

REPORT



Female Refugees Integration and Inclusion
through Volunteering

Funded by the European Union. The FRIIV project is co-funded by the European Union under the Erasmus+ Programme and implemented with the support of the Dutch National Agency Erasmus+ Onderwijs & Training (NL01). Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the Dutch National Agency Erasmus+ Onderwijs & Training. Neither the European Union nor the funding agency can be held responsible for them. Project Number: 2025-1-NL01-KA220-ADU-000357345.



Co-funded by
the European Union

ABOUT FRIIV

FRIIV (Female Refugees Integration and Inclusion through Volunteering) is a European Erasmus+ Cooperation Partnership in Adult Education that aims to strengthen inclusion, diversity and civic participation across Europe through volunteering.

The project focuses on female refugees from around the world recognizing their potential not only as beneficiaries of support, but as active contributors to European society. By empowering volunteer managers and women with lived refugee experience, FRIIV works towards creating more inclusive, conscious and sensitive volunteering environments.

FRIIV is coordinated by Erasmus University Rotterdam and implemented by a consortium of universities, NGOs and expert organisations from across Europe.

Layout: AMU Team

Date of publication: September 2026

ABSTRACT

This report presents the results of the FRIIV consortium members' work. The tasks outlined in Work Package 2 were carried out between December 2025 and June 2026, based on tools developed during the European Research Meeting in Rotterdam in December 2025. Consortium members then identified areas of interest containing 113 keywords grouped into 17 main categories. Based on this, a literature review was conducted. Eleven focus group interviews were also conducted simultaneously, with two or three interviews conducted in each consortium country. Ultimately, the AMU team collected and compiled the information, which, together with analyses provided by consortium members, formed the basis for this report. It is available in seven languages (English, Dutch, French, Slovak, Polish, Portuguese, and Ukrainian) for broad use by volunteer managers or anyone volunteering in the context of migration and refugee issues.

This report is part of the Erasmus+ FRIIV project, which will also include a handbook for volunteer managers and a training course for volunteer managers and females with refugee backgrounds.

All deliverables are available on the project website: WWW.FRIIV-EU.ORG

Keywords: challenges for refugees, female volunteers, good practices in migrant adaptation, integration, Ukrainian forced migrants.

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CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION to FRIIV

Forced displacement continues to rise globally, with 122.6 million people currently uprooted from their homes (UNHCR, 2026). Ongoing conflict, natural disasters, and other crises indicate that this number will likely increase in the coming years. The losses associated with exile often leave refugees with limited resources to navigate the challenges of rebuilding their lives and integrating into new societies. Supporting refugees in reconstructing and expanding their social networks is therefore essential for successful integration. Volunteer engagement can play a significant role in this process. When volunteer organisations offer opportunities to refugees, they must create environments that acknowledge and understand the profound effects of forced displacement. Volunteering is frequently framed as a pathway to labour market participation, personal development, and civic engagement. It is embedded in a broader discourse of “good citizenship,” where volunteering becomes a technology of the self—an instrument through which refugees are encouraged to transform into idealised civic subjects (Yin Yap, Byrne, & Davidson, 2011). However, research demonstrates that these pathways are not equally accessible to all refugees. Male refugees often gain independence and societal participation even before formal citizenship is granted, whereas female refugees face persistent barriers (Ouacha & Meijs, 2024). Across Europe, female refugee participation in volunteering remains low, contributing to their overrepresentation among the most socially isolated groups—an isolation that often persists even after acquiring European citizenship.

In recent years, civil society across the globe, and particularly within the European Union, has mobilised unprecedented support for refugees fleeing war, conflict, and climate-related crises. Within this context, the FRIIV project examines how volunteer-involving organisations can more effectively engage female refugees as volunteers. It trains volunteer managers to engage more effectively with female volunteers from refugee backgrounds and to understand how emotions such as empathy can support the transition from isolation to integration and inclusion in their new societies. To address the obstacles volunteer organisations face the lack of diversity and the limited presence of volunteers with lived refugee experience. FRIIV also focuses on recruiting and retaining female volunteers with lived refugee experience. Their insights can strengthen organisational strategies for including female refugees as volunteers. In doing so, FRIIV directly contributes to the European priority of fostering inclusion and diversity in volunteering, and to the broader goal of building an active and inclusive European society. By focusing on female refugees from both European (e.g., Ukrainian) and non-European backgrounds, FRIIV enhances the capacity of volunteer managers and former refugee volunteers to cultivate more inclusive and culturally diverse volunteering environments. Female refugee participation remains far from mainstream, in part due to persistent prejudices that associate non-European origins with underdevelopment, isolation, or limited education (Ouacha & Meijs, 2024). FRIIV's innovative approach places intercultural understanding and narrative exchange at the core of volunteer

engagement, ensuring that female refugees are not only included but also recognised as contributors and knowledge holders.

Europe continues to receive refugees, serving as an important destination for asylum seekers from both within and beyond the continent. In 2023, 19.5 million refugees sought asylum in a European country (UNHCR, 2026). Female refugees, who often face heightened vulnerability compared to their male counterparts, embody significant reserves of resilience, intercultural insight, and inspiration. FRIIV seeks to harness these strengths to build sustainable forms of knowledge exchange and interaction through volunteering, offering a model that can be replicated in other contexts. By amplifying the voices of female volunteers with refugee backgrounds, allowing them to speak for themselves, share their experiences, and articulate their journeys toward safety and freedom, FRIIV introduces a new method for cultivating a pan-European identity grounded in lived experience and mutual understanding. The dissemination of detailed personal narratives across Europe will extend beyond the volunteer sector, contributing to broader societal learning. Through their participation in FRIIV, volunteer managers and former refugee volunteers will be better equipped to enhance the quality and inclusiveness of volunteer engagement, which remains a cornerstone of civic learning and social cohesion. While research shows that the benefits of volunteering are complex and varied, particularly for individuals experiencing vulnerability, it also demonstrates that volunteering can foster social interaction, new relationships, and what scholars describe as “social capital,” “trust,” or “social cohesion.” By focusing specifically on female refugees, FRIIV aims to support their transition out of isolation but also to strengthen the capacity of civil society organisations to build social bonds across ethnic, social, and local communities.

FRIIV advances the selected priorities by providing adult education opportunities for volunteer managers and for female volunteers who were once refugees themselves. The project strengthens their capacity to improve the inclusion of female volunteers of all ages and from both European (e.g., Ukrainian) and non-European refugee backgrounds. The priority of inclusion and diversity is embedded throughout the project: FRIIV promotes more inclusive and culturally diverse volunteering environments that recognise the importance of preserving cultural identity and deepening public understanding of what it means to flee one's country of origin, rebuild a life elsewhere, learn a new language, and bridge intercultural divides. For many refugees, these processes occur involuntarily and are driven by the basic human need for safety and survival. The project positions learning opportunities and capacity development as central mechanisms for enabling female refugees to participate actively in society. Through volunteering, participants can acquire practical and vocational skills that support future employment and personal development, even as they continue to cope with the psychological effects of forced displacement. FRIIV ensures that these learning opportunities are accessible to volunteer managers and former refugee volunteers from diverse ethnic, cultural, and generational

backgrounds, thereby promoting continuous learning and the acquisition of new skills relevant to their future roles.

FRIIV also promotes common values and civic engagement by encouraging the active participation of female refugees as potential volunteers. This engagement contributes to a more united future grounded in quality education and an authentic European identity. By participating in volunteering activities centred on shared stories and cultural narratives, participants develop a deeper appreciation of the European values and democratic principles that underpin integration, belonging, and identity formation. Through their involvement in volunteering initiatives, female refugee volunteers and volunteer managers become active contributors to civic life in their local communities, with impacts that extend to regional, national, and European levels. The project strengthens the capacity of the volunteering and integration sectors to adopt more inclusive practices, thereby expanding opportunities for social groups that experience heightened vulnerability, such as female refugees. By focusing on volunteer managers and former refugee volunteers as adult learners, FRIIV increases awareness, knowledge, and practical competence in engaging female refugees as potential volunteers.

