

<https://www.doi.org/10.26565/2220-7929-2026-69-14>  
УДК 316.7-054.73(477):364-787.522(4-6ЄС)

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### **THE SOCIO-CULTURAL ADAPTATION OF UKRAINIAN REFUGEES IN THE EU: THE ROLE OF CULTURAL EVENTS\*<sup>1</sup>**

*The migration crisis caused by Russia's war against Ukraine has become the largest for Europe since World War II. Long-term uncertainty and a distinct "female face" are the defining features of this phenomenon, putting on the agenda the development of new*

**Як цитувати:** Keda M. The Socio-Cultural Adaptation of Ukrainian Refugees in the EU: The Role of Cultural Events. *Вісник Харківського національного університету імені В. Н. Каразіна. Серія «Історія»*. 2026. Вип. 69. С. 278–302. <https://www.doi.org/10.26565/2220-7929-2026-69-14>

**How to cite:** Keda M. The Socio-Cultural Adaptation of Ukrainian Refugees in the EU: The Role of Cultural Events. *The Journal of V. N. Karazin Kharkiv National University. Series History*. 2026. No. 69. PP. 278–302. <https://www.doi.org/10.26565/2220-7929-2026-69-14>

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\* Acknowledgment: Olena Soloviova (practical psychologist, Deputy Director of the Chernihiv Higher Vocational School (Ukraine) for her expert consultation on the psychological aspects discussed the article.

The main findings suggested in the article were discussed at the Science for Policy Workshop, JRC-EUI, Florence, Italy. 26–27 May 2025 within the panel “Migration Governance in Times of Crisis and Disinformation” (<https://www.eui.eu/events?id=578073>).

*strategies for migration management. While the legal and socio-economic factors of migration management have been the subject of sustained academic scrutiny, its cultural component often remains insufficiently studied and assessed. Combining methods of theoretical and empirical research, the paper investigates the impact that involving Ukrainian refugees in cultural activities has on their mental health, language acquisition, and changes in self-identity. The theoretical aspect of the project includes analysis of the source base and research literature on the impact of cultural interventions on work with forced migrants, while the empirical aspect is represented by a quantitative survey of 524 respondents from 27 EU countries and a qualitative study in the form of 56 semi-structured interviews, recorded in 2022–2023. As the paper examines the influence of participation in cultural and creative events in host countries on the adaptation of displaced Ukrainians, a significant decrease is found in their attendance of such events, and the main barriers to this form of engagement are identified. Analysis of the empirical data shows that cultural practices of various kinds produce the strongest positive effects for Ukrainian refugees in such closely related areas as: overcoming stress, managing the sense of uncertainty, and preventing the development of displacement- and war-related trauma (including PTSD). Such practices also contribute to language learning, the formation of social capital, and preservation and strengthening of national and European self-identity. Recognizing the role of culture as a regulatory mechanism in the process of refugee adaptation and integration will help in due course to elaborate algorithms for targeted cultural intervention in the system of migration management.*

**Keywords:** refugees, forced migrants, cultural involvement, war trauma, adaptation, integration, identity, Europeanness.

The migration wave, triggered by Russia's war against Ukraine, brought nearly 8 million refugees to European countries (as of January 2023, UNHCR), placing on the agenda the issue of revising established migration policies and practices. In response to this unprecedented challenge, the European Union involved new mechanisms, among which was activation of the Temporary Protection Directive (TPD). Although adopted in 2001, the directive had never been applied earlier. Its activation made it possible to react swiftly to the emergency and effectively manage the massive influx of refugees by granting millions of people, fleeing Ukraine rapid access to basic rights and services in Europe.

Despite the overall effectiveness of the TPD, a number of challenges remain unaddressed by this temporary mechanism. In particular, the uneven

implementation of the Directive across EU member states has resulted in significant differences in the rights and opportunities available to displaced persons. Moreover, the absence of clear long-term perspectives once the TPD expires, creates considerable uncertainty among refugees, which directly affects their integration into host societies. And while the socio-political and economic aspects of integration are more frequently examined in academic research, the cultural dimension of integration requires particular attention.

