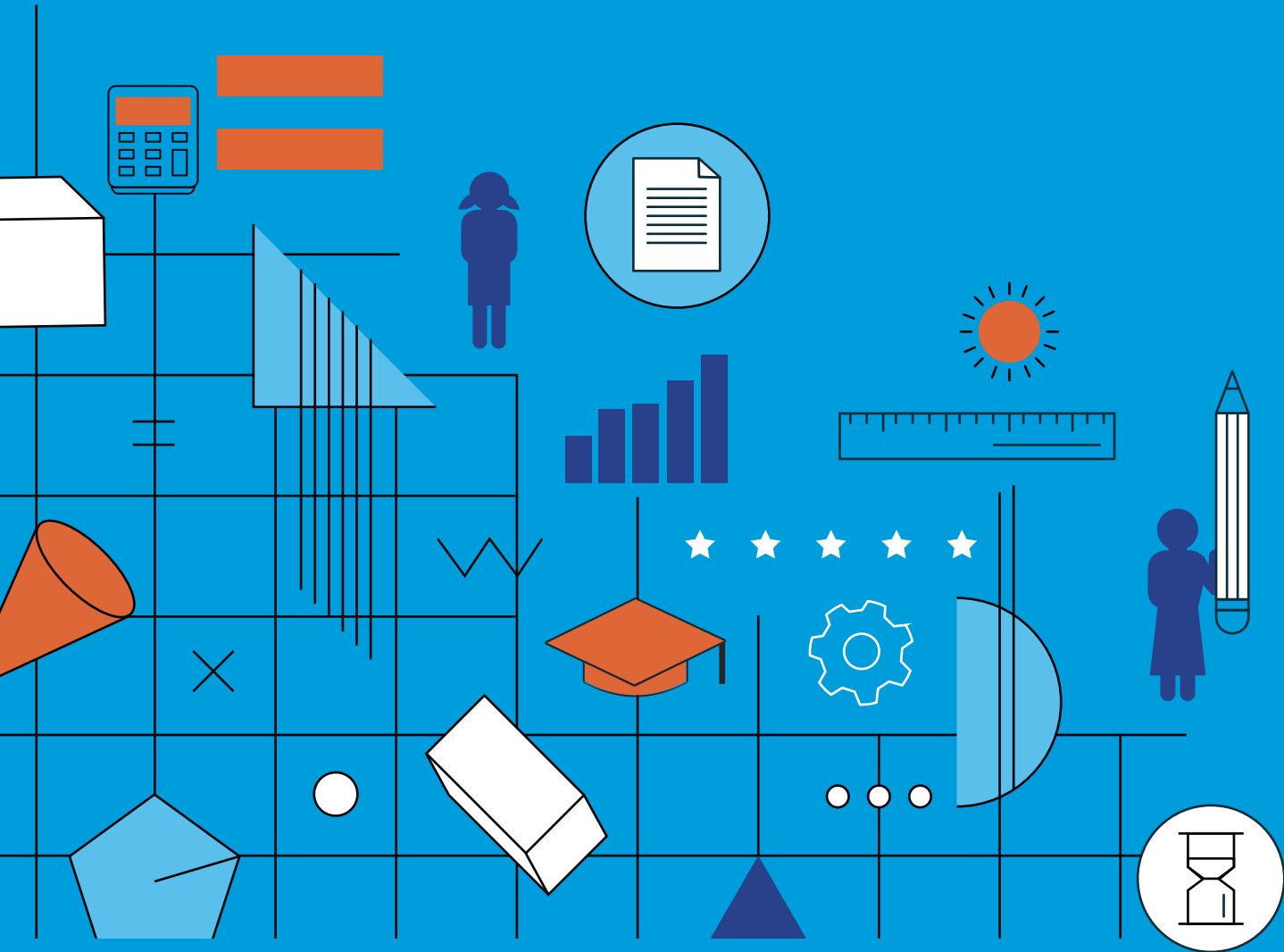


AN INCLUSIVE FUTURE FOR UKRAINIAN YOUTH: CHALLENGES, OPPORTUNITIES AND THE NEEDS OF YOUTH NOT IN EDUCATION, EMPLOYMENT OR TRAINING



INTRODUCTION

The war in Ukraine has resulted in approximately 3.7 million people becoming internally displaced within Ukraine and more than 6 million people fleeing to other countries in Europe, particularly neighbouring countries.¹ The war has had highly disruptive consequences across all segments of society as a result of this massive displacement, widespread destruction of infrastructure and the economic impacts of the conflict.

One group that has been particularly affected is youth, defined by the Ukraine Youth Policy as individuals aged 15 to 29.² As of 2021, 15–29-year-olds accounted for approximately 15 per cent³ of the population of Ukraine, or 6,336,505 people.⁴ As of 2020, 15.5 per cent of people aged 15 to 24 were considered not in employment, education or training (NEET) – around 18 per cent of which were female and 13 per cent male.⁵ The concept of NEET has become an increasingly common way of understanding the multifaceted vulnerabilities and forms of marginalization that youth face, encompassing unemployment, early departure from education and economic inactivity reflecting more structural disengagement from the labour market.⁶ Although the NEET rate in Ukraine had been declining in recent years,⁷ war has increased the risk of disruptions in youth education and professional training, and their struggles to find meaningful employment that contributes to their full self-realization.

As the war in Ukraine continues and recovery plans are being developed simultaneously, the situation and needs of NEET youth must be considered, along with the challenges youth may face in accessing education, employment and training moving forward. Ensuring the engagement of youth in education and

employment is likewise important for ensuring the full realization of young people’s economic potential, which can further local economic development. Given that girls and women are more vulnerable to being NEET and people with disabilities and those from the Roma community also face barriers access education and employment, addressing this issue is also a matter of social and gender equality. In the context of Ukraine, it is hence key to address the challenges of NEET youth to facilitate economic recovery and achieve Sustainable Development Goal 8 and its target to reduce the number of youth NEET.⁸

This brief focuses on the situation of NEET youth from Ukraine by identifying the unique needs, challenges and capacities of girls and boys displaced both in Ukraine and in neighbouring countries (Moldova, Poland, Romania and Slovakia) and the availability of opportunities for these youth. Attention is also paid to factors such as gender, disability and membership in a minority community that may raise additional vulnerabilities and challenges. This brief concludes with practical recommendations to promote the integration of Ukrainian NEET young women, girls, young men and boys into services, programming and assistance delivered in the context of the regional response to the war in Ukraine.