The added value of volunteering differs for individual women. Female refugees arriving in Europe, whether alone or with partners and children, represent a wide spectrum of educational backgrounds, from highly educated to illiterate (Ouacha & Meijs, 2024). They come from urban and rural areas, various social classes, and diverse religious communities. For many, volunteering becomes an essential tool for building social connections and contributing to European society. It enables the sharing of experiences, mutual support, and the cultivation of future aspirations, elements closely aligned with the EU value of solidarity as articulated in Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union. Evidence shows that volunteering is a unique instrument capable of addressing a wide range of European, national, and regional challenges (Doctors Without Borders, 2026). Under the right conditions, it generates clear added value across diverse topics, groups, and organisational contexts. FRIIV responds to the need for a strengthened and tailored adult learning programme for volunteer managers and former refugee volunteers. The skills and competencies they acquire will enable them to create more structured, supportive, and meaningful opportunities for female refugees as volunteers, positioning these women not only as beneficiaries of support but as contributors to it. Better-trained volunteer managers will be equipped to help female refugees and former refugees reconcile with their past experiences and integrate their experiences of rebuilding their lives, thereby enhancing the inclusivity, quality, and accessibility of volunteering opportunities and expanding civic participation among marginalised groups. This will be achieved by training the project's direct target group - volunteer managers who may themselves have refugee backgrounds - to increase their skills, confidence, and intercultural civic awareness. The project will also benefit female refugees who aspire to volunteer, as the “gatekeepers” to volunteering roles will be better prepared to support them.

The FRIIV partnership brings together organisations from multiple sectors, including volunteering infrastructure and training, academia, gender-focused non-profits, refugee empowerment organisations, and community accelerators. These partners collectively cover formal, non-formal, and informal education. The project has strong potential to influence vocational training and non-formal learning through the involvement of volunteers, including female refugee volunteers. These volunteers, particularly those with formal education, can translate academic and practical knowledge into accessible forms that help volunteer managers and former refugee volunteers create environments where female refugees feel included, understood, and acknowledged as both human beings and potential volunteers.

The project also leverages digital technologies to enhance cross-border volunteering potential. In a context where social media plays an increasingly important role in volunteering, FRIIV's digital components may help reach isolated female refugees and generate large-scale impact across intercultural, intergenerational, and community-based settings. By focusing on the inclusion of female refugees as potential volunteers, FRIIV creates a foundation for these women to engage peers within their own communities. As insiders to refugee experiences and outsiders to native European societies, they are uniquely positioned to foster intercultural understanding. The project demonstrates how meaningful engagement of minority groups can produce inclusive outcomes that resonate across diverse civic contexts in the EU. By addressing a vulnerable group present in every European country, albeit to varying degrees, as seen in Poland and Slovakia with Ukrainian refugees, FRIIV contributes to a deeper understanding of contemporary integration and inclusion challenges.

Ultimately, the project strengthens European volunteering culture as a space for learning and personal development for volunteer managers, former refugee volunteers, and female refugees who aspire to volunteer. By providing tailored training, knowledge, tools, and ongoing support through dedicated trainers, a project website, and a community of practice, FRIIV enhances the quality, accessibility, and diversity of volunteering opportunities. This, in turn, expands civic participation among marginalised groups and improves the inclusiveness and effectiveness of volunteer organisations. Research shows that individuals who feel isolated or underrepresented often withdraw from society and from intercultural and intergenerational debates. Female refugees, whether current or former, offer unique experiences, narratives, and cultural perspectives that can enrich all sectors of society. Through its outputs, including the State of the Art report, Training Package, and piloting activities, FRIIV equips volunteer managers, who may be former refugees themselves with the confidence and competence to support female refugees to become volunteers, ensuring long-term impact across Europe.

References:

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Websites:

The UN Refugee Agency, <https://www.unhcr.org/pl/>

Doctors Without Borders, <https://www.doctorswithoutborders.org/>

CHAPTER 2. DESK RESEARCH: DATA, RESULTS, AND ANALYSIS

The State of the Art Report aims to support the initial phase of the FRIIV project by conducting a systematic analysis of the target groups' training needs and delivering a suitable training package for volunteer managers in FRIIV partner countries: Belgium, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, and Slovakia. Tailored tools (data matrix of keywords) for the desk research and focus group interviews - a list of questions, interview instructions, and a code of ethics were developed during the FRIIV kick-off meeting in Rotterdam in December 2025 (European Research Meeting). The keyword matrix was organised into 17 main categories, each containing 3 to 11 subcategories (113 keywords in total). The main categories were connected to the areas of interest identified during the FRIIV consortium workshop. They included theoretical and legal concepts, everyday challenges and practices, all rooted in the refugee context, with reference to women refugees' issues.

During the desk research stage, every national team worked independently. The tool, a list of keywords generated during the European Research Meeting in Rotterdam, was used to review and analyse the body of literature selected on a geographical basis, with a preference for data, research, and country-specific information. Using a keyword matrix and a general instruction file replicated five times, once for each national team, the FRIIV team managed to analyze national research resources to identify the main areas of interest. The results, based on 30–60 texts analysed by each national team, were used to prepare this report. All results are available on the project website <https://www.friiv-eu.org>

Desk Research - Data

Most Frequently Used Keywords

In the section below, the main categories and subcategories with the most frequently used keywords are presented. The frequency is based on a body of 198 texts in migratory, refugee, and volunteer studies produced by the FRIIV national teams.

A. Challenges for Refugees

In the main category “Challenges for refugees”, the five most frequently used subcategories were: “1.1 Entry into society/exit from the communities”, “1.3 Lack of agency”, “1.5 Lack of resources versus accessibility of resources”, followed by “1.7 Refugeeism (in general)”, and “1.10 Uncertainty in the social context”.

The list of challenges may also include the less frequently mentioned subcategories: “1.8 Stigma and social labelling” and “1.4 Lack of knowledge about how society works (jobs, education, healthcare, banking)”. The list provides deeper insight into the harsh reality of refugee status, as analysed in the literature reviewed by the consortium members. Other challenges marked in our keyword matrix, were frequently addressed during the desk research stage, were “9.1 Access to services” and “11.3 Official languages as a barrier”. What should also be noted and highlighted is the lack of agency and authority, often pointed out in the body of the texts analysed. The wide range of presentations and manifestations of the discourse on migration and inclusion can be particularly useful for understanding the importance of these terms and the semantic challenges they raise. This issue was further explored in the focus group interviews when participants were asked to provide more details about the challenges they faced on their journeys to their current destinations. This main category is one of the most frequent selections in our analyses, covering a wide variety of challenges, from structural ones to individual ones experienced by refugees in their neighbourhoods. It provides insight into the individual obstacles refugees face upon arrival.

B. Practices

The second most frequently mentioned category was „12. Practices”, in which the most frequently used keywords were „12.5 Inclusion” and „12.6 Integration”. In this case, a lower frequency was observed in the categories „successful stories” and „participation”. This provides an important area for analysis and the promotion of good practices across different locations. Participation may be placed first on the list, but it is a broad concept encompassing various forms of participation, cooperation and collaboration. Similarly, during the focus group interviews, participants were asked about their personal perspectives on experiences of participation in both their places of origin and their new settings. Some of these practices although locally based and unique to a specific socio-economic context, are worth sharing as individual responses to the

challenges of everyday life in the refugee contexts. Others, focused more on host communities, offer interesting perspectives on how locals adapt to the new social in the places where newcomers arrive.

C. Sociodemography

For the main category „13. Socio-demography“, „13.2 Civil society“ and „13.3 Host communities“ were most frequently used. As noted above, the social context of integration, participation, and inclusion in initiatives, actions, and events was highlighted. When discussing socio-demography as a general category during the European Research Meeting, the profile of an activist, expert, or a volunteer who acts as a focal point, spreading positive energy in their communities, neighbourhoods, workplaces, or leisure activities was defined. The desk research stage demonstrated the breadth of this category in the literature and enabled us to explore other perspectives, providing a valuable source of information for the subsequent stages.