In contemporary migration studies, there is a growing tendency to approach migration not merely as a consequence or reaction to complex political, economic, or demographic challenges, but rather as a multifaceted social process embedded within broader globalization dynamics. This perspective calls for a fundamental rethinking of migration governance in general (Triandafyllidou et al. 2023) given the clear statistical evidence that European societies have become migration societies (Sievers 2024, 2). The harmonious unfolding of this transformation depends, to a large extent, on the cultural inclusion of refugees within host societies.

The European legislative and regulatory documents, guiding cultural policy in the EU countries, demonstrate a gradual strengthening of the migration dimension (Keda 2025a). At the same time, this trend is less visible in Ukrainian cultural policy, which is currently undertaking significant and successful efforts to adopt its cultural industries to war-time challenges (UKF 2024, 14). In particular, the state Strategy for the Development of Culture in Ukraine for the period up to 2030 recognizes the need to adapt cultural practices to the conditions posed by martial law and its consequences, including organizing cultural events for military and internally displaced persons (IDPs) (Stratehiia 2025, 10). It notes the necessity of retraining the cultural organizations staff who were unprepared to interact with war veterans, IDPs and people experienced psychological trauma, which has complicated the use of culture as a tool of social adaptation (Stratehiia 2025, 2). Among the tasks of new Strategy are creation of cultural and artistic programmes for psychological support and social reintegration of war veterans, IDPs and other vulnerable groups as well as integration of cultural practices into programs of psychological support and mental health preservation (Stratehiia

2025, 29). However, except for EDPs there is no mention of potential role of culture for migrants in general and other categories of refugees in particular.

The need to strengthen the migration dimension within cultural policies and practices as well as to reinforce cultural dimension within migration policies in EU and in Ukraine highlights the importance of adopting an interdisciplinary approach. This, in turn, underlines the necessity of updating the national strategies in light of current migration processes and their impact on shaping of future cultural landscape of Ukraine as an integral part of the European cultural community.

The aim of the article is to explore the impact of cultural participation on psychological well-being, language acquisition and identity transformation in conditions of the forced displacement, using as a case study the experience of people, relocated from Ukraine due to the war. The detailed examination of the Ukrainian migrations case in this context may provide valuable insights for extrapolation to other potentially similar situations.

The methodological framework of this study was developed on the bases of interdisciplinary triangulation approach, incorporating research not only from migration and cultural policy studies but also from psychology (in particular trauma therapy), sociology and linguistics. It combines both theoretical and practical methods.

The empirical part of the research includes the data of the original author's study "Ukrainian Forced Migrants in the Cultural Policies of the European Union" (Keda 2025b), which employed a two-step approach, combining a quantitative survey with 524 respondents and qualitative semi-structured interviews with 56 participants. The target group of the survey consisted of temporarily displaced persons fleeing the war in Ukraine, who arrived to the European Union countries after February 23, 2022. The statistical data is complemented by evidences from 56 in-depth semi-structured interviews to gain a deeper understanding of the motivation behind the participants' life trajectories. All the interviews were conducted personally by the author through direct face-to-face communication with the interviewees in Italy, Poland, Czechia and Ukraine (the respondents from Ukraine were those who had already returned from Europe). Interviews with the majority of respondents from other EU countries were conducted online via Zoom.

Chronologically the survey was held from December 2022 to July 2023, geographically it covered all 27 EU countries and Ukraine.

The theoretical framework of the research involves conceptual approach and is based on the concepts *displaced persons, refugees, cultural practices, highbrow and lowbrow cultural activities*.

Using the term “refugees”, we acknowledge its complex and contested nature. Due to a strictly legal perspective it is necessary to differentiate between refugees, asylum seekers (EMN 2018), beneficiaries of temporary protection under the respective EU Directive (or similar national temporary protection schemes in non-EU countries) and internally displaced persons (often referred to as “internal refugees” (Onikiienko, Bratchenko, Prykhodko 2023, 257). However following a broader interpretative approach to the concept of refugees (Pasikowska-Schnass 2017), the latest version of Asylum and Migration Glossary (EMN 2018) as well as specific research on the legitimacy of applying this term “refugees” to persons covered by the TPD (Storey 2022), in this article this term is employed in its general umbrella sense, encompassing all the above mentioned categories of displaced persons.