1 UNHCR (United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees). 2024a. [Global focus Ukraine](#); UNHCR. 2024b. [Ukraine Refugee Situation](#).

2 Parliament of Ukraine. 2021. [Adopted the Law of Ukraine “On the Main Principles of Youth Policy”](#).

3 Unless otherwise specified, all percentages have been rounded to the nearest whole number for legibility.

4 State Statistics Service of Ukraine. 2022. [2021 Statistical yearbook of Ukraine](#).

5 European Training Foundation. 2021. [Ukraine: Education, training and employment developments 2021](#); State Statistics Service of Ukraine. 2021. Labor force of Ukraine.

6 ILO (International Labour Organization). 2015. [What does NEETs mean and why is the concept so easily misinterpreted?](#)

7 From 17 per cent in 2015 to 16 per cent in 2019. European Training Foundation. 2021.

8 Crismaru, M., Gagauz, O., & Buciuceanu-Vrabie, M. 2017. [Inclusion of youth not in employment, education, or training \(NEET youth\)](#).

METHODOLOGY AND DEFINITIONS

This brief is based on a review of existing literature, key informant interviews (KIIs) with organizations working with Ukrainian youth in the target countries, and an online survey of said youth. The literature was reviewed between March and July 2024, with a focus on understanding the status quo of NEET youth before and after the onset of the war in Ukraine. The literature review informed KII questions and survey topics as well as recommendations. For this brief, the main primary data source consists of 16 semi-structured KIIs conducted between May and June 2024, with one informant from Moldova, three from Poland, four from Romania, four from Slovakia and four from Ukraine. These interviews were held in English online, with the possibility of interpretation, covering the pre-war situation of NEET youth, post-war challenges, access to services and support, and additional factors in the experiences of NEET based on gender, disability and belonging to the Ukrainian Roma community.

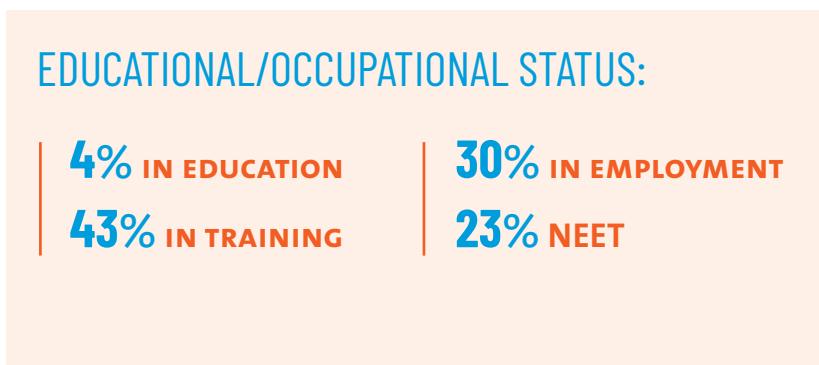
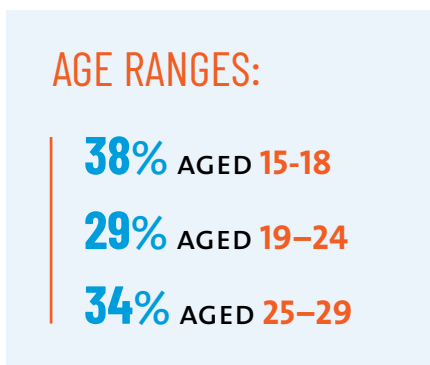
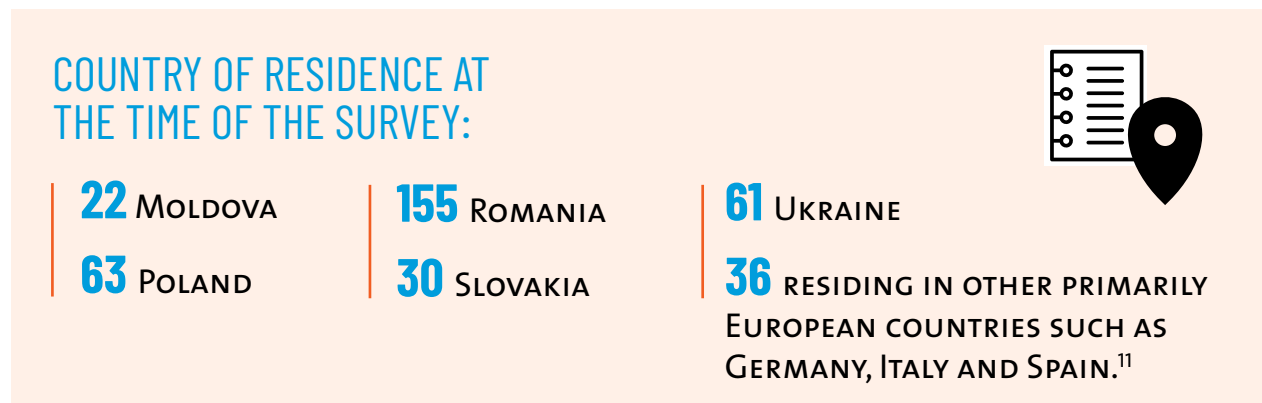
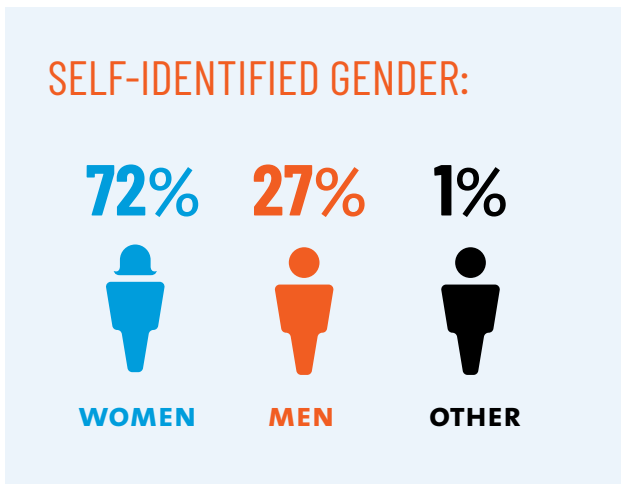
To supplement the KII findings, an online survey was distributed by UNICEF Country Offices in Moldova, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Ukraine between May and July 2024 via the main platforms and partners used to reach out to youth in these countries. The anonymous survey contained 25 questions for youth in neighbouring countries and 26 for youth within Ukraine, with the additional question for the latter pertaining to where in Ukraine youth have moved to since February 2022. Key topics of the survey pertained to experiences with access to education, employment and training pre- and post-war-onset, the role of gender and disability in these experiences, desired areas of training, psychosocial counselling and other support, access to information and intentions to return to Ukraine.

TABLE X
Survey dissemination platforms, per UNICEF Country Office, outreach May–July 2024

COUNTRY	APPROACH
MOLDOVA	U report ⁹ and partner organizations
POLAND	U report and partner organizations
ROMANIA	U report, Facebook and partner organizations
SLOVAKIA	Social media, partner organizations, local government and informal education centres
UKRAINE	U report and partner organizations

⁹ U-Report is UNICEF's digital community for young people, by young people, where they can raise their voices and share opinions on topics that matter to them. More information is accessible via: <https://ureport.in/>

RESPONDENTS, IN NUMBERS:



*Far more female respondents said they were NEET than males: 29% of all female respondents versus 11% of all male respondents.

¹⁰ *Approximately 70% of respondents were displaced in 2022 (most within the first three months of the war), with the remaining 30% being displaced between 2023 and April 2024.

¹¹ Given the scope of this brief, the responses of those not in the focus countries have been excluded from the data analysis from this point on.

LIMITATIONS

The survey results are not intended to be generalizable to the entire population of Ukrainian NEET youth across Ukraine and the representative neighbouring countries, but are instead intended to offer a first snapshot into the challenges, opportunities and needs faced by NEET Ukrainian youth, to be nuanced in future research. The decision to include youth who are in education, employment and training as well as those who are NEET in the survey was taken to enable comparison between NEET and other youth to identify distinct and cross-cutting trends. However, the proportion of youth who identify as NEET. This is connected to the fact that while the survey was targeted as much as possible through partners and the targeting parameters on the platforms where the survey was distributed, due to the nature of the NEET population, precise targeting and sampling was not possible. Additionally, while the survey did receive over 350 responses, the response rate was particularly low in Moldova and Slovakia despite repeated rounds

of survey repromotion and an extension of the survey period. This may have been a result of the end of the academic year and summer holidays.

For this brief, NEET is defined based on the Eurostat and World Bank definition of youth between the ages of 15 and 29 who are not actively or regularly engaged in formal education, employment or training.¹² In 2021, the Law of Ukraine “On the main principles of youth policy” was adopted and shifted the youth age limit from 35 to 29.¹³ This can include both those who are actively seeking but unable to access education, employment or training and those who for various reasons have become economically and educationally inactive. Moreover, the definition of NEET as between 15 and 29 rather than 24 reflects the increased time young people may take to complete higher education and the challenges of transitioning to employment afterwards¹⁴ and also helps capture cross-country variation in the age definition of youth.

12 Eurostat. n.d. [Statistics on young people neither in education, employment, or training.](#); World Bank. n.d. [Metadata glossary.](#)

13 Danish Trade Union Development Agency. 2022. [Labor Market Profile Ukraine- 2022.](#)

14 ILO. 2016. [Labour market transitions of young women and men in Ukraine: Results of the 2013 and 2015 school-to-work transition surveys.](#)



CONTEXT OF YOUTH NEET IN UKRAINE AND NEIGHBOURING COUNTRIES

This section presents the findings of a review of existing literature on NEET.



NEET RATES

Despite progress, already prior to February 2022 Ukraine had one of the highest NEET rates among Eastern European countries, with the exception of Moldova and Romania. **Although the NEET rate in Ukraine had decreased from 17 per cent in 2015 to roughly 16 per cent in 2019, and the youth unemployment rate had fallen from 22 per cent in 2015 to 15 per cent in 2019, youth were already facing challenges engaging in education, employment and training prior to the war.**¹⁵ Meanwhile, the neighbouring countries to which many Ukrainian young people have fled since the beginning of the war have also faced challenges related to youth NEET. At the onset of the war in 2022, the NEET rate among neighbouring countries was highest in Moldova, at around 30 per cent,¹⁶ followed by Romania at 20 per cent, Slovakia at 12 per cent and Poland at 11 per cent.¹⁷ **Across these countries, the NEET rate is higher among women than men, with the largest gender disparity in Romania – where the NEET rate for women was 25 per cent relative to 15 per cent for men.**¹⁸ Young people from rural areas of Ukraine¹⁹ and Roma²⁰ communities regardless of age also face higher barriers to accessing education, employment and training.

Individual experiences, gender, disability and ethnicity

A variety of factors contribute to youth becoming NEET, which previous research relate both directly to the Ukrainian context and to NEET more broadly. One strand of this research has focused on identifying broader commonalities in personal, demographic and

socioeconomic factors that may contribute to youth becoming NEET. The role of family economic dynamics has been highlighted – such as low-socioeconomic status, financial difficulties in one’s household, having one or more household heads unemployed, and the low educational level of parents – which can increase youth’s vulnerabilities to becoming NEET, particularly when compounded with factors such as social isolation and exclusion.²¹ At the same time, broader economic crises also disproportionately affect young people²² and can contribute to them being NEET. **The gender dimension is also relevant, particularly for women and girls seeking to transition from education to employment while balancing social expectations related to care and domestic work.**²³ This reflects the gendered barriers women face particularly in transitioning from education to employment. In Central and Eastern Europe, women make up a higher portion of university graduates but have lower labour force participation.²⁴ This is a result of women being more vulnerable to becoming economically inactive when in the phase of beginning employment, as a result of social norms around care and domestic work, and difficulties becoming engaged in the labour market, for example via entrepreneurship.²⁵ State support for care work and gender-responsive family-friendly policies in this context can play an enabling or hindering role depending on the provision of assistance, especially for young mothers. The lack of effective and affordable care systems further increases the difficulties for young mothers.²⁶ Moreover, according to the Ministry of Economy of Ukraine, **the gender wage gap stands at nearly 19 per cent compared to the 13 per cent EU**

15 European Training Foundation. 2021.

16 Ciurea, I. 2024. [Contribution of partner countries to the EU youth Wiki: Chapter IV Moldova social inclusion.](#)

17 Eurostat. 2024a. [Data browser: Young people neither in employment nor in education and training \(NEET\), by citizenship.](#)

18 Eurostat. 2024b. [Data browser: Young people neither in employment nor in education and training by sex \(NEET\).](#)

19 Ciurea, I. 2024; FAO (Food and Agriculture Organization). 2022. [Complementary information note: The impact of the war in Ukraine on rural labor markets.](#)

20 Acted. 2023. [Republic of Moldova: Roma community needs assessment.](#) Romani early years network. n.d. REYN Ukraine; Roma Foundation for Europe. 2024. [Why the EU needs the Roma.](#)

21 Rahmani, H., Groot, W., and Rahmani, A. M. 2024. [“Unravelling the NEET phenomenon: A systematic literature review and meta-analysis of risk factors for youth not in education, employment, or training.”](#) *International Journal of Adolescence and Youth*, 24(1).

22 International Labour Organization. 2021. [Statistical brief: An update on the youth labor market impact of the COVID-19 crisis.](#)

23 UN Women. n. d.. [Regional factsheet: Eastern Europe.](#)

24 McKinsey & Company. 2021. [Win-win: How empowering women can benefit Central and Eastern Europe.](#)

25 Diia. 2024. [Needs and Problems of Ukrainian women entrepreneurs in the context of war in Ukraine.](#) Ibid.

26 UNECE (United Nations Economic Commission for Europe) and UN Women. 2021. [Empowering women through reducing unpaid care work: A regional analysis of Europe and Central Asia](#)

average, and there are widespread stereotypes that different types of work are more suitable for women versus men.²⁷ Roma youth many also face a higher NEET rate for example as a result of discrimination in addition to cultural norms meaning many young people, particularly Roma girls and women, do not often have an enabling environment to pursue their education.²⁸ A final additional factor highlighted in existing research for example in Moldova is that youth living in rural areas may be slightly more vulnerable to being NEET partly based on the limited availability of opportunities.²⁹ Importantly, these factors are not mutually exclusive and intersect across the multiple facets of young peoples' lives and identities to impact their being NEET.

Education and employment systems and NEET

On top of the individual-based factors that can contribute to youth being NEET, the structural dimensions of education and employment systems in Eastern Europe, and Ukraine specifically, have been studied. While Ukraine had a high tertiary enrolment rate of roughly 71 per cent in 2022, and with the exception of Moldova in the region had one of the highest government expenditures on education (at around 6 per cent in 2020), aspects of the education system increased barriers for youth to access education, employment and training.³⁰ **Specifically, the Ukrainian education system tends to place a strong emphasis on theoretical over practical and soft skills and generally has little infrastructure for career guidance.³¹ Relevant in this context is vocational education and training (VET), which has often been underemphasized in the Ukrainian context relative to higher education.** The VET system is broadly accessible for young people and efforts have been undertaken in recent years

to reform the system to make it more attractive and effective for youth. However, key challenges persist, including outdated technical infrastructure, mismatch with labour market needs, little applied training and outdated methodological approaches.³² Moreover, despite the persistent lack of skilled labour from VET programmes in regional labour markets in Ukraine, it tends to be an under pursued form of education, partly as a result of the stigmatization of VET schools as being less prestigious than universities and stereotypes of VET professions as more masculine and thus less pursued by women.³³ Youth with disabilities may face additional challenges as a result of physical accessibility challenges and a lack of staff trained to support them or adapting to their needs.³⁴ Roma children may face additional barriers to pursuing education, for example as a result of tensions, discrimination, and family and community dynamics, as indicated by Roma communities in Moldova.³⁵

Systemic issues with the education system intersect with the challenges youth face when transitioning to the labour market, which can contribute to their status as NEET. In the context of the labour market, the European Training Foundation has highlighted **skills mismatches, overqualification, regional disparities and low economic activity rates as reasons for youth becoming and remaining NEET.**³⁶ Labour market profiles further indicate that youth tend to be concentrated in elementary occupations below their education level, which can contribute to them exiting the labour market as a result of job dissatisfaction and the prolonged transition from education to stable and meaningful employment.³⁷ The COVID-19 pandemic also disproportionately impacted youth via unemployment and economic inactivity due to the economic recession and decrease in labour market size. COVID-19 also intersected with mounting tensions with Russia, which contributed to higher

27 ILO. 2023. [Despite the war, Ukraine keeps up the reform process: addressing the gender pay gap is high on agenda](#); UNFPA (United Nations Population Fund). 2021. [What Ukrainians are driven by when choosing a profession: The results of national public opinion survey on key factors and stereotypes](#).

28 European Roma Grassroots Organizations Network. n. d. [Investing in our future: What work\(s\) for young Roma? Recommendations](#).

29 HELVETAS and EPER. 2023. [Feasibility study on employment opportunities, skills development, and social cohesion for Ukrainian refugees and vulnerable Moldovan individuals in the Republic of Moldova](#).

30 Trading Economics. 2024a. [Moldova - public spending on education, total \(% of GDP\)](#); Trading Economics. 2024b. [Ukraine - public spending on education, total \(% of GDP\)](#); World Bank. 2024. [School enrollment, tertiary \(% gross\) - Ukraine](#).

31 Danish Trade Union Development Agency. 2022.

32 Leu-Severynko, S. 2022. [A short overview on vocational education and training in Ukraine: Current status, challenges, and reform intentions](#).

33 UNFPA. Activities 2021. [Чим керуються українці та українки при виборі професії: результати національного дослідження щодо ключових чинників та стереотипів](#); Tkachuk, A. 2020. [Професійна освіта в сучасних умовах. Погляд збоку. Частина 2](#).

34 Presentation shared by The Platform for Families with Disabilities.

35 Acted. 2023.

36 European Training Foundation. 2021.

37 Danish Trade Union Development Agency. 2022.

youth vulnerability to lay-offs and unemployment. This can result in negative cycles where youth struggle to gain further work experience as a result of having lacked opportunities to do so early in their careers, thus becoming viewed as unemployable.³⁸ **A final important factor in terms of access to employment is informal employment and entrepreneurship, particularly prevalent among youth, which remains a persistent challenge in Ukraine and also contributes for example to generally lower formal wages.**³⁹ These vulnerabilities also intersect with gender, disability and ethnicity. For similar reasons discussed in the context of education, youth with disabilities and members of the Roma community face additional vulnerabilities in accessing employment.⁴⁰ Ukrainian women also tend to face higher levels of unemployment and economic inactivity as result of care responsibilities and a lack of sufficient support for working mothers, both of which have become particularly salient barriers following COVID-19.⁴¹

Initial understandings of the needs of youth from Ukraine, post-February 2022

Attention has begun to turn to the experiences of Ukrainian youth in accessing education, employment and training since the onset of the war in Ukraine. Towards the beginning of the war, a survey was conducted by the European Youth Information and Counseling Agency on the information needs and aspirations of displaced Ukrainian youth (aged 15–35)⁴² highlighting the role of social networks in accessing information and the need for: **information on host country education and training followed by leisure activities, medical support, labour rights and employment.** The study also found that for youth intending to return to Ukraine shortly, **psychological**

support was a highly cited need. Research by the United Nations Development Programme and Ukrainian Ministry of Youth and Sports on youth aged 14–35 who remained in Ukraine or had travelled abroad by the end of 2022 revealed that for youth in Ukraine, both pre- and post-war, **family well-being, health and careers were the top priority** but their importance had greatly increased since the war.⁴³ Meanwhile, **decreased income and deterioration in mental health were the most commonly reported experiences related to the war**, while volunteering became an increasingly common activity and investment in the local economy was the most commonly cited precondition for young people to return. This study also highlighted that **Roma youth face particular challenges that compound existing ones related to discrimination, such as wage declines and fewer opportunities for labour migration.** In Romania and Moldova, the Norwegian Refugee Council and National Youth Council of Moldova undertook a needs assessment of Ukrainian refugee youth (aged 15–35), revealing their key needs as: access to income; language courses in the local language and English; **access to childcare and youth centres providing skills training, mental health support and opportunities for socialization.**⁴⁴

38 Ibid.

39 Ciurea, I. 2024; ILO. 2018. [Undeclared work in Ukraine: Nature, scope and measures to tackle it](#).

40 Machlouzarides, M., & Uretici, S. 2024. [A Resilient Picture: Experiences of Persons with Disabilities in Ukraine](#).

UN Women. 2018. [The Rights of Roma Women in Ukraine](#).

41 UNECE and UN Women. 2021; UN Women. 2020. [Rapid Gender Assessment of the situation and needs of women in the context of COVID-19 in Ukraine](#).

42 European Youth Information and Counseling Agency. 2022. [Ukrainian displaced youth: Identifying information needs and aspirations](#).

43 UNDP (United Nations Development Programme). 2023. [Impact of war on youth in Ukraine](#).

44 Norwegian Refugee Council. 2023. [Hope and uncertainty: A needs assessment of Ukrainian youth refugees in Romania and Moldova](#).

EXPRESSED CHALLENGES, OPPORTUNITIES AND NEEDS OF YOUTH FROM UKRAINE SINCE FEBRUARY 2022

This section presents the findings expressed in the KIIs and survey, identifying the key challenges, opportunities and needs of Ukrainian youth, particularly NEET youth. Education-and-employment-specific factors are first presented, followed by cross-cutting challenges.



Challenges

Both in Ukraine and neighbouring countries, key informants noted that the war has increased challenges for youth to access and effectively follow education, though it must be noted that as a result of the online Ukrainian education system, many youth have been able to continue studying online. In Ukraine, informants noted that those living in front-line areas face power shortages and bombardment, meaning that even if online schooling is available, they may not have a safe environment or the infrastructure to access and effectively follow classes. Simultaneously, one key informant from eastern Ukraine noted that those who relocate to the west of the country and pursue in-person education, especially Russian-speaking youth, may face difficulties with social exclusion, which can increase their vulnerability to leaving school. **These themes were also highlighted across respondents in neighbouring countries, where they noted that language and differences in the Ukrainian and host-country education systems remain the primary barriers for youth.** The language barrier was also the main barrier identified in the snapshot survey, both for youth who are NEET and non-NEET. This was true across all age groups and was noted as a barrier by around 17 per cent of female respondents relative to 13 per cent of males. While language courses have been made available to youth since the war in Ukraine, they have often been short-term and not geared towards advanced levels and preparing children to pursue education in the host-country language. Moreover, for youth seeking to enter high school or university in the host country, particularly in Poland and Romania, informants stressed that they may be unable to do so because of recognition of their previous education and that they must often complete entrance exams in the host-country language and on country-specific material. Transferring education systems is also complicated by differences between the Ukrainian and host-country education systems, because students generally finish at a younger age in Ukraine and therefore may not continue education but also be considered unemployable due to their age. **Capacity and social cohesion are also central challenges.** In Poland, a key informant noted that access to secondary school was already competitive prior to 2022, and with the influx of Ukrainians the capacity and competition in schools is being further strained. The situation may change with enrolment for Ukrainian refugees becoming compulsory in countries such as Poland and Slovakia as of the 2024–2025 academic year. However,

even if students do get a place, across neighbouring countries, key informants stressed that social isolation and exclusion are central challenges, not only due to the language barrier but also due to stigma. Moreover, if young people are following both in-person and online education, they may not have time to socialize with their peers.

Difficulties in accessing employment is also a key challenge contributing to young Ukrainians being NEET. For young people in front-line areas of Ukraine, the ongoing fighting, connectivity issues and departure of many businesses can make it difficult to access employment. **Key informants in Ukraine also noted that even if there are jobs available, for example in Western Ukraine, the persistence of skills mismatches and low wages combined with inflation mean that youth may choose not to pursue this employment.** As previously mentioned, but necessary to reiterate, language was again highlighted as the central barrier to employment access by the key informants and as also indicated in the survey, together with challenges related to having certifications and diplomas from Ukraine recognized. **Importantly, the survey indicated that among female youth NEET, a lack of opportunities, the need to care for a family member (mostly among 25–29-year-olds), and a lack of enrolment space in education, employment and training programmes were the main barriers, apart from language. Meanwhile, for male youth NEET mental health conditions, lack of opportunities, and lack of information on opportunities and their right to study or work were the main barriers.** This is compounded by what key informants and youth considered discrimination by employers as a result of their nationality, and as noted by one key informant in Romania, if youth do get employed it is typically in low-skill occupations where they may face exploitation in terms of working hours, salaries, etc., which may lead youth to choose not to take such employment. Among the youth surveyed, NEET and non-NEET youth indicated in open answer questions that they felt they were not being selected for jobs, paid less, given worse hours, and generally bullied because of their nationality. Although not a primary barrier, key informants noted that the aforementioned challenges can be compounded by a lack of familiarity with soft-skills and labour market norms in the host country. As previously noted, young women and girls may experience this differently than young men and boys, as for the former this mostly took the form of a perceived lack of space in programmes, while for the latter information on the opportunities and rights themselves is the key challenge.



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These broader challenges in accessing education and employment intersect with additional barriers that youth may face as a result of their gender, having a disability, or coming from the Roma community. **In Ukraine and neighbouring countries, key informants indicate that prior to the war gender stereotypes in the labour market and insufficient childcare systems were already barriers for young women to access employment.** That many women have now become both primary caregivers and income-earners in their households as a result of the conscription law, and that in some cases this care now also includes older or injured family members, means that without access to sufficient care support systems, young women may be particularly vulnerable to becoming NEET. This can also result in long-term unemployment if women become economically inactive for prolonged periods in the early phases of their careers. Among youth surveyed, particularly women, the need to care for a family member was the third most-cited barrier, whereas male survey respondents did not indicate this as a barrier. **As noted during one KII with a Romanian organization, the increased vulnerability of girls and young women to sexual and reproductive health challenges and gender-based violence increased their risk of being out of education, employment or**

training. KIIs also stressed that both in Ukraine and neighbouring countries, boys may face additional vulnerabilities, often connected to the enforcement of military conscription in Ukraine. For boys at or approaching conscription age in Ukraine, parents may seek to keep them away from conscription by taking them out of school or employment, or sending them to a neighbouring country. Young boys may also feel increased pressure to provide for their families while their male family members are on the front lines, and so may seek to pursue employment at a younger age. However, particularly in neighbouring countries, they may be considered unemployable as a result. Young women may be vulnerable to this pressure as well, as one 15-year-old girl in Romania indicated that she was seeking work but employers would not hire her due to her age. For youth with disabilities, online education, while accessible, is not necessarily suited to the support needs of these students. When accessing physical education, they may face a lack of capacity in host country schools or discrimination. For example, in Slovakia, students with disabilities who complete primary education do not receive the certifications necessary for the transition to regular secondary school and must stay in programmes for those with disabilities. Key informants across countries noted

that there was already pre-existing discrimination against Roma youth for the reasons previously outlined, and consequently Ukrainian Roma continue to face discrimination both due to their ethnicity and nationality if they are not dual nationals.

Additional factors highlighted in the KIIs include the location and movement intention of youth and mental health. **In Moldova, Poland and Ukraine, KIIs stressed that young people located in rural areas are particularly vulnerable to being NEET, as most education, employment and support resources are concentrated in urban areas.** In Poland, residency in rural areas was noted to have the particular potential to affect Roma youth, who often travel in large groups and are consequently relocated to rural areas to accommodate them together. For non-Roma as well, surveyed youth living in rural areas of host countries more often sighted a lack of access to transportation or a space to pursue education as barriers. For example, a 29-year-old woman in Poland indicated that there is no work in the village where she is living and transport to the city is difficult, even more so because she has a child with a disability. In addition, variations in movement intentions of Ukrainian refugees make them perceived as unreliable investments for employers. **Mental health was the final cross-cutting challenge noted across KIIs, which was identified as a barrier by around 16 per cent of surveyed youth NEET.** The KIIs indicated that the war is having long-term repercussions for the mental health of young people in terms of post-traumatic stress disorder, depression and anxiety disorders, among others, which is exacerbated by the general social stigma surrounding mental health in Ukrainian culture. If unaddressed, these impacts can hinder the ability of youth to engage in education and employment. Moreover, seeking support, particularly in neighboring countries, is complicated by the lack of Ukrainian language specialists. Young men and boys mostly aged 16–17 may be particularly vulnerable to the negative mental health impacts as a result of guilt for avoiding conscription while male family members and friends are on the front lines. At the same time, young men and boys hold higher stigma surrounding mental health issues and may be less likely to seek help. At the same time, the KIIs also noted that it is difficult to reach out and support youth NEET with their specific needs as there is no registry of these youth.

Opportunities

To respond to these challenges, a variety of initiatives have been launched, primarily by local organizations and governments to address some of these challenges. Importantly the war has, in specific ways, created new opportunities for young Ukrainians.

Youth centres and spaces, help-points, buddy-programmes, reskilling and language courses, job portals, and similar initiatives have been established in Ukraine and neighbouring countries, which although not normally targeted only to NEET youth, are also accessible to them. These programmes offer support with employment, education and training, offer spaces for socialization, group and sometimes individual therapy and childcare. While these programmes and services are valuable resources for the youth they serve, they are not accessible for all youth, particularly serving primarily those living in urban areas. **They also often lack the sustained access to resources needed to continue offering their services to young people over time and at the necessary scale. Additionally, many of these programmes have slowed and declined in scale as the war has become prolonged.** Around 74 per cent of youth NEET surveyed indicated that they found assistance programmes targeting youth very or a little accessible. In addition, roughly 29 per cent of youth NEET indicated that they had previously wanted to and been able to access support and counselling services; while around 15 per cent indicated that they had not been able to access such services when they wanted to.

Beyond the opportunity to access support and services, KIIs in Ukraine and neighbouring countries said that the war in Ukraine has in some ways created opportunities for structural changes in Ukrainian society, mostly around gender and mental health. **While young women continue to face the barriers to accessing employment noted above, KIIs in Ukraine noted that the enlistment of most working-age men into the armed forces has meant that women have the opportunity to be more economically active, including in sectors that were traditionally male-dominated.** Moreover, KIIs noted that the stigma around mental health for youth has also begun to shift slightly and that it is becoming more accepted to speak about the psychological impacts of the war, although access to this support remains limited.

Needs

Based on the previously reviewed challenges and opportunities, the following key needs for youth NEET to be able to access education, employment and training both presently and during the recovery can be identified:

Education

- Youth programmes and service hubs that implement peer-to-peer approaches to engage youth, and which in neighbouring countries include youth workers with an understanding of both cultures.
- Expanded access to youth programmes to rural areas via online platforms, where necessary and possible.
- Social integration support programmes that address exclusion factors that can keep youth from engaging in school, and associated support for parents of youth who may have concerns about sending their children to school for fear of social exclusion.
- More advanced higher-education-oriented language courses in the host-country language and in English.
- Support for Ukrainian students with disabilities in neighbouring countries to be able to transition to secondary education.
- Support for the recognition of educational qualifications from Ukraine, not only for young people but also for those specialized in psychology and special needs education, for example, who can support young people.
- Programmes for the continuation of education for young veterans.
- An education system that places more emphasis on alignment with labour market openings and that emphasizes soft skills development, and reflections on self realization.
- Support for the transition back to the Ukrainian education system, including recognition of any certifications or diplomas obtained abroad.
- Awareness raising and programmatic support for young women to pursue traditionally “masculine” fields of education to also meet key labor market

needs, particularly in light of the military conscription in Ukraine.

- The need to destigmatize VET education and raise awareness of its benefits, particularly targeting women.
- Comprehensive outreach for programmes targeting the education of youth, to avoid the long-term disengagement of large portions of the population from the labour market.

Employment and training

- The establishment of, and funding support for, long-term programmes that help youth navigate various aspects that may prevent them from accessing employment, education and training, such as mental health support, résumé-writing, soft-skills development and retraining courses. This support is needed particularly for those who have become economically inactive rather than only unemployed.
- Job-matching programmes that engage private companies and State institutions to help youth identify their career ambitions and work towards their self-realization.
- Reskilling programmes, for example via VET institutions.
- Access to employment for those living in rural and front-line areas, with a focus on online work, where accessible, to enable youth to access such programmes and employment when physical access is not possible.
- Equitable and gender-sensitive access to care services.
- More advanced workplace-oriented language courses in the host-country language and English.
- Support for the recognition of employment qualifications from Ukraine, not only for young people but also those specialized in psychology and special needs education, for example, who can support young people.
- Given that lack of information on opportunities and systems is the fourth most common barrier to accessing education, employment and training, and that approximately 27 per cent of youth respondents who are NEET indicated that they

would be interested in pursuing vocational and reskilling programmes, further dissemination of information on these programmes and their scale-up is a central need. The main areas of interest for these programmes reported by the female youth NEET surveyed are: (1) language, (2) cosmetology and (3) soft skills. Meanwhile, for male youth NEET, these are: (1) language, (2) both entrepreneurship and soft skills and (3) business.

- Programmes for the retraining and access to employment for young veterans.
- The creation of economic and educational opportunities that fill the needs for the self-realization of youth and high quality of life to encourage them to return to Ukraine. These opportunities must also not be confined or shaped by gender stereotypes.
- Speedy restoration of care facilities for children, older people, and those who may have become disabled as a result of the war in Ukraine and support particularly for female-headed households to balance these responsibilities and education, employment or training.
- Support for the transition back to Ukrainian employment and training systems, including recognition of any certifications or diplomas obtained abroad.
- Engagement with private enterprises to bring innovative and engaging employment opportunities for young people that also contribute to overall economic development in Ukraine.

- Comprehensive outreach of programmes targeting the employment and training of youth to avoid the long-term disengagement of large portions of the population from the labour market.

Mental health, psychosocial support and protection

- Increased access to and awareness of how to access sexual and reproductive health and gender-based violence prevention and response services, as these issues can particularly impact girls and women's ability to access education, employment and training.
- Mental health services that target the unique situation of young people, particularly young boys, that can have long-term negative impact on their access and engagement in education, employment and training. To encourage youth to access these services in the face of persistent stigmas around mental health, these support services should also be made available in ways that are integrated into community services and other programmes, such as leisure or social integration events.
- Mental health support for youth related to specific post-war issues, such as working with veterans and those with disabilities acquired as a result of the war, as well as programmes on coping with the various lasting psychosocial implications of the war.



CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

More than 6 million young Ukrainians between the ages of 15 and 29 have been impacted by the war in Ukraine at a critical point in their lives for the development and advancement of their education, employment and training. The war, displacement, economic effects and personal impacts all increase their potential vulnerability to find themselves outside of education, employment and training systems. Gender, disability and ethnicity all add additional dimensions impacting how young people are impacted.

This brief has offered insights and furthered the existing understanding of the challenges, opportunities and needs experienced by youth NEET and those vulnerable to becoming NEET. Language barriers, discrimination, social cohesion challenges, mental health issues, gender norms, care work burdens, location-related challenges, movement intentions, ability to integrate and adapt to new country contexts, and the ability for organizations to access and engage youth NEET have been highlighted as key challenges for accessing education, and training. While opportunities do exist for youth to receive support in some of these areas in Ukraine and the neighbouring countries surveyed, they are not equally accessible for all vulnerable youth or at the scale at which they may be necessary.

While gender norms and mental health continue to present challenges for youth to access education, employment and training, the nature of the war has in some ways created opportunities for women to challenge gender stereotypes by pursuing what is traditionally considered the masculine breadwinner role and more traditionally male-dominated professions. The normalization of discussing mental health and pursuing mental health support has also potentially increased among youth, though challenges remain. Based on this, key needs for the present and the eventual post-war recovery have been identified, ranging from access to language courses, to investment in the local economy with private enterprises, to an increase in the provision of mental health programmes.

1. LANGUAGE AND EDUCATION INTEGRATION

Combined, these findings together with existing research make it possible to identify several key recommendations for Ukrainian and neighbouring host countries, which are further elaborated below:

1

Establish specialized language courses, moving beyond basic needs

Develop comprehensive language programmes that focus on professional and academic terminology, particularly for fields with extensive technical language like psychology, health care, information technology and engineering. These courses should offer certifications recognized by both host countries and Ukrainian institutions, potentially including advanced English language skills.

Target stakeholders: Local universities, language institutes, NGOs and private sector companies providing job-placement services.

2

Support exam preparation for Ukrainian youth

Implement specific exam-preparation programmes that help Ukrainian youth prepare for national exams in both Ukraine and host countries. Provide tutorial support that covers key subjects and language.

Target stakeholders: Educational institutions, private tutoring services and youth organizations.

3

Address stigma around VET and technical education

Actively destigmatize VET and technical forms of education by including them in discussions on potential next steps and future careers for youth, through for example partnerships with VET institutions to develop awareness campaigns that target young women, youth with disabilities, and Roma.

Target stakeholders: Educational institutions, private tutoring services and youth organizations.

4

Ensure mutual recognition of diplomas and credentials

Facilitate a streamlined, fast-tracked process for the recognition of Ukrainian diplomas in host countries, ensuring that Ukrainian youth can continue their studies or find employment without delays. Such processes should also be ensured for the recognition of foreign diplomas and certifications in Ukraine for those who return.

Target stakeholders: Ministries of Education, certification boards and Ukrainian embassies.

5

Expand youth centres and peer-support programmes

Create more youth centres in rural and underserved areas, providing peer-support programmes, reskilling workshops and career counselling services tailored for both Ukrainian and host-country youth. It is also important to engage with the parents of vulnerable youth to address their concerns, which may affect the ability of young people to pursue their education, employment and training. Include staff who are familiar with both the host-country and Ukrainian culture.

Target stakeholders: NGOs, community organizations, private donors, local governments.

2. EMPLOYMENT AND ECONOMIC INTEGRATION

1

Establish buddy programmes and safe spaces for interaction

Launch and expand buddy programmes within schools and community centres, providing opportunities for Ukrainian youth to interact with local youth through shared projects, sports and cultural events.

Target stakeholders: Schools, community centres, youth organizations and local NGOs.

2

Create gender-sensitive employment opportunities

Develop flexible, part-time employment and training opportunities for young women with caregiving responsibilities, offering remote work or on-site childcare to **accommodate their needs**.

Target stakeholders: Private sector, local businesses and women's organizations.

3

Open internship and apprenticeship programmes

Establish paid internships and apprenticeships in collaboration with private companies, ensuring that these opportunities target Ukrainian youth, with a focus on women and vulnerable groups. Include gender-sensitive training to avoid reinforcing stereotypes.

Target stakeholders: Private companies, vocational training centres, government labour departments and international NGOs.

4

Establish job-matching and career counselling programmes

Create youth-specific job-matching platforms that link Ukrainian youth with job opportunities in host countries and Ukraine. This should include career counselling services that align with youth's skills and aspirations.

Target stakeholders: Employment agencies, private sector, donor agencies and youth organizations.

3. SOCIAL PROTECTION AND (MENTAL) HEALTH CARE SERVICES

1

Expand affordable and accessible care services

Facilitate the establishment of affordable childcare, elder care and disability care services for Ukrainian families, ensuring that female-headed households have access to care while seeking employment or training.

Target stakeholders: Local governments, international donors, women's organizations and private care providers.

2

Support Ukrainian youth with disabilities

Increase the capacity of schools to accommodate Ukrainian youth with disabilities, ensuring smooth transitions from primary to secondary education, and offering remote or hybrid education options where necessary that are tailored to any specific needs youth with disabilities may have.

Target stakeholders: Ministries of Education, disability advocacy groups and donor agencies.

3

Integrate mental health support in youth programmes

Incorporate mental health services into all youth reskilling and education programmes, with special attention to Ukrainian boys and young men who may face stigma around seeking help.

Target stakeholders: Mental health NGOs, youth organizations, donor agencies and local governments.

4

Incorporate sexual and reproductive health and gender-based violence mitigation in training programmes

Ensure that reskilling programmes and other youth-oriented programming include modules on sexual and reproductive health and gender-based violence prevention, with information on labour rights to prevent the exploitation of young women entering the workforce.

Target stakeholders: Women's rights NGOs, local health services and training institutes.

Target stakeholders: Employment agencies, private sector, donor agencies and youth organizations.

4. LONG-TERM SUPPORT AND SUSTAINABILITY

1

Ensure sustainable support for youth centres and services

Launch and expand buddy programmes within schools and community centres, providing opportunities for Ukrainian youth to interact with local youth through shared projects, sports and cultural events.

Target stakeholders: Schools, community centres, youth organizations and local NGOs.

2

Engage youth in policy discussions

Develop flexible, part-time employment and training opportunities for young women with caregiving responsibilities, offering remote work or on-site childcare to **accommodate their needs**.

Target stakeholders: Private sector, local businesses and women's organizations.

3

Conduct research on vulnerable NEET youth

Establish paid internships and apprenticeships in collaboration with private companies, ensuring that these opportunities target Ukrainian youth, with a focus on women and vulnerable groups. Include gender-sensitive training to avoid reinforcing stereotypes.

Target stakeholders: Private companies, vocational training centres, government labour departments and international NGOs.

5. SKILLS AND JOB-MATCHING

1

Invest in job and skill-matching programmes

Develop programmes that directly connect the skills of Ukrainian youth with labour market needs in host countries and Ukraine. This includes developing a database and online platform that matches skills with job opportunities in specific regions.

Target stakeholders: Private companies, employment agencies, vocational institutes and government labour departments.