D. EU, International and National Laws and Procedures

The results show the frequent occurrence of keywords connected with the institutional aspect of welcoming and integrating newcomers (“5.7 EU, international and national laws and procedures”), which draws attention to the formal and legal procedures that affect people's ability to live and work, access medical care when needed and enroll their children in the local education system. These procedures may act as barriers that prevent refugees from integrating successfully or, conversely, enable them to access support and opportunities that facilitate successful adaptation in their new places. It is important to note not only the presence of established procedures, but the time required to regularize one's legal status, gradual integration into local communities. This process is necessarily shaped by geographical and local conditions, the practices identified in the Ukrainian cases analyzed may be regarded as good practices.

E. Ukrainian Context

Finally, the Ukrainian context was strongly represented in our keyword matrix, with the most frequently used keywords “6.1 Central European positionality”, and more specifically: “14.3 Ukrainian female volunteers” and “16.2 Volunteer institutions and associations”. This is surely related to the geographical cases of Poland and Slovakia involved in the research, but not only to them. In fact, the Ukrainian context is evident across all the countries in the FRIIV consortium. This is important for many reasons, particularly following February 2022, when millions of Ukrainians arrived in the EU. The following sections focus primarily on the good practices that emerged in response. Their arrival and different patterns of adaptation indicate that many of the integration strategies implemented have been successful. In some cases, local grassroots responses were not based on formal strategies but were driven by altruism, a willingness to help

and the immediate availability of resources, such as a spare room, a car or food. Such support was urgently needed by refugees and could be provided immediately. As shown above, the keyword matrix identified the general area of interest for our state of the art report. As the results indicate, the challenges arise mainly from a lack of resources, although these are not always material, and from difficulties in accessing available resources. The case of Ukrainian refugees in Poland, in particular, shows a high level of need in the first months of arrival, replaced by growing self-sufficiency as a result of successful adaptation, recognition and integration in their new settings. In 2022, the number of beneficiaries of the social welfare system from Ukraine in Poland exceeded 1,111 million, while in 2023 it reached 148 thousand. The level of labour market integration among Ukrainians in Poland is very high, reaching 90% among pre-war migrants and 70% among refugees (source: OECD 2025).

1. Geographic Specificities

Some more specific information is included in national team selections, even if a geographical approach does not apply equally to all locations (i.e., Belgium and the Netherlands differ significantly from Poland and Slovakia in terms of refugee and forced-migration patterns, for example, in the timing and frequency of arrivals, socio-demographic profile of newcomers, modes of cultural adaptation, anchoring and integration, and many others). Historically, Slovakia has received relatively few migrants and has primarily served as a transit country. It was only after the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, that large numbers of migrants began to arrive in the country. At that time, services were not prepared for this and access to them was limited and difficult (for example, finding a doctor, enrolling children in education, applying for a job and obtaining financial support). The country had little experience, and the state administration had to react quickly. Many studies therefore focus on what initial access to services was like, how it changed, and whether and how it improved. This is also closely related to another keyword: “13.2 Civil society” which filled the gaps in the state system and helped people who had fled Ukraine. Many studies have focused on the areas in which civil society provided the most assistance or on which civil society organisations were the most effective in providing assistance. Regarding the third keyword (14.1), Slovakia began using the term “exiled person” (“odídenec” in Slovak) due to the large influx of migrants from Ukraine and the challenges of their integration into society. This granted them temporary protection status, which simplified administration procedures and access to services. This is a special status for which assistance and benefits were set for entire arriving families. This status allows them to obtain temporary accommodation and legal residence within hours or days. It provides immediate and free access to employment without the need for special permits. It guarantees access to urgent and, to a certain extent, standard health care. It allows children to start school or preschool immediately.

Similarly, Poland's geographical location has shaped its role as a destination for substantial numbers of Ukrainian refugees and forcibly displaced people since the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. The Central European area of interest seems to be a natural consequence of the processes that created the large-scale movement of people that began in 2014 with the first wave of Ukrainian refugees, followed by a second, larger wave in 2022. This naturally created a new context for social dynamics, raising questions about social capacity and how to the social challenges associated with large-scale arrivals. Integration is among the key current issues in Poland due to the increased scale of immigration and the growing share of newcomers in society. Ukrainians, Belarusians, Indians, Vietnamese, and many other nationalities constitute the multicultural face of Polish society. It is worth noting that they are distributed across all regions of the country, mainly due to the warm welcome and the lack of any barriers to permanent settlement. Many migrants choose large cities and, in 2026, constitute 3-10% of the population of Poland's largest cities. Their integration encompasses housing, the labour market, education and healthcare. A significant portion of the aid provided to refugees in the first months of their increased migration into Poland in 2022 was distributed by individual volunteers (especially in the border region), social and charitable organisations, and institutions originally established for other purposes but dedicated to refugee assistance in a crisis. Examples include schools and preschools that welcomed refugee children during school hours and provided after-school care. Furthermore, schools often became hubs for social assistance to refugee families and single mothers with children, providing hot meals and various forms of psychological support, language lessons and courses, and general assistance, which was particularly important for single mothers entering employment. In many cases, such work was possible because these educational institutions provided comprehensive childcare during daytime hours. It is also worth mentioning the psychological and pedagogical assessment offered to children who had experienced migration trauma, and often war trauma. The comprehensiveness and multifaceted nature of these activities, along with the involvement of numerous specialists, often at no cost to those in need, enabled adequate adaptation and integration at refugee reception sites.

2. Host Communities

Qualitative analyses indicate that informal support activities undertaken by individuals demonstrating empathy, openness, and a willingness to provide selfless support played a key role in the adaptation process of refugee families. In this case, volunteers served as informal guides, often supporting families in navigating the education, healthcare, and social welfare systems, enabling them to utilize available support more effectively. This assistance primarily included:

1. translating documents and explaining procedures,
2. assisting with applications,

3. accompanying families on visits to institutions,
4. arranging appointments with medical specialists,
5. supporting families in obtaining diagnoses and official decisions,
6. assisting with communication with schools and clinics.

Relationships between host communities and refugees constitute a key area of analysis in the sociology of migration, particularly in the context of large-scale forced migration. In the academic literature, relationships between refugees and host communities are most analyzed within several theoretical frameworks. First, acculturation theory (Berry, 2005) emphasizes different strategies of migrant adaptation (integration, assimilation, separation, and marginalization), which are co-shaped by host-society attitudes. Second, the concept of social capital highlights that the quality of intergroup relations depends on the availability of support networks and the level of social trust. Finally, the notion of social or community cohesion assumes that integration is a reciprocal process, shaped by both public policies and everyday social interactions. Within this perspective, relationships between refugees and host communities are understood as dynamic and evolving, evolving over time under the influence of economic, political, and cultural factors. In conclusion, relationships between host communities and refugees across Europe are dynamic and multidimensional. The initial phase of intense solidarity has gradually evolved into a more complex configuration of interactions, encompassing both cooperation and social tensions. From a theoretical perspective, the analysis of these processes highlights the need to consider both structural factors (economic and institutional) and micro-level dynamics (interactional and cultural). Everyday social contacts and the accumulation of social capital emerge as key conditions for successful integration processes.

3. Volunteering Infrastructure

Another important source of support was people of the same nationality who had arrived as refugees earlier and had partially adapted to local conditions. In the case of the Ukrainian community in Poland for example, these were often women whose husbands had worked in Poland before the outbreak of the war in 2022.

They had knowledge of how the institutions operated, familiarity with the local environment, and linguistic skills to effectively support newly arrived families. This kind of support was provided through neighbours, family members, or community networks and included both informational and emotional support.

In the context of forced migration, particularly in large-scale humanitarian crises, the concept of “volunteering infrastructure” has emerged as a key analytical category for understanding the role of civil society in supporting refugees. Volunteering infrastructure can be defined as the system

of formal and informal mechanisms that enable, coordinate, and sustain volunteer engagement in response to social needs.