The study also adopts UNESCO’s holistic approach to culture in the context of migration. Within this framework the term “cultural practices” is used to refer to a broad range of cultural events, arts, everyday activities, rituals and forms of expression, many of which are integral to a community’s identity and social cohesion while cultural participation refers to any activity that strengthens individual cultural and cognitive resources, supports identity formation and provides opportunities for self-expression (Nastoiashcha, Marutian, Sobolevska 2024). Refugee’s participation in cultural life is analyzed along two main dimensions. The first distinguishes between highbrow cultural activities (arts, theatre, concerts, sport events, museums, etc.) and more everyday lowbrow practices (visiting parks, gardens, leisure activities etc.) (Bertacchini et al. 2021). The second concerns the distinction between active and passive forms of engagement. Earlier studies demonstrate that even passive cultural consumption (via Internet, television or radio) as well as more participatory forms (such as mere attending music events, dancing or sport activities) can significantly enhance overall well-being (Edmonds, Roberts 2021; Venturini, Mosso, Ricci 2022; Klashorst 2024).

The primary source base of this publication consists of a set of policy documents in the field of cultural policy in Ukraine and the EU that explicitly incorporate a migration dimension (Keda 2025a) as well as a number of sociological reports (KMIS 2023; Chuprii, Nastoishcha, Marutian 2023; UTsKD 2025). The author's study contributes to this body of works by deepening existing theoretical and practical insights and by specifying the needs of Ukrainian refugees in EU countries in particular (Keda 2025b).

Secondary sources include a range of Ukrainian and international studies. The importance of cultural participation for displaced persons at wartime is widely recognized by experts. The annexation of Crimea and the occupation of Donbas caused forced migration and the emergence of internally displaced persons in Ukraine, whose number reached nearly 2 million by 2021 (IOM 2021). Since 2014 Ukrainian researchers have been actively analyzing the specifics of psychological adaptation of IDPs, emphasizing the need to create a supportive socio-cultural environment and targeted psychological support for the successful integration of displaced persons into new communities (e.g. Krashchenko, Sorokina, Bolovatska 2018; Ishchuk, Lukasevych 2019; Yurkiv, Lukanov 2021).

In further studies that appeared with full-scale invasion (e.g. Mykhailych 2023; Bilenka 2024; Chuprii, Nastoishcha, Marutian 2023; Didkovska, Didkovskyi 2024) the positive role of cultural and social activity in the process of integration of displaced persons is increasingly emphasized. The acknowledgment of the role of culture in circumstances of war is also evidenced by systematic comprehensive research conducted in Ukraine both prior to the full-scale invasion and afterwards (Chuprii, Skokova, Nastoishcha 2021; Chuprii, Nastoishcha, Marutian 2023; Nastoishcha, Marutian, Sobolevska 2024). In the 2023 wave of the study the authors identified several cluster groups and provided a comparative analyses of attitudes towards different types of cultural practices (low-brow and high-brow) among various categories of displaced persons, including those internally displaced from occupied and non-occupied territories, as well as those, who left Ukraine (Chuprii, Nastoishcha, Marutian 2023). Researchers also focused on institutional instruments and agents of influence: impact of socio-cultural projects on the adaptation of internally displaced persons and the development

of social entrepreneurship in the context of the Russian-Ukrainian war (Onikiienko, Bratchenko, Prykhodko 2023); the advantages of involving intercultural assistants in the adaptation of Ukrainian children who were forced to emigrate to Poland (Tashkinova 2023) etc.

While Ukrainian researchers naturally pay more attention to IDPs, European researchers focus on the practices of Ukrainian refugees who have fled to EU countries. The impact of cultural activities on refugee adaptation is well recognized in the established tradition in foreign research. Given the large number of scientific works on various sociocultural, psychological and migration studies, we've selected those that are most relevant to our theme and grouped them into two blocks. The first block is presented by interdisciplinary studies devoted to analyzing the impact of cultural events on refugee's well-being (Berry 1997; Pasikowska-Schnass 2017; Bertacchini et al. 2021; Zbranca et al. 2022; Giovanis 2025). World Health Organization (WHO) reviewed the literature on this issue and summarized how different arts activities can positively affect psychological, social and behavioral processes (WHO 2022). Researchers focus on building resilience among the displaced population, offering a sociocultural perspective that explains trauma as a collective experience closely linked to culture and social environment (Theisen-Womersley 2021); consider numerous aspects of integration, basing on European examples and regard the role of governing authorities at national, regional and local levels (McGregor, Ragab 2016); analyze the process of migrant's socialization by means of culture (Apostol 2018). Such studies demonstrate that both active and passive engagement with arts and cultural activities can support the mental well-being of people who have been experienced a trauma of displacement. The second block consists of scholarship that focus specifically on the Ukrainian case. However, it should be noted that there is no single comprehensive research, but rather a number of specialized studies devoted to various specific aspects (Synowiec 2022; Carrera, Ineli-Ciger 2023; Długosz 2023; Kraby et al. 2025).

