, October 2024).

The absence of accessible guidance also extends to bureaucratic processes, with refugees struggling to navigate legal and administrative requirements. One respondent stated:

I don't know where to turn for answers about bureaucracy or my documents, and private firms charge for help (interview, Germany, March 2025).

Many refugees initially dismissed reports of new rules for arrivals after 1 April 2025 as misinformation, as they were unaware of the coalition agreement provision or doubted that Germany could introduce retroactive changes. In the absence of clear official communication, rumours and unverified information—including online—frequently circulate within Ukrainian refugee communities, fuelling uncertainty and distress.

IN THE ABSENCE OF CLEAR OFFICIAL COMMUNICATION, RUMOURS AND UNVERIFIED INFORMATION—INCLUDING ONLINE—FREQUENTLY CIRCULATE WITHIN UKRAINIAN REFUGEE COMMUNITIES, FUELLING UNCERTAINTY AND DISTRESS.

This confusion generates additional bureaucratic strain and frustration on all sides, as unclear rules lead to repeated enquiries and office visits, increasing administrative costs for German authorities. To address these risks, the German government must urgently establish a structured, multi-channel communication system that ensures that Ukrainian refugees receive timely, accurate and accessible information. This could be achieved by leveraging existing digital infrastructure to send targeted newsletters and alerts directly to refugees' personal online accounts in Jobcentre and *Sozialamt* systems—platforms already used for benefits and documentation—thereby ensuring direct delivery of verified updates and reducing reliance on unofficial sources. In addition trusted intermediaries, such as Ukrainian refugee communities, NGOs, the Refugee Advisory Board and members of Foreigners' Advisory Councils or Integration Councils (where available), should be engaged to bridge the gap between institutions and refugee communities. Through these partnerships, official messages could be clarified, misinformation dispelled and culturally sensitive guidance provided. Clearly designated contact points within government agencies should also be established to answer questions regarding bureaucracy, documentation and programme eligibility, ensuring that refugees know where to turn for reliable support.

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