It encompasses organisational structures, networks of cooperation, information channels, and material resources that facilitate collective action. From a sociological perspective, volunteering infrastructure operates at the intersection of institutional frameworks and grassroots mobilization. It includes both established actors—such as non-governmental organisations, local governments, and international agencies—and informal networks of citizens who self-organise in response to crises. The effectiveness of such infrastructure depends on the density of social networks, the availability of resources, and the level of trust within a society. In the case of Ukrainian refugees, volunteering infrastructure played a crucial role in the initial phase of their arrival in other European countries. The rapid mobilization of citizens, local communities, and civil society organisations enabled an immediate response to urgent needs, including housing, food distribution, and access to education and healthcare. This form of bottom-up organisation partially compensated for the limited preparedness of formal institutions, demonstrating the importance of civic engagement in emergency contexts. At the same time, volunteering infrastructure is not static but evolves over time. In the early stages, it is typically characterized by spontaneity and high levels of social mobilization. As the needs become prolonged, however, the sustainability of volunteer engagement becomes a central concern. This often leads to the institutionalization of previously informal practices and the development of more structured forms of coordination between public institutions and civil society actors. Furthermore, the functioning of volunteering infrastructure has important implications for relations between refugees and host communities. On the one hand, it strengthens social cohesion by fostering direct contact, empathy, and solidarity. On the other hand, prolonged reliance on voluntary support may lead to fatigue among volunteers and tensions related to resource distribution.

In conclusion, volunteering infrastructure constitutes a critical component of societal responses to forced migration. Its analysis provides valuable insights into the capacity of host societies to mobilize resources, coordinate action, and sustain support mechanisms over time, particularly in contexts where formal institutional responses are insufficient.

4. Educational System and Educational Policy

Since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine in February 2022, the education systems in many European countries have undergone a rapid transformation in response to the increased number of refugee children, the majority of whom arrived with their mothers. The refugee population from Ukraine is highly feminised, as women and children constitute the dominant demographic group among those seeking protection. This demographic structure has important implications for the functioning of the education system, as women play a central role in mediating children's access to education, supporting adaptation processes, and navigating institutional requirements.

The Polish education system, for example, integrates Ukrainian refugee students primarily through two institutional pathways: inclusion in mainstream classes and participation in preparatory units designed for students with limited Polish language proficiency.

These preparatory classes offer adapted curricula and additional linguistic support while remaining aligned with the national core curriculum. From a gender perspective, such arrangements are particularly significant for girls, as language barriers and adaptation challenges may interact with gendered expectations related to behaviour, social roles, and participation in school life. Importantly, the gendered structure of refugee migration implies that women often feel responsible for ensuring children's educational participation, frequently under conditions of economic insecurity and limited institutional support. This situation may constrain their ability to engage fully with the education system, particularly when language barriers, employment pressures, and caregiving responsibilities intersect. Consequently, the effectiveness of educational integration policies depends not only on school-level interventions but also on broader socio-economic support targeting refugee women. It is notable that while the Polish education system has successfully implemented a hybrid model combining mainstream inclusion with targeted support mechanisms, its long-term effectiveness depends on the incorporation of a gender-sensitive perspective. Addressing the educational needs of Ukrainian refugee girls and supporting the critical role of refugee women in educational processes are essential for ensuring equitable access to education and preventing the reproduction of inequalities in the context of forced migration. The adaptation process for refugee children involves simultaneously functioning in new linguistic, cultural, social, and educational environments. Students find themselves in an environment where social norms, school organisation, and educational expectations often differ from their experiences in their country of origin. Experiences of war, violence, forced migration, loss of a sense of security, and separation from loved ones further complicate adaptation. Research indicates that effective adaptation is facilitated by positive relationships with peers and teachers, a sense of belonging to the school community, and activities that support intercultural integration.

Factors facilitating the process of adaptation of students from Ukraine to the school environment in their host European country, particularly during the initial period of their stay, included prior institutional experience in working with foreign students, the presence of staff members proficient in Ukrainian or Russian, and the existence of Ukrainian students who had migrated before the outbreak of the war.

These factors may be interpreted through the lens of institutional and social and cultural capital, which supports adaptation by fostering a more conducive communicative environment and reducing linguistic and cultural barriers. The situation of families raising children with disabilities or other special educational needs is particularly complex. In many cases, families left their country of origin without the child's medical, psychological, and educational documentation. This

necessitates repeated diagnostic procedures. Parents must obtain specialist consultations, gather medical documentation, undergo a psychological and educational counselling centre diagnosis, and obtain a decision on the need for special education. Language barriers, limited knowledge of the local institutional systems, and the burdens resulting from migration experiences significantly hinder the implementation of these activities.

The adaptation process for refugee children is multidimensional and extends beyond activities undertaken solely by the school. Informal social support networks, created by individuals guided by empathy and social solidarity, as well as by members of the migrant community who have previously undergone the adaptation process, are particularly important. For children with special educational needs, providing families with support in navigating the diagnostic and educational systems is crucial.

The experiences of the families studied indicate that the effectiveness of the integration process depends not only on institutional solutions but also on the quality of social relationships, the willingness of local communities to provide assistance on a volunteering basis, and the school's ability to create a safe, inclusive environment that recognises the diversity of migration experiences.

5. Ukrainian Female Refugees

In the context of forced migration from Ukraine, the situation of female refugees has received increasing attention in humanitarian and social research. Available data indicate that the refugee population from Ukraine is highly feminised, as women and children constitute the majority of those who fled, primarily due to restrictions on the mobility of men of conscription age (CARE, 2026; UNHCR, 2026).

In some analyses, women represent a dominant share of adult refugees, with estimates suggesting that they constitute most of the refugee population in host countries (Bogoni & Normann, 2024). Research highlights that female refugees face specific challenges related to gendered roles and responsibilities, including caregiving duties, labour market constraints, and economic vulnerability. These challenges are often intensified by responsibility for accompanying children, which not only limits women's labour market participation but also shapes their capacity to support their children's educational integration (Huliaieva, 2024). Furthermore, protection monitoring reports indicate that women are disproportionately affected by discrimination and stigmatization, pointing to the gendered nature of integration processes in host societies (International Rescue Committee [IRC], 2025).

From an educational perspective, women play a crucial mediating role in facilitating access to schooling, navigating administrative systems, and supporting children's learning trajectories. Despite this central role, the specific constraints and needs of female refugees remain

underexplored, particularly in relation to their influence on children's educational outcomes. The absence of systematically collected gender-disaggregated data further limits the development of targeted educational policies and interventions (CARE, 2026).

Within this broader framework, the situation of girls in education remains an underdeveloped area of analysis. Although girls constitute a substantial proportion of refugee students due to the feminised structure of migration, their experiences are rarely examined separately in educational research. Existing studies indicate that refugee children face multiple psychosocial challenges associated with war and displacement, including trauma, reduced sense of stability, and uncertainty about the future, all of which negatively affect school engagement and well-being (UNICEF, 2025).

Moreover, reports highlight persistent difficulties in peer integration, including social isolation, limited interaction with host-country students, and the formation of parallel peer networks. These processes may contribute to reduced participation in school life and lower levels of educational engagement. Experiences of discrimination, including verbal aggression and social exclusion, further complicate the process of educational integration for refugee children (IRC, 2025).

Adolescent girls may face additional risks linked to gendered expectations, including the assumption of caregiving roles within the household, social pressure to conform, and constraints arising from cultural norms. In combination with structural barriers such as limited knowledge of the education system, language difficulties, and economic constraints, these factors may increase the likelihood of discontinuities in educational trajectories or reduced participation in formal schooling (CARE, 2026). From a comparative perspective, gender differences constitute an important, though still insufficiently explored, dimension of refugee education. While both girls and boys are affected by core challenges such as displacement, trauma, and disrupted schooling, evidence suggests that they may experience and respond to these challenges differently. Girls are more likely to internalise stress and demonstrate withdrawal, anxiety, or reduced visibility of educational difficulties, whereas boys are more likely to externalise challenges through behavioural issues or conflicts. This differentiation has implications for patterns of teacher recognition and support, as internalised difficulties may remain less visible within school environments.

Gender differences are also evident in processes of social integration. While both girls and boys may experience exclusion, girls may be more sensitive to relational dynamics and social pressure, whereas boys may be more exposed to overt forms of conflict. In adolescence, these differences are further reinforced by gender norms, which may shape educational aspirations, participation, and access to opportunities. Barriers to access to education constitute a particularly significant area of concern, also affecting adolescent girls. Research indicates that some refugee young

people face language barriers, limited familiarity with the host country's education system, and economic constraints, which may lead to temporary or permanent exclusion from schooling. Moreover, a persistent sense of temporariness and uncertainty about the future is frequently noted, negatively affecting students' educational engagement (CARE, 2026).

At the same time, qualitative studies suggest the presence of assimilation pressures within the school environment, manifested, for example, in students' tendency to conceal their cultural identity and conform to dominant norms (CEO, 2026; UNICEF, 2026). Although these reports rarely differentiate students' experiences by gender, it can be argued that the situation of girls and young women requires more in-depth analysis, particularly in relation to their potential vulnerability to specific forms of social pressure, exclusion, or disruption of educational trajectories. Consequently, despite the growing body of research about Ukrainian students in Polish schools, the gender perspective remains underdeveloped. This creates a clear research gap and highlights the need for more in-depth analyses focusing specifically on the educational experiences of girls and young women in the context of forced migration.

6. Female Exclusion

The feminization of refugee migration implies that women play a central role in ensuring children's educational participation. They are often responsible for enrolling children in schools, maintaining communication with educational institutions, and supporting learning processes at home. However, these responsibilities are frequently carried out under conditions of economic insecurity and limited institutional support. The intersection of caregiving duties, labour market barriers, and language constraints may limit women's engagement with the education system and increase the threat of exclusion. This underscores the need for policies that address not only students but also the broader socio-economic conditions of refugee families.

Although girls constitute a substantial proportion of refugee students, their specific experiences remain understudied. Existing research suggests that refugee children face significant psychosocial challenges, including trauma, instability, and uncertainty, which can negatively affect educational engagement.

Adolescent girls may encounter additional risks linked to gender norms, such as caregiving responsibilities, social pressure to conform, and reduced mobility. These factors can increase the likelihood of interrupted educational trajectories. Structural barriers, including language difficulties and limited knowledge of the education system, further exacerbate these risks.

Gender differences represent an important yet insufficiently explored aspect of refugee education. Addressing these differences can help improve the prospects for inclusion. While both girls and boys experience the consequences of displacement, their responses and educational trajectories may differ. These differences influence teacher perceptions and responses,

potentially leading to unequal support. Moreover, girls may be more sensitive to relational dynamics within peer groups, while boys may experience more overt forms of conflict. These gendered patterns highlight the need for differentiated approaches to educational support.

7. Inclusion

The key area of intervention the systematic integration of a gender perspective into educational integration policies. This requires the collection and analysis of data disaggregated by sex, as well as incorporating gender differences into the assessment of pupils' or students' needs. As indicated in humanitarian reports, the lack of gender-disaggregated data significantly limits the capacity to design adequate support measures. The introduction of mechanisms for monitoring the educational situation of girls would enable the identification of areas of heightened risk, such as withdrawal from education or experiences of peer violence. A second critical direction concerns the development of policies aimed at preventing the educational exclusion of girls, particularly during adolescence. The literature emphasises that refugee youth face substantial barriers to accessing education, including linguistic, economic, and institutional factors. In the case of girls, educational policy should additionally consider the risk of assuming caregiving responsibilities or constraints arising from cultural norms. In this context, it is advisable to develop school dropout prevention programmes tailored to the specific circumstances of girls with a migration background. Another important element involves the creation of a safe and inclusive environment that is sensitive to experiences of violence and discrimination. Research indicates that students who are refugees or asylum seekers experience various forms of exclusion and verbal aggression. Consequently, policies should include the implementation of anti-discrimination measures and programmes aimed at preventing gender-based violence, including the establishment of dedicated support spaces (dedicated safe spaces) for girls. Volunteers have an important role to play in establishing and maintaining these spaces. Equally significant is the development of empowerment programmes that may serve as a response to assimilation pressures and the challenges associated with identity formation in migration contexts. In terms of educational policy, this implies supporting mentoring initiatives, socio-emotional learning programmes, and activities that promote girls' participation in school and community life. Such interventions, often by volunteers, may contribute to the development of social capital and foster a stronger sense of belonging to the local community.

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CHAPTER 3. FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEWS

THE LIST OF QUESTIONS THAT GUIDED THE FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEWS

I. "On the road"

1. Please briefly describe how you travelled from your previous place of residence to your current location (When did you travel, which route did you take, and what were your first moments after arrival like)?
2. What do you remember about arriving at your current place of residence (Did it take long to find suitable accommodation, work or places to spend your free time)?

II. "Reception"

3. What barriers have you encountered while living here?
4. Are you satisfied with your current living conditions, including housing, work, healthcare, children's education and places to spend your free time?
5. How would you rate your current place of residence? Is it a good place to live?

III. "Social networks"

6. Do you maintain contact with loved ones, relatives, and friends who remain in your country or place of origin (How often are you in contact? Is the contact in person, for example through visits, or mainly remote)?
7. Can you say that communities have emerged and are active in your place of residence or stay (neighbourhood, workplace, places where you spend your free time). If so, who belongs to them, what are some examples of their activities and initiatives?

IV. "Volunteering"

8. What does the term „volunteering“ mean to you?
9. How does volunteering in your current place of residence differ from volunteering in your country or place of origin? What are some examples of activities?
10. Do you maintain contact with other people who have recently arrived, members of your ethnic group or people in a similar situation? Do you offer them any form of help or support?
11. Do you engage in any forms of volunteering (unpaid assistance to those in need)? If so, in which community, organisation, or association?
12. What examples of good, successful activities for people with migration or refugee backgrounds can you mention?
13. How would you rate your ability to understand and actively use the local language?

14. Is there anything else you would like to add?

Focus Group Interviews:

Experiences and views shared during the focus group interviews were often connected to barriers and challenges, individual struggles fuelled by the desire to find a better, safer place to live, both now and for the future. However, the discussions concerned not only the future. Participants' past experiences also offered valuable perspectives on present-day challenges.

“Europe forgets its own history. There were many European refugees. I’m half Italian. New York is full of Italian names because so many Italians fled poverty and war. And ironically, Italians today are often the first to oppose refugees. In my research on diaspora philanthropy, I see the same pattern. When I talk about people sending money back home, everyone assumes I mean people from the Global South. But after World War II, when the Netherlands was destroyed, Dutch families survived because relatives in the US and Canada sent money back. People forget that. In every lecture, someone eventually says: ‘You’re right—my family also received help from abroad’. We forget our own stories.”

Regardless of the locations where the interviews were conducted, the shared future of refugees is evident in a series of events that require a redefinition of everyday life: a sense of temporality, uncertainty about future fates, threats to individual agency, and a forced interruption in pursuing life goals. The refugees interviewed provided valuable information that will be further utilized in the project's work with refugees, experts, and volunteers. Some respondents described volunteering as an important form of civic engagement that gave them a sense of agency, belonging and self-fulfillment.

“To be honest I never volunteered back in Ukraine. But in Portugal It gave me purpose again. Because when you arrive, you are mostly receiving help... so you want to give back. (...) Yes, you feel active again.”

In addition to the powerful motivations for leaving, participants identified a wide variety of obstacles at every stage of the migration process, from deciding to leave to travelling and settling:

“Person 1: Housing. I think everyone will say this. Because without stable housing, nothing else works.

Person 4: Yes, and not just any housing. Something where you feel you can stay, not move again in two months.

Person 2: I moved several times. Every time you move, you lose energy. You must understand a new area, new transport routes, new neighbours... it’s exhausting.

Person 7: And it affects your plans. You cannot commit to work or courses if you don’t know where you will live.”

Through this and many other examples, we aim to present a picture of refugees' experiences.

Below, we present findings from the FRIIV national teams, and in the following parts, we continue with a general analysis of the focus group interview results. In the section below, specific areas of interest are presented to provide a general picture of the experiences of refugees and volunteer managers. The areas of interest follow the process of travel and arrival at the destination, the barriers and challenges faced there, and the activism of refugees, volunteers, and managers as a proposed solution.

To gain insight into experiences of refuge, migration, and volunteering, we interviewed both refugees and individuals working with them.

1. The Reception in New Settings

All the participants of focus group interviews shared not only practical challenges but also the lasting emotional burden of displacement. Leaving their places of permanent residence was rarely described as a genuine choice; rather, it was forced by circumstances. Many left in haste, expecting to return within weeks, and therefore left behind documents, belongings, and unfinished aspects of their lives. Alongside the uncertainty, many experienced guilt about leaving family members behind, especially spouses or elderly parents.

“During the journey, you don’t think. After you arrive... everything comes at once.”

Many participants said the most difficult moment was not leaving, but arriving, as the structure of the journey was replaced by uncertainty and emotional strain. Many felt “in between” — no longer part of their previous everyday lives yet not fully integrated into new settings — making it difficult to commit to building a new life.

Housing was identified as one of the most urgent challenges upon arrival. Frequent moves created instability, making it harder to maintain jobs, attend courses, and establish routines. Participants stressed that beyond finding accommodation, securing stable housing was essential for rebuilding their lives. Work was seen as important not only for financial security but also for restoring independence, confidence, and a sense of identity. However, participants faced barriers such as difficulties transferring previous professional experience, language limitations, and unsuccessful job applications. Many also found the amount of information provided initially overwhelming, noting that information was provided before they were ready to use it.

They emphasised the need for ongoing, gradual, and more personalised support. Rather than formal therapy, participants highlighted the importance of regular human contact and simple emotional check-ins: “Someone asking ‘How are you really?’ makes a difference.” Interestingly, some participants said their main sources of motivation were their children and family members in their hometowns, as well as a sense of responsibility towards them. Over time, motivation

shifted from simply coping day by day to building stability, with daily routines providing a sense of normality.

“When you arrive as a newcomer, everyone around you can see that you’re not from here. You feel it. But when an NGO approaches you, asks what you need, and tries to provide it, you feel supported. You feel like you have a family here. They always say we are part of the team, and it’s true - we feel like a family.”

While the journey itself was often described as focused on survival and logistics rather than on emotions, the emotional impact became much stronger upon arrival in the host country.

The refugee community was seen as a vital source of practical and emotional support, although some noted that relying on it exclusively could limit broader integration. Supportive individual relationships also played an important role. Volunteering helped many participants regain a sense of purpose, contribute to their host communities, and improve language skills, although language barriers, low confidence, and limited energy sometimes reduced participation. Participants consistently described members of the host community as kind and welcoming, while viewing administrative systems as slow and difficult to navigate. As one participant summarised: “People are kind, but the system is slow”. The proposed solutions include faster administrative procedures, clearer communication, more consistent follow-up and longer-term support beyond the initial arrival phase.

Participants described their experiences with phrases such as “between worlds,” “rebuilding slowly,” and “an ongoing process,” reflecting that integration is still unfolding. Overall, their accounts showed that successful integration depends not only on practical support but also on time, stability, and the opportunity to rebuild a sense of self.

The difficult circumstances faced by newcomers, refugees and people forced to flee create urgent needs that go beyond material assistance and require complex, comprehensive and sensitive to assessment procedures balance refugees' needs with the resources and capacities available to volunteers.

“I also remember that when I lived in Gliwice [city in southern Poland], for the first two days, some people were carrying such large amounts of food. I don't know, maybe it's from my father's work. I remember I just went to school in Gliwice for seventh grade. And that was my first day there. Markers, notebooks were the materials, so I came to this classroom, and they just told me, ‘Take whatever you want!’ You know, it's just like that.”

“I still have my own problems, but this environment makes me feel less stressed. I just want to say thank you.”

“I was a foreigner. But two weeks, three at most, I started speaking Polish. A month and I could already talk to my friends.”

„When we arrived, we received some information about healthcare, about some support, and how things work here from volunteers already at the border. And it was fine for us – when we arrived, we went to this humanitarian centre of ours, and they distributed some things there. They also gave us brochures, both large and small. And all the information was there, including phone numbers.”

However, among the most common topics of conversation, spontaneously initiated by interview participants, was a sense of integration and belonging to the place where they currently lived. Regardless of when they arrived or which route they took to reach their destination, most interview participants expressed the belief that they were at home. Another noteworthy example concerned a local lawyer who specialised in assisting refugees with legalization and registration procedures, drawing on his education in Ukraine and bilingual skills:

„I should also add that there's a lawyer in Poznań, (...). I don't know if you've heard of him. He's a bilingual lawyer. He spoke Polish, but he studied Ukrainian in Ukraine and speaks Ukrainian perfectly. He often leads his seminars. Legal advice on legalization. A different range of legal advice, specifically for Ukrainians. (...) He also posts on Facebook, where people ask questions. He provides answers, so he also provides advice, and he does that completely, on a voluntary basis”.

Participants described arrival as emotionally overwhelming, noting that only after reaching safety did the reality of displacement fully sink in:

“During the journey, you don't think. After you arrive... everything comes at once”.

In another example, women living on a ship in Rotterdam emphasized the importance of mutual support, describing their community as “one family” despite difficult living conditions. Connecting with others who shared similar experiences helped reduce loneliness and provided emotional strength. Beyond housing and safety, participants stressed the need for meaningful social inclusion. Volunteering, courses, cultural activities, and opportunities to maintain their identity beyond being “a refugee” were seen as essential for wellbeing. They also highlighted the need for greater public understanding that refugees fled out of necessity rather than choice, and called for more empathy from host communities.

2. Challenges upon Arrival and Grassroots Responses

An analysis of the specific features of refugee reception can begin by presenting local spontaneous responses to the migration and refugee arrivals. It is important to note that the critical first moments and days after arrival matter, as newcomers need various forms of support to address their acute needs. In fact, everyday reality in the place of arrival is shaped not only by the needs of newcomers, but also by the responses by local people - individual experts and activists, local communities, NGOs involved in various welcoming initiatives, as well as volunteers

of the same ethnic community who can share their experiences and help newcomers settle in. The quotes below illustrate some of these initiatives:

“And first, the word spread in that town about Slovaks who wanted to help and Ukrainians who needed help. So, they helped us find accommodation after the hotel. And they were already offering information about which schools the children could attend, and so on and so forth.”

“When I moved to Syria the Ship, I was hungry all the time. The food quality was terrible. Sometimes the chicken was burnt on the outside but still frozen and raw inside. They used spices we weren’t familiar with. The food was often dirty or poorly prepared.”

“We are like a big family on the ship [the place of accommodation]. The living conditions are not ideal, but we support each other. We find small moments of happiness. Sometimes we cry, sometimes we celebrate. We even call some of the older women ‘mama’. We feel like one family- not because we are refugees, but because we have lived together for so long. It’s not easy, but I try to hold on to hope.”

“[about relatives who arrived in Poznań from Ukraine] They came to us at the beginning of the war to see the apartment, see where everything was, and they went for a walk, as if for a walk. They went somewhere and brought two or three bags of food, clothes, some medicine, and some toys for the children, because she still had a child with her. I’m asking you, here she is, she said somewhere on the Avenida [the mall centre in Poznan], that some Red Cross, to help with this, so that, I say, it was at the beginning of the war.”

“And we send parcels. Now, for example, I was buying some medicine for my mother – when she was here, she needed medicine, she looked at what was available here in Slovakia and then sent me a list. My parents are doctors, so they also need medicines for others there. So, every time I go to Ukraine, I bring medicine, because she needs it. And my sister too. I also sent some things, because children’s clothing is more expensive there. So, we also call, we send parcels, and we go when possible.”

Overall, the challenges refugees face upon arrival are considerably reduced by the work of various civil society organisations, NGOs, and spontaneous initiatives for newcomers. The examples in the following section illustrate refugees’ own activism and volunteering.

3. Barriers

The topic of barriers was frequently raised by our respondents. This is particularly relevant in relation to how a sense of belonging and anchoring during a longer stay. As one respondent noted, “People are kind, but the system is slow”. Respondents noticed many differences compared to their places of origin, sometimes new challenges or obstacles arising from misunderstandings, misinterpretations, or prejudices. The following subsection presents selected

cases that illustrate the everyday experiences of refugees and migrants. These accounts often go beyond identifying barriers by also proposing solutions. This is particularly valuable because it reflects the perspectives of those directly affected by these processes. Participants report challenges of staying in touch with their family, relatives and friends left at home. In the following quote, there is contextual information provided about the barriers approaching when trying to reach the hometown near Kharkiv:

“I've traveled there more than once because Kharkiv is a disaster, there's a bomb every day, and so on and so forth. Of course, I left my own apartment there. I don't even know what's there”

“[about visiting hometown in Ukraine] There's no point, no point in doing something all over again. Just to go for a walk, to see something, to see family, for example, that's still okay. Living or working there is no point anymore. (...) I can't [mentally] survive a week there...”

As for the barriers for anchoring, respondents also described daily obstacles in finding work opportunities, from the perspective of adult refugees:

“For my parents, it was work. When my dad can still do something like that, like with his hands, physical work, my mom, well, maybe less, and she has higher experience, and she's the main accountant, she was in Belarus and she had too much experience, but here in Poland, it's like you have nothing, and when I want to work, to be someone, it's difficult because we're from Belarus and not all employers want to hire me”.

Language was another important barrier, along with the urgent need to adapt to a new communication environment because being in a multicultural environment requires developing new skills:

“The Ukrainian community. In the beginning it was very important. You can ask anything and someone answers quickly. But if you stay only there, it becomes harder to integrate.”

“What I didn't like about some of those articles is that they pointed out problems but framed them as if the people were the problem. As if the refugees themselves were dangerous or criminal. They didn't address the real issue: the living conditions are extremely difficult. Honestly, [imagine] put 1,800 Dutch people on a ship with no internet, tiny rooms, and poor food, and there will be problems too. It's like a small village.”

How can the above accounts be summarized? Family ties, particularly those with children, emerged as the dominant motivation among respondents across the different focus interview locations:

“I have that strength only, only because I have children and I simply cannot stop, stop and not move forward. I know that I will never return home. I no longer have that possibility.”

“The hardest part was leaving my parents. They didn’t want to go. So, when I left, it felt like I was... abandoning them.”

“Family and children – I wanted peace and safety for the children. I was not thinking about returning home, if the war continues we cannot.”

As seen above, some challenges occur more often regardless of the location or the individual. These challenges can be summarized as the need to adapt to a new situation, pursue future goals and come to terms with past experiences.

4. The Sense of Temporality

Temporariness and the search for new opportunities were also addressed in the respondents' accounts.

“Yes... this idea of ‘temporary’ is very strong. I had it too. For me, the hardest part was the decision. Because leaving means you accept that your life is... interrupted. I stayed longer than I should have. I kept waiting for things to calm down, but they didn’t. And when I finally left, I felt relief, but also guilt.”

“Why just Spain? (...) Well, I've been there twice, I really liked it there. The Spanish language is... It's not better, but what kind of language? It's not even easy, it's beautiful. The country is beautiful, and the architecture. And the sea is nearby.”

No matter the place of origin, refugees live with temporary circumstances and often report a lack of plans, rooted in a loss of agency, homesickness or waiting for things to happen after arriving in a new place. Some make decisions emotionally and pursue whatever opportunities arise. The following statement illustrates this state of mind, when the respondents described the process of decision-making between two destination countries:

“I am from the Donetsk region. I came here when the war broke out. I came with my children and my mother. At first, I did not even know where I was going, because we had no one here in Slovakia or anywhere abroad. At first, we were deciding between Moldova and Slovakia, because one friend went there and another went there, and I did not know where we would go.”

Similar dilemmas were identified among other focus group participants:

“For me, the journey itself was not dangerous physically, but mentally it was... very confusing. I went from one place to another, not really knowing where I would end up. When someone suggested Portugal, I said yes without thinking. Later, I checked where it was.”

Another participant summed it up more briefly:

“It’s like your previous life doesn’t fully exist here.”

Or another one: *“I remember I was packing but not really thinking. Just putting things in a bag without asking ‘Do I need this?’ I kept thinking I’ll come back in two weeks. So, I didn’t take documents, photos, many important things. (pauses) Now I regret that, but at that time... your brain is in survival mode”.*

The focus group interviews aimed to capture refugees’ perspectives on their personal experiences to better understand the complexity of their needs, expectations, and the realities they face in their new social statuses. The uncertain nature of refugees’ lives, their temporary circumstances and their dependence on people they have only recently met often lead to unpredictable choices and difficult decisions. As one respondent described it:

“When we crossed the Ukrainian border, she turned around and said, ‘Sorry, I have no place for you or your children’. She turned and left, and I never saw her again. At that moment, I was completely broken; it was terrible. I did have some money because my husband worked in a mine, but I did not know any Slovak. I had no acquaintances; I simply had no one.”

The above, and many other quotes presented in this section, provide an insight into the everyday situation of refugees - from the search for a safe place to build a future to coping with past trauma.

The conclusion should have been these conditions cannot create a safe environment. Instead, the conclusion was: *“It’s dangerous because there are so many refugees from different cultures. That’s unfair. It dehumanises people. It’s an easy narrative for organisations to use—because then they don’t have to change anything.”*

5. The Proposed Solutions: Refugees' Activism and Volunteering

These experiences, together with the search for a sense of belonging, can be explained by several factors, most linked to volunteering.

As focus group participants were asked about the FRIIV areas of interest related to refugee involvement, activism and volunteering, these topics featured prominently in the interviews. The examples below are drawn from their accounts.

“I volunteer with a project called Help for Ukraine. It’s run by Dutch people. We collect aid in supermarkets - hygiene products, baby items, and essentials. Dutch drivers take the supplies to Ukraine, even to the front lines. I’ve volunteered every weekend for two and a half years. We also collect clothes, but it’s expensive to transport them. A truck can only carry a limited number of banana boxes used as transportation unit, so we prioritise essentials. Sometimes the organisation receives money donations, and then we buy drones, blankets, and other urgent items.”

“Well, here in Poznań, it’s just these cultural events, but I think it’s such a good initiative that it’s familiarized us with these other limbs. Like this one event, but for several years now, it’s only

attracted mainly enthusiasts. It's 'the Ukrainian Spring', organised by the 'the Zamek Cultural Centre'. You see, you see how many there are, I understand. And sometimes at the 'Ethnoport'. It varies year to year, but sometimes also. The 'Ethnoport' takes the form of some workshops and a Ukrainian choir performance."

"There's a Children's Foundation in Poznań. It's so cool, very good. The Foundation works with children in the summer. They organise integration events for classes, they also organise volunteering, Polish language, and various exam preparation classes. That's exactly how it works, so it only works in that direction, and they have psychologists there, just for children or adults. The information we need, but you could also tell a child that it's cool there, like in the city centre."

"I, for example, was in the organisation Liga za duševné zdravie (Mental Health League), where as a volunteer I also helped with the integration of Ukrainians. At first, it was children, and later, adults as well. To this day, as a volunteer in the Mental Health League, I support everyone - not only Ukrainians, but I also support Slovaks and people from third countries. I got to know some displaced persons also from Georgia, and I help those people who sometimes come to me and ask for help."

"The first time was last summer, seven years ago. I also know that the Belarusian does a lot. And whenever I hear about such cultural events, they're always doing their actions with my friends. It's just there."

"I volunteered at the Vocal Arts Centre. It was the heart of the centre. I'm thinking of things like crossroads music events, which were passion, a festival, or a festival? I helped organise one of those events every year."

"I spent three whole days taking applications from people looking for apartments, I kept a list of those willing to help, and I look for families who matched them, because the queue outside was so long that people were waiting with their children. It was later, but only after that, the first few days, when they started arriving, it was all at the Poznań Fair, and I'd also go there, transporting supplies, and food"

"Well, we're collecting money. For the [Ukrainian] military... There's a person. He says I'm just collecting money there. I set up a link on social media, and I simply collect money for everyone who wants to go there, and simply point out the troops, she taught us to have them. They either buy and deliver the supplies themselves or give us the money."

"I volunteer by running a volleyball club for teenagers. Both my son and other children from Ukraine attend, as not all of them were able to make friends. The club is for both Slovaks and Ukrainians."

"I am a trained educator. I have a degree in pedagogy, and I worked with children in Ukraine as well. When the organisation People in Need was helping us, I got to know one Slovak woman. She

was also an educator and saw that I could help with children and teach them. I volunteered as an interpreter for children.”

Some examples of such activism are particularly valuable for newly arrived refugees in destinations where established communities already exist. These communities are well placed to help because they understand newcomers’ needs and preferences. It is also worth noting that online communicators and social networks play a particularly valuable role:

“They're creating their own communities online, especially on Facebook. On Facebook, you can find various groups like ‘I don't know what's going on with him in Poznań’, ‘Foreigners in Poznań’, and ‘Ukrainians in Poznań’, which also share a lot of their own experiences and ask a lot of questions. It's impossible to, let's say, maintain contact with everyone because we're constantly passing through these people. Let's be honest, there are hundreds of thousands of them, so even if you talk to each person for just a minute, the whole day is simply wasted. Well, a lot of these social media groups and forums have emerged, where people ask questions like, ‘What to do in this situation?’ on the forum. People start commenting, offering advice.”

“The fact that we are connected like this as a community in a Telegram group can also help us – for example, where we can find work, who is offering work, where I can find some service or someone is offering their service. Or we also have something important for Ukrainians – there are people who regularly go to Ukraine, and we can contact them if we want to send something or go with them. That way we can also stay in contact with those who stayed in Ukraine.”

“We also have Online groups. They are very important. You can ask anything and someone answers.

- Person 1 - especially in the beginning. It's faster than official information.*
- Person 2 - But sometimes it keeps you inside the same circle. You don't connect outside.*
- Person 3 - True. It's comfortable but limiting.”*

“These events, if they're promoted in Belarusian, or, for example, in England, if it's published in English, aren't meant to integrate, to familiarise people with this culture. They're meant to create space and opportunities for people to simply sit down with each other at home.”

Another participant, of Ukrainian origin, gave examples of volunteering activities in Ukraine:

“I remember volunteering in Ukraine, especially in my school. I just remembered a situation from 2014 when the war with Russia started, like so-called, let's say, the small war, started. I remember in the first grade we painted pictures like just we were asked to paint something that we would like to send to the military, the soldiers. And, our parents, they provided some kind of socks and maybe thermal clothes like I know how it's called.”

“In Ukraine, so from the eastern regions and yes, I guess in Ukraine military volunteering is extremely developed. That's maybe one of the best in the world because now everyday people are collecting money for different stuff.”

“I remembered before 2022, my mom, I used to work with volunteers, and she would also send the soldiers. I think clothes, stuff like that. And I remember I would make bracelets also. They were blue and yellow and so we would also make little cards for the soldiers and drawings and then. Uh, they would send them to soldiers and other soldiers.”

Another participant described the incentives for young people to get involved in volunteering through participation in volunteering events and initiatives. It is connected to the opportunity to earn extra points in the school curriculum through involvement in volunteer events and initiatives. These points matter during the application procedure for high school or university:

“The truth is only about time, I say, because we collect points [for the school leaving certificate for primary school graduates]. Under thirteen, they must volunteer with their parents. Together with a parent; thirteen and older. Then you can be alone, and up to that age, they must be with a parent. (...) Contacts for him. He's only going there out of curiosity now. I already have enough hours to complete them, because our school required 50 hours there, but he already has more than that. He simply likes it, and I have to say that I also met many adults there who were there simply to help. And I respect you very much, thanks to your volunteering.”

The motivations described ranged from self-fulfillment to altruism:

“Personally, it brings me joy. I have already been a volunteer for four years. It is wonderful when you can help your own people. Because you know, we are simply a family – not like I don't know, this one is from here and that one is from there. We are one whole family in such an unpleasant situation that has arisen, so it is obvious that you want to help and help your own the most. In our centre we also had so many activities for us and at the beginning we were open from seven in the morning to eleven at night. And really, both teenagers and little children were there with us.”

Finally, one participant's quote illustrates the perception of safety and the feeling of being at home. This is emphasized through a comparison with their home and place of origin. This may be related to the perceived cultural closeness of the destination:

“Then my father came and took us, and we went to the airport. So, I think we came by plane to Warsaw, and then by train to Poznań. Here, from Greater Poland in Poland, how—as she recalls it seriously—when we arrived, we got off the train. Dad looked at me and asked, ‘How are you feeling?’ I said, ‘I'm home.’ Seriously, it was like that first feeling, like, well, we were home, like everything was alright, but let me put it this way: before the war, my home.”

Other comments and reflections provided deeper insight into the institutional and social barriers participants face in daily life. Respondents also highlighted mutual help within refugee

communities, and many successful initiatives are regularly organised in public spaces in the city, inclusive and open to anyone who wants to join.

CHAPTER 4. CONCLUSION

This report presents the findings of the first phase of the FRIIV project. It is based on desk research and focus group interviews that gathered information on the experiences of refugees and volunteer managers. Respondents provided valuable comments and proposals for improving quality of life and social inclusion in their destination countries. For example, when asked, „What does volunteering mean to you?“, one focus group participant responded: “It gives meaning. Especially when you feel you have lost your previous role.” The following case focuses on caregiving mothers and their labour market opportunities:

“The fact that the experience was unpaid also highlights an important challenge. While such opportunities can open doors, are not equally accessible to all refugee women, especially those facing financial pressure or caring responsibilities. This raises important questions about inclusion and fairness in access to professional opportunities.”

In this sense, she added, *“more inclusive and supportive structures are needed to ensure that refugee women can access and benefit from these opportunities without additional vulnerability”.*

Another participant offered this tip:

“What I find especially valuable is that these activities always mix Rotterdam residents with newcomers. They meet each other naturally; it’s not ‘an activity for Rotterdammers’ or ‘an activity for newcomers.’ It’s shared.”

To conclude, several main points can be highlighted:

1. Ethnic Diasporas

In the case of Ukrainian refugees, established ethnic diasporas consist of two groups: those who left Ukraine after February 2022 and economic migrants who have lived in Europe for much longer, in some cases since 2014, the first wave of over a million refugees left Ukraine in response to the Russian annexation of Crimea and the war in Donbas. A ‘small war’, as interviewees described it. Members of these established diasporas may become volunteer managers during such crises.

2. Reception by Locals

The second most frequently mentioned point, emphasized by refugees, was the favourable and open reception by locals. The spontaneous, grassroots nature of many aid initiatives and the significant participation of volunteers of all ages meant that everyone could find someone to talk to, someone to whom they could turn for support and assistance. Interviewees recalled the connections they made through these initiatives. To strengthen these practices, they should be promoted in the media.

3. Sense of Belonging

The importance of a sense of belonging, expressed in various ways, also stemmed from the necessities and obligations refugees faced. Refugees did not choose their fate, and in some cases, did not even plan their destination. Remaining in a new place for years increasingly weakened their sense that they could and did have a place to return to. This sense faded because the conditions in their place of origin that had caused their departure remained unchanged. It should not be forgotten that behind each of these accounts lies individual fates, a sense of coercion and historical injustice, and a belief in a possible but uncertain future return. A sense of belonging, as opposed to temporariness, may be strengthened by social activism initiated and led by migrant and refugee communities.

4. Everyday Problems

Another frequently raised theme concerned everyday problems in participants' places of residence. These concern housing, the requirements for formalising one's stay, the challenges of obtaining specialised medical care, everyday problems at work, at school, or at university, and the dynamics of life among other refugees and migrants.

Naturally, new friendships are not always successful or lasting. Some interviewees reported falling victim to various scams and forms of exploitation when formalising employment. Migrants' daily lives in new places also involve building and verifying connections, establishing trust with people they meet, and learning the many regulations and formalities that affect their daily lives. Our interviewees provided numerous examples of how they achieved it, thanks to help from new acquaintances, often members of their own ethnic or national group who were volunteering. This highlights the need to train and engage volunteer managers who are themselves migrants or refugees or have been members of migrant and refugee communities.

Finally, one participant summarized very clearly what can be done for refugees.

"I want people to remember that refugees are just people. We should think about how we can help each other, how we can be useful to each other. As women, what helps is being active - volunteering, taking courses, joining activities. Small things like workshops, concerts, beauty sessions, anything that reminds you that you are still a woman, not just a refugee. These moments bring happiness."