Overall, international research generally illustrates interdisciplinary approach and successful models of integrating cultural practices from other fields (ex. psychology) into migration management. Therefore the detailed analyses presented in this articles on the benefits, that participation in cultural

activities offers to Ukrainian refugees, provide a foundation for further research and policy development that takes into account both the adaptive and integrative potential of culture. In turn, this may contribute to the design of more coherent and sustainable strategies for managing migration processes in general in the context of contemporary geopolitical crises.

### **Results of the research and discussion**

The Ukrainian case of forced migration in 2022–2023 demonstrates a number of specific features that distinguish it from previous instances of forced displacement in Europe. The majority of displaced persons are women, accounting for approximately 90%. The results of the survey evidence that 61.3% of female respondents are displaced persons with children in their care. Of these, 26.9% have two or more children. 18.1% care for elderly individuals with whom they live and who require assistance (Keda 2025b, 12). The majority of respondents — 77,8% are 25–54 years, 11,5% are youth (18–24 years), 10,7% — are above 55 years old. 45,2% of respondents pointed that they were employed (Keda 2025b).

The “female face” of the Ukrainian forced migration case particularly justifies the involvement of cultural instruments for regulation of the current European migration crisis, as it is proved that cultural participation can bring women more outcomes, comparable to men. Women in general are more inclined to war stress and trauma and face more acute obstacles to social integration (Berry 1997, 22; Lauren, Dumont 2023, 4) and at the same time they are more active participants of high-brow activities such as classical concerts, operas, theatre, art museums (Christin 2012; UTsKD 2025) which bring to participant more significant outcomes. One more important aspect, which enhanced our interest to the cultural instruments, is the recent finding that Ukrainian migrants in Italy demonstrate very high to the highest predicted probabilities for cultural participation among 16 nationalities: the first place for visiting theatres and concerts, the second place for cinema and sports events, third for dancing venues (Bertacchini, Venturini, Zotti 2022, Fig. 2).

The results of the study evidence that after displacement to Europe the number of cultural events attended by refugees from Ukraine dropped notably: those, who used to attend 2–3 times a month in Ukraine reported

a decline of almost 14 %, while individuals who participated at least once a week experienced an even steeper drop — nearly one third. The most culturally active group remains youth aged 18–24. Among all the listed activities, respondents were most involved in visits to parks and leisure areas (81.3%), visits to historical places, palaces, fortresses, cathedrals, and monuments (72.1%), visits to museums, exhibitions, and galleries (59.7%), attending educational events (52.9%), visits to the zoo (43.5%), reading books in Ukrainian (43.1%), attending theaters (42.4%), concerts (38.2%), and cinema (33.4%) (Keda 2025b, 16, 17, 47).

Participation in cultural practices provides refugees with multidimensional benefits, ranging from individual psychological well-being to social, linguistic, educational and economic domains. Yet any rigid hierarchization of these outcomes may seem relative as it much depends on the context of displacement, conditions in the host country and personal experience (ex. different language-factor importance in case of internal displacement, the type of trauma and extent to which it was proceeded). The significance of factors also vary for individuals originating from regions with different levels of safety and having different experience of crises (Cohan 2022). Acknowledging that migration is a topic marked by a high level of social complexity (Triandafyllidou et al. 2023), the Ukrainian war-time case particularly exemplifies it. It encompasses diverse push and pull factors, from urgent evacuation from besieged or occupied arrears to more deliberate well-considered decisions, made without haste but still under war-related pressures. Consequently, the conditions and effects from participation in cultural practices can not be reduced to a universal model or ranked hierarchy, which is why this article treats them as interrelated rather than stratified.

Recent refugee studies emphasizes the fundamental importance of *psychological well-being* in shaping readiness for integration. Anxiety, trauma and prolonged uncertainty can severely undermine motivation and discourage participation in both social and cultural life. For this reason, we place the psychological outcomes at the forefront of our analyses.

This publication does not aim to delve into detailed psychiatric terminology, rather it provides an overview at the level of general categories, commonly used in the socio-cultural and migration studies. Accordingly, the author

relies on the concept of “trauma” understanding it as multidimensional and multilayered, “multiple trauma” (Synowiec 2022; Kraby et al. 2025). In discussing the value of cultural participation for coping with trauma, it is rational to abstract from the specific manifestations of trauma to its conceptual understanding, considering it not only as personal experience or psychological reaction in the context of war, but also as the outcome of broader geopolitical processes, including securitized migration policies, colonial practices and global migration governance (Ehrkamp, Loyd, Secor 2021; Theisen-Womersley 2021). Taking into consideration that trauma-focused approaches often neglect cultural variables and that the concept of “psychological distress” may serve as a more culturally grounded idiom (Cohen 2022), for this publication we involved only those trauma-focused scholarship, which include vivid cultural dimension.

After displacement to Europe Ukrainians attended cultural events significantly less frequently and in this context *complicated psychological mood* was pointed as the third-rate obstacle (after language and economic ones) to participation in cultural activities — among 26,9% of respondents. This figure has slight variations in several (up to 5) percent between age categories, being the highest (32,1%) among the senior category (above 55), and a bit lower (24,5%) among employed (Keda 2025b, 30–31). One more factor we’ve considered in prioritizing psychological aspect for the analyses of outcomes is that during interviews our respondents often initiated detailed description of psychological issues (such as high level of stress, low mood etc.) rather than mentioning language and economic barriers.

“I did not ever want to move to Europe, I wanted to live in my native country. But the war forced me to move. Therefore, the psychological discomfort was higher. ...I was in a very bad psychological condition, and it was so good that they had found a psychologist from Ukraine who worked with me... not with me, but with a group of Ukrainians, ten sessions for free and offered more in case of need. When these sessions were held, the psychological state improved a lot. I didn't even believe in the power of psychologists so much.” (Svitlana, Spain)

Numerous European studies mention that many Ukrainian refugees in EU countries experience mental suffering, which is a result of the accumulated stress. Resent research in Poland has highlighted the high

prevalence of PTSD among Ukrainian war refugees (Długosz 2023; Bilewicz, Babińska, Gromova 2024). One of our respondents who was forced to flee Bucha under tragic circumstances in the period of its occupation, regret that didn't have an opportunity to get psychological assistance at her first stay in Europe. Finding herself in constrained conditions (alone with a school-aged child in a small settlement far from a city, with limited internet access) she decided to return to Ukraine and then moved to Latvia.

“So, I reflect on my stay in [country 1] and my stay in Latvia and Ukraine, and I understand that, well, yes, when we arrived to [country 1], we arrived right in the midst of active hostilities in Bucha, so we actually fled from there, and our stay in [country] was not perceived as we would have liked it to be. Yes, we went out, we walked ... around the city, but I can say that we did not see the city. Because when we arrived in Riga, we walked around on our own and with a guide — it was a completely different experience and a completely different perception. As it was preceded by psychological assistance. This assistance was organised for us as mothers by a Latvian foundation. That is, separate assistance was organised for the children. These were psychotherapeutic measures.... It was very important for everyone. And in particular, after these, so to say “therapies” after several sessions, everything began to be perceived in a completely different way. And if there had been similar psychological assistance for people in the [country 1] at that time, perhaps things would have been different. But unfortunately, maybe it was impossible to do, I don't know, because there was a very active influx of people from Ukraine and maybe it was impossible to organise and implement, because you need specialists, people, premises and it was extremely challenging under the conditions of the large-scale displacement at that period.” (Lilia, Latvia)

It indicates the strong need to provide newcomers an access to mental health facilities at the first stage of their adaptation. For this category of refugees, a psychological support is a vital factor for arousing their desire to participate in cultural activities and further successful integration. In this aspect it is also crucial to emphasise to refugees the importance of communication in general and of engaging with psychologists in particular, as seeking psychological help remains significantly stigmatized in Ukrainian society (Kraby et al. 2025). Overcoming psychological distress is a crucial prerequisite for ensuring effective adaptation.

Involvement of refugees with vivid war-trauma into cultural activities may yield a number of substantial mental health benefits. In particular, the study

of the World Health Organization summarizes different psychological, behavioural and social outcomes, underlining that arts activities can improve self-confidence, promote healthy behaviours as well as social inclusion and, importantly, offer hope (WHO 2022, 5). Artistic activities are recognized as valuable instruments in therapeutic contexts, because they support self-esteem, allow for the expression of emotions and aid in processing traumatic experience. Through creative methods, refugees are provided with the opportunities to explore, recognize and articulate their feeling and experiences associated with violence and displacement (McGregor, Ragab 2016, 8). Medical research recognizes participation in cultural activities as an important component for improving mood within the framework of complex, multidisciplinary rehabilitation (Bilewicz, Babińska, Gromova 2024; Kraby et al. 2025). Mentioned above effects were also widely noted by our respondents:

“We went to the zoo. The atmosphere there, with the children and the animals, was fun and enjoyable. It certainly improved my mental state and that of my child. There is no doubt about that.” (Lilia, Czechia)

“At first, I chose painting, but next year I also want to take up ceramics. And art really helps a lot in coping with stress. Really a lot... with stress. With some emotional disorders that, unfortunately, we have now. And... yes, it helps.” (Ksenia, Belgium)

“The concerts were related to the war, but it definitely diverted, added new colors to life, some feeling of returning, because the dominance of one thought, actually, the blockade to perceive that it was really happening, was very powerful.” (Iryna, Cyprus)

Therefore, many researchers emphasize the need to integrate cultural contexts into the development and implementation of mental health and psychosocial support programs for displaced persons (Kraby et al. 2025; Cohen 2022).

In the context of revising methodological approaches to the study of migration within the psychological dimension the factor of *uncertainty* requires particular attention as it adds an additional layer of vulnerability for persons displaced from Ukraine. Uncertainty is not unique to the Ukrainian migration case, it is a common circumstance of forced displacement (Olwig 2021). Refugee populations are subject to multiple temporal tensions:

while the decision to flee violence, threat or persecution is often abrupt, with mounting danger limiting the time available for warning or planning, the journey towards places of destination (and transit) are typically prolonged, fragmented, and unpredictable (Abranches, Jaber 2024). However in the Ukrainian context uncertainty is amplified by the specific design of the EU Temporary Protection Directive (Triandafyllidou 2022; Carrera, Ineli-Ciger 2023) which grants security but without clarity regarding long-term perspectives. Empirical evidence from the author's survey illustrates the scope of this phenomenon: 33.4% of respondents found it difficult to answer whether they planned to return to Ukraine, 24.4% tied their decision to the end of war — a horizon, marked by fundamental uncertainty (Keda 2025b, 15).

Recent research stated that higher tolerance of uncertainty can serve as a protective factor against adverse environmental stressors that elevate PTSD symptoms in a traumatized population (Bilewicz, Babińska, Gromova 2024). In this aspect, participation in cultural practices allows displaced persons to expand planning horizons, identify islands of stability and familiarity, strengthen their sense of personal control and reinforce their perception of future.

The next sphere that can gain significant benefits from refugees' participation in cultural practices is language learning. *Language proficiency* is widely recognized as one of the most crucial factors of integration, acculturation, mental health and the development of communication skills (Synowiec 2022, 376; Kovács et al. 2023; Barker et al. 2024). Arts and cultural practices can play a dual role in this context: they promote non-verbal communication and intercultural dialog, while also supporting language acquisition (McGregor, Ragab 2016, 7). Findings from our survey confirm this significance. The study revealed among the immediate factors that limit or prevent displaced persons from participating in cultural events in the host country, 50.6% identified insufficient language proficiency as the most serious barrier. This percentage is even higher among youth (ages 18-24), reaching 65%. In the interviews many respondents confirmed that lack of language skills prevented them from attending events that required high language competences (e.g. films or theater performances which were not accompanied by translation). However many noted that participating in events with local

populations gave them the opportunity to start practicing local language, using the simplest words and phrases. While some respondents did not dare to communicate due to the lack of language skills, others gave examples of reaching out and trying to interact literally with gestures (as one respondent jokingly named “by miming” (“*на міжак*”). Several respondents mentioned examples of non-verbal communication as a good practice to overcome fear and start expressing themselves.

“Children, who didn’t know Lithuanian — they still managed to find a common language... I was with my daughter and granddaughter. She is five years old. And Lithuanian kids came to us. Children didn’t know the language at all. And they were just standing there, kind of lost. And the older children also seemed somehow confused. But she, such a little one just jumped up and said, “Let’s play. You don’t understand, so I’ll show you! Like this! Close your eyes.” And she showed them that they should play hide-and-seek and then run together. The children understood, and they started this game. This is what I want to say — It was just wonderful indeed. (Lithuania, Yevheniia)

For EDPs the language barrier does not play such a decisive role, yet for the Ukrainian war migration case it may still carry an important weight, considering the regional specifics of the use of Ukrainian and Russian languages and their perception across regions, which can still influence cultural participation. Research on the impact of participation of IDPs in cultural projects in Ukraine during war-time evidence the noticeable change in language self-identification towards increasing usage of national language (Onikiienko, Bratchenko, Prykhodko 2023).

At the initial stages of integration language support (through interpretation, cultural mediators and conversation partners) is essential for adaptation (especially if rehabilitation is needed) (Kraby et al. 2025). For this reasons, diverse cultural language-oriented programmers are particularly valuable as they equip refugees with practical tools for effective communication and navigation of their every-day life. They reduce cultural isolation and open pathways for active participation in the host society’s cultural life, thereby strengthening both well-being and integration. Overall, language competence is more than a technical skill. It increases employment opportunities and contributes to stability and security, builds self-confidence, reinforces

a sense of belonging. For example, one of the respondents described the impact of not knowing the language on her sense of identity in the following way:

“Being a refugee, a forced migrant — it’s different. ... When I come here as a tourist, I understand everything... I feel completely on the same level as people here, sure. The cultural sphere, the leisure activities — they are familiar and understandable to me... But as a temporary migrant — I don’t feel like a full-fledged European, equal to the Europeans who live here permanently. Because I do not know fully the Czech language. Yes, I know English and I can communicate easily, but not everyone here speaks English. So the language barrier is a major barrier for me now, in terms of my engagement with life here and in how I feel like a full-fledged European.” (Anna, Czechia).

*Transformation of identities* (both, of displaced and of representatives of host societies) through shared participation in culture and arts has been attracting growing scholarly interest. Above all, active cultural participation fosters strengthening of refugees’ identity and preservation of national culture (Apostol 2018, 88; Chuprii, Nastoiashcha, Marutian 2023). The level of national identity among the respondents of the study reaches 98.1%, surpassing the corresponding indicators among the population of different regions in Ukraine. Having found themselves in Europe, the displaced persons reported a particular intensification of identity awareness. For example, one of our respondents even noted that moving abroad itself became a catalyst for strengthening her sense of national identity:

“I would definitely say that I am Ukrainian, and being in Europe, I may never have thought so much about being Ukrainian, but I understood 100 percent that I am a Ukrainian, although a lot of things that I saw, say, regarding tolerance, regarding the attitude towards people of other nationalities — they really appeal to me. But still, it seems to me that I felt to a certain extent more that I am Ukrainian.” (Bohdana, Italy).

Many respondents spoke with emotion about how surprisingly little Europeans know about Ukraine. In the study 78.4% of respondents underlined it to varying degrees (Keda 2025b, 43).

“I think they know very little (about Ukraine). They don’t know that we have a sea, that we have mountains. They have no idea about the size of our country.” (Natalia, Estonia)

“They know almost nothing about Ukraine. The stereotypes about Ukraine, shaped by Russian propaganda dating back to the Soviet Union, are well known.” (Kateryna, Netherlands)

“This war will make Europe rethink its attitude. The main conclusion, which is clear, is that we have become less associated with Russia, and this identification is taking place. This is really important.” (Iryna, Cyprus)

Accordingly, many interviewees pointed the necessity to promote the image of Ukraