

Focus: Work and Benefits

Our research shows that a lack of understanding of historical context and stereotyping of “Eastern Europeans” in the UK impacts on the experiences of displaced Ukrainians in multiple ways. This 2-page briefing focuses on the implications for supporting Ukrainians in accessing benefits and transitioning to paid employment. The full report (including bibliography) can be downloaded from:

<https://postsocialistbritain.bham.ac.uk/>

Recommendations

In the area of work and benefits, we recommend that national and local government, service providers, and organisations working with displaced Ukrainians implement the following:

1. Collation and expansion of existing support schemes for Ukrainians to re-transition into skilled employment. Mentoring schemes are currently offered by several charities (e.g., RefuAid, Refugee Council, Refugee Action)¹ but should be expanded nationwide and more proactively promoted, e.g. by Jobcentres.
2. Guidance for Jobcentres and other employment agencies on the equivalence of Ukrainian qualifications, and on reasons diplomas or job references may not be readily available, so that they can support Ukrainians in applying for appropriate positions.
3. Guidance to Ukrainians (in English, Ukrainian and Russian) on accessing benefits, in particular childcare benefits. For instance, the charity Turn2us provides a useful calculator, which could be translated into

other languages and referred to by Councils and Jobcentres.²

4. Clarity from the UK government on routes to extending stays in the UK to enable long-term planning for Ukrainians and employers

Findings

Many interviewees in our study state that they cannot find jobs commensurate with their education and experience. Indeed, Ukrainians arriving in the UK via the new visa routes often work in hospitality or agriculture in the UK, whereas in Ukraine many were employed in finance or education.³ That is, many have taken on lower-skilled and lower-paid jobs since moving to the UK. This is a significant and persistent issue among migrants from Central and Eastern Europe in the UK, partially driven by stereotypes of the “Polish cleaner” and “Romanian fruit picker”, which seem to play out in the Ukrainian case as well.⁴ As one of our interviewees put it:

[Most] Ukrainians who came to England are educated, they have several diplomas, but currently they only offer cleaning... we're cheap labour for the English at the moment.

Further reasons for down-skilling among displaced Ukrainians include insufficient language skills and difficulties with diploma recognition, as well as the inability to provide proof of education and references (job references are not commonly requested in Ukraine, and many former employers would now be fighting in the army or displaced themselves). One interviewee said:

¹ Refugee Action (n.d.), *Pathways to work*. Available at: <https://www.refugee-action.org.uk/pathways-to-work/>; RefuAid (n.d.), *Employment Programme*. Available at: <https://refuaid.org/employment-programme>; Refugee Council (n.d.), *Supporting refugees into employment*. Available at <https://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/our-work/helping-refugees-to-rebuild-lives/supporting-refugees-into-employment/> (all accessed 13 March 2023).

² Turn2us (n.d.), *The Turn2us Benefits Calculator*. Available at: <https://benefits-calculator.turn2us.org.uk/> (accessed 13 March 2023).

³ Office for National Statistics (2022), *Visa Holders Entering the UK under the Ukraine Humanitarian Schemes. Follow-up survey: 17 October to 7 November 2022*. Available at:

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/internationalmigration/bulletins/visaholderenteringtheukundertheukrainehumanitarianschemes/17octoberto7november2022#visa-holders-entering-the-uk-under-the-ukraine-humanitarian-schemes-data> (accessed 9 March 2023).

⁴ Bulat, A. (2019), “High-Skilled Good, Low-Skilled Bad? British, Polish and Romanian Attitudes towards Low-Skilled EU Migration”, *National Institute Economic Review*, 248: 49-57; Narkowicz, K. (2023), “White Enough, not White Enough: Racism and Racialisation among Poles in the UK”, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2022.2154913> (accessed 11 March 2023).

I don't even have my diploma here, it somehow stayed there, in the occupied territory, I don't know how to take it from there.

Most displaced Ukrainians in the UK are women with children whose fathers have stayed in Ukraine.⁵ The lack of childcare is another significant barrier to employment. One of our interviewees expressed her frustration about the lack of wrap-around care: *There are no after-school clubs in the school [my son] goes to now, so I cannot even pay to leave him there.*

Finally, the UK government's humanitarian schemes only grant Ukrainians three years to stay in the UK, making it difficult to make long-term plans including re-training, and this is likely to deter employers as well.

Our interviewees perceive living on benefits and down-skilling as unsatisfactory not only because of the financial limitations, but also because of the status loss and the meaning of work for their identity. As one interviewee describes:

The biggest shock after being separated from your family is the change in your social status.

This status loss is two-fold – the socio-economic downgrade is intertwined with an ethno-cultural status loss, as Ukrainians and others described as “Eastern Europeans” in the UK are discriminated against as “not quite white” and are less likely to work in highly-skilled jobs than other groups with similar levels of education.⁶

Moreover, the strong desire to work may be driven by the experience of the Ukrainian welfare system, in particular the lack of social security in post-socialism. One interviewee explained:

In Ukraine, if you don't work, you don't eat... I want to be useful, because we all have

experiences that will definitely be useful for Britain.

The emphasis on doing work useful for Britain can also be seen as a response to public discourse portraying migrants as benefit-seekers. These stereotypes were particularly dominant during Brexit debates of “Eastern Europeans” as “benefit tourists” or “scroungers”.⁷ The focus on a desire to work by several of our interviewees can be seen as an attempt to counter this stereotype and justify their presence in the country.⁸

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⁵ Office for National Statistics (2022). *Visa Holders Entering the UK*.

⁶ Bulat (2019); Drinkwater, S., Eade, J. & Garapich, M. (2009), “Poles Apart? EU Enlargement and the Labour Market Outcomes of Immigrants in the United Kingdom”, *International Migration*, 47(1): 161–190.

⁷ Burrell, K., & Schweyher, M. (2019), “Conditional Citizens and Hostile Environments: Polish Migrants in Pre-Brexit Britain”, *Geoforum*, 106: 193-201.

⁸ Previous research on movers from CEE countries in the UK has found that they often emphasise that they do not rely on the welfare state, in order to justify their presence in the country (Burrell and Schweyher, 2019); and portray themselves as hard-working and British society as meritocratic in order to escape discrimination (Fox, J. E., Moroşanu, L., & Szilassy, E. (2015), “Denying Discrimination: Status, ‘Race’, and the Whitening of Britain’s New Europeans”, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 41(5): 729-748).