

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

UKRAINIAN WOMEN IN THE EU: VOICES, NETWORKS AND THE FUTURE OF UKRAINE'S RECOVERY

*"I wouldn't want people to say: the women left — that's a loss.
I would want them to say: a woman in Europe — that's the voice of Ukraine."
— a woman from the Kharkiv region, now residing in Germany*

By Open Space Works
May – June 2026



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research was made possible by Ukrainian women from 23 EU countries, who shared their experiences of civic engagement, professional involvement, integration, return, and staying connected to Ukraine. We are especially grateful to the participants in the survey, focus groups, interviews and validation discussions for their openness, trust, and willingness to talk not only about achievements, but also about fatigue, barriers and difficult choices.

Research team:

- **Natalia Harasivka** — co-author of the study, data collection and analysis.
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Particular thanks go to the Ukrainian Women's Fund representatives **Natalia Karbovska** and **Milena Horiachkovska**, who initiated the research and supported the development of the methodology, participant recruitment and validation of findings.

Layout: **Yuliia Pushchenko**.

The full study is available via the following link:

<https://openspace.works/ukrainian-women-abroad-1>

or QR code



This research was carried out by Open Space Works and the Ukrainian Women's Fund, with the support of the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister for European and Euro-Atlantic Integration, the Ministry of Social Policy, Family and Unity of Ukraine, and the Government Commissioner for Gender Policy.



CONTEXT

Nearly 2 million adult Ukrainian women currently hold temporary protection status in the EU, most of them seasoned professionals aged 35–64 with many years of career experience¹. The share of those planning to return fell from 74% at the end of 2022 to 43% in December 2024². By early 2026, almost half had already applied for an alternative legal status abroad, rather than wait to see whether temporary protection would be extended³. Millions of Ukrainian women and men will remain in the EU for years to come, so the window for keeping them connected to Ukraine is narrowing — and the case for engaging Ukrainian women abroad is a case for acting now.

This research deliberately looks beyond intentions to return. Its purpose is to map what displaced Ukrainian women are already doing, and to understand what conditions would unlock even greater potential for civic engagement and economic contribution to Ukraine's recovery. The gap between what women are already doing and what current conditions allow them to do is, above all, a failure of institutional design — not a lack of personal motivation. The recommendations in this report are therefore addressed to institutions, not to women.



METHODOLOGY

The research combined quantitative and qualitative approaches; data were collected between May and June 2026.

Quantitative strand: an online survey, distributed through snowball sampling via the networks of the Ukrainian Women's Fund and Open Space Works, social media, and diaspora organisations — 327 respondents from 23 EU member states (29 questions: single- and multiple-choice, plus rating scales).

Qualitative strand: 4 focus groups and 11 interviews with key informants (around 35 participants from more than 10 EU countries) — women working remotely, women engaged in advocacy, students and graduates, and women who have returned to Ukraine. Two validation workshops were also held, bringing together civil society, government and international organisations.

Sample limitations: the sample is not statistically representative. Snowball sampling systematically reaches women who are already connected to diaspora networks, so the real proportion of women outside these networks is likely higher. The findings should be read as indicative trends, not as precise estimates for the wider population.

¹ European Commission, Eurostat (2026), «4.37 Million under Temporary Protection in April 2026,» Eurostat News, 10 червня, <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/w/ddn-20260610-1>.

² Ippolitova, I. et al. (2026), "Ukrainian Refugees after Four Years Abroad: Fifth Wave of Research," Centre for Economic Strategy, <https://ces.org.ua/en/ukrainian-refugees-fifth-wave/>

³ Ibid.

KEY FINDINGS

1. Staying connected to Ukraine from abroad does not stand in the way of return — it lays the groundwork for it.

Findings from the validation workshop, together with existing longitudinal research, bear this out: policies that support structured connection from abroad do not weaken intentions to return — they reinforce them. Women who maintain professional ties, civic networks and institutional relationships with Ukraine while abroad are better placed to return when conditions allow, because they have kept hold of the social capital, professional visibility and practical, current knowledge of Ukraine that a clean break would otherwise cost them. Every investment in remote employment, diaspora advocacy infrastructure and cultural engagement is, at the same time, an investment in readiness to return.

2. Women are actively engaged in civic life, but largely under their own steam.

Women are actively engaged in civic life, but largely under their own steam. The most common forms of contribution are fundraising, informal advocacy, cultural diplomacy, and the everyday work of explaining Ukraine to audiences in their host country. These activities demand time, emotional labour and social capital, yet they typically receive little or no institutional backing. What infrastructure exists is often informal and flexible, but it rests largely on unpaid work and personal motivation. The drift from institutional engagement towards fundraising as a “fallback option” is not simply a matter of time and energy — it also reflects how professionally capable women feel, after years in which their skills have gone largely unrecognised in host-country labour markets. Rebuilding that confidence is a structural task, not merely a motivational one.

3. Disinformation shapes the environment for participation.

More than half of respondents (52%) had encountered negative or manipulative narratives about Ukraine. The most common claims were that “Ukrainians abuse welfare benefits”, that “supporting Ukraine costs too much”, and that “Ukraine is too corrupt”.

These narratives work on two levels. The first is external narratives aimed at the host-country public. The second is the stigmatising of the women themselves who left, branding them as “traitors”. This second level chips away at women’s confidence in their own moral standing to speak on Ukraine’s behalf, or to take part in its reconstruction.

4. Economic engagement is real, but structurally undermined.

47% of respondents maintain some form of professional or work-related connection with Ukraine. The most common forms are remote work for Ukrainian companies and collaboration with Ukrainian organisations.

Willingness to engage remotely and willingness to physically return are shaped by different factors. For remote engagement, the key factor is income. For return, it is the security situation. 76% of the women surveyed regard living abroad while maintaining professional ties to Ukraine as the most realistic scenario for themselves — by far the most frequently chosen option. Full return is realistic for only 35–46%, depending on conditions.

5. What women lack most is not motivation, but somewhere to turn for information.

In both civic and economic spheres, the most frequently cited need for support is access to reliable and accessible information about opportunities and entry points. Respondents need to know where to work, how to contribute, how to access funding, how to build new skills, how to stay connected to Ukrainian institutions, and what realistic options exist should they decide to return. This is, relatively speaking, a low-cost problem to fix, yet its potential impact is high, since information gaps are currently holding back both remote engagement and any informed planning around return.

6. Both leaving and returning erase a person's professional track record.

The loss of professional visibility happens twice over: once when women leave Ukraine, and again when they try to return. Qualifications, work experience, languages and expertise built up across borders are not always consistently preserved or recognised. The core problem, then, is not return itself, but the absence of any system that carries a person's professional history through displacement, life abroad, and eventual reintegration in Ukraine.

7. These difficulties fall more heavily on women than on men.

The professional erosion documented in this research — unrecognised qualifications, undervalued skills, unpaid civic labour — bears down harder on women than on men in comparable situations: within displaced Ukrainian communities, women earn less than men, are more likely to end up in part-time work, and carry a greater share of caregiving duties, which eats into the hours available for both paid work and civic engagement. Policies developed in response to this research therefore need to go beyond removing generic barriers, and take account of the specific, documented ways in which these barriers weigh more heavily on women.

8. Embassies are trusted in principle, but not yet see it as a source for support of the initiatives.

Embassies are trusted in principle, but not yet see it as a source for support of the initiatives. They rank lowest among support channels — not because respondents see them as illegitimate, but because they are not yet seen as accessible, responsive points of contact for the kind of everyday support women need. At the same time, Unity Hubs, the Diaspora Alliance and the emerging Unity Network open up a chance to rethink the role of embassies and consulates as institutional anchors, working through trusted civil society organisations, community initiatives and specialised referral pathways.

9. The state has taken a first step, but this is not always felt on the ground.

The launch of the Diaspora Alliance, Unity Hubs and other initiatives shows that Ukraine is starting to build engagement infrastructure for Ukrainians abroad. However, this signal has not yet consistently translated into practical mechanisms that women and organisations can draw on in their day-to-day work: access to first-time grants, clear guidance on routes into remote employment, tax advice, professional return programmes, support for Ukrainian organisations abroad, or clear consular referral protocols for sensitive cases.

RECOMMENDATIONS

For Government Authorities

- **Develop a policy framework for Ukrainians abroad, with a specific focus on women and on reintegration infrastructure.** Rather than treating time spent abroad as a gradual loss of connection, Ukraine should recognise the ongoing contribution women make from outside the country — through verified information channels, recognition of their engagement, and mechanisms for maintaining ties. In keeping with the principle of “nothing about us without us”, those affected by the policy should have a hand in shaping it. Alongside this, clear guidance is needed on building reintegration infrastructure on the ground, involving business associations, civil society organisations, educational institutions, municipal bodies and local media.
- **Provide clear guidance, sensitive to each country’s context, on tax residency, double taxation, social contributions and remote work from abroad.** Existing double-taxation agreements do not remove the practical uncertainty facing women who combine income from Ukraine with income earned in their host country. Clear guidance, model scenarios and intergovernmental clarification are needed to make remote economic engagement with Ukraine more legally secure.
- **Recognise professional experience gained abroad, and build onward pathways within return programmes.** Tools are needed to counter professional “drop-out”: digital experience profiles, recognition of remote work, return scholarships, internships, and sector-specific databases of professionals and employers, alongside simplified recognition of diplomas. Structured return programmes for professionals lose much of their value if participants have no onward path once an internship ends — they should therefore include alumni networks, registers of consultants, and follow-on scholarships that allow participants to stay connected.
- **Strengthen institutional infrastructure abroad: expand the role of Unity Hubs and build partnerships with existing diaspora organisations.** The educational, cultural, professional and community functions of the hubs should be used to support Ukrainian civic initiatives, not simply to facilitate return. At the same time, Ukrainian diaspora organisations established before 2022 have built up genuine trust within host-country civil society — partnerships with them should be built on the basis of trusted intermediaries, rather than treating them as outdated or building parallel structures from scratch.

For International Organisations and Donors

- **Recognise returnees, and those planning to return, as a distinct transitional group, and fund longitudinal research into their journeys.** Return should not be treated as a single administrative event that draws a line under the displacement process. Returnees may face specific risks around professional reintegration, housing, children's adjustment, institutional resistance and social isolation. Donors should support research that follows what happens after return over time, since a single point-in-time statistic is not enough to judge whether a return will last.
- **Create first-grant instruments, and focus funding on new, grassroots organisations.** Ukrainian organisations set up abroad after 2022 fall outside Ukrainian grant programmes, since they are not physically based in Ukraine, and lack the local funding track record needed to secure host-country grants. Existing donor programmes tend to favour large, established organisations, leaving smaller and newer initiatives without access to funding — even though these are often the ones best attuned to their communities' needs. Dedicated first-grant schemes and simplified small grants would help close this gap.
- **Fund advocacy work on a par with service delivery.** Donors are generally readier to fund service provision than advocacy work, even though advocacy often does more to shape policy and drive systemic change. This imbalance should be corrected deliberately.
- **Invest in shared information infrastructure, and support horizontal networks.** Verified, regularly updated databases of jobs, grants, housing and education should be treated as core infrastructure, not as an add-on project. At the same time, the most trusted support currently flows through peer networks rather than centralised organisations — donors should fund this work directly, without requiring such networks to formalise into a single organisation.
- **Support women's psychological resilience, and ensure return-support programmes do not appear unfair to those who stayed.** Women engaged in advocacy, fundraising and cultural diplomacy carry a significant emotional load — psychological support, supervision and safety protocols should be treated as part of the infrastructure, not as an optional extra. At the same time, any scholarship or reintegration support offered to returnees needs a clear, public rationale, so as not to give the impression that those who stayed in Ukraine are being overlooked.

For Civil Society Organisations, Diaspora Networks and Media

- **Treat the sharing of verified information as a core service.** Since respondents consistently point to a lack of information as their main unmet need, CSOs and diaspora networks should treat the mapping of opportunities, verified referrals and practical guidance as central activities in their own right — not as a by-product of other work.
- **Build horizontal coordination between countries, and mentoring between women's organisations.** Peer networks are trusted more than any single organisation claiming to speak for the whole diaspora, so cross-country relationships and shared tools should continue to be built, while preserving each organisation's autonomy. More established Ukrainian women's organisations could support newer organisations abroad through placements, joint visits and shared projects — since such organisations currently often operate in isolation from one another.
- **Work with Unity Hubs as practical platforms.** Wherever Unity Hubs exist or are planned, Ukrainian organisations should be involved in shaping their functions, proposing activities and identifying community needs. This will help the hubs become a genuinely useful tool for lasting connection, rather than simply visible infrastructure.
- **Shape a media environment that recognises the contribution of women abroad, and balance the success narrative with a wider range of stories.** Ukrainian online media are often experienced by displaced women as hostile or shaming — towards those who left, and towards those weighing up return. At the same time, a media landscape that presents only success stories distorts the real experience of displacement: forced migration means forced integration, and “success” is often a form of adaptation rather than a free choice. Organisations and media should round out the success narrative with stories of hardship, doubt and return.



The Ukrainian Women's Fund (UWF) - is a charitable foundation that supports the development of women's civil society organizations and the feminist movement in Ukraine in order to expand women's rights and advance gender equality. Part of UWF's work is cultivating demand for gender analysis as a foundation for shaping effective policies — particularly in the areas of recovery, European integration, and the Women, Peace, and Security agenda.



Open Space Works is a women-led social enterprise – ethically driven and purpose-oriented – that combines research and participatory facilitation. We operate with a clear social mission to advance inclusive and community- driven approaches in humanitarian and development practice and derive resources into scaling to strengthen local leadership and knowledge generation in Eastern Europe. We provide developmental, humanitarian, governmental, and civil society stakeholders with evidence-based research and participatory facilitation to enable action-oriented decisions and enhance program impact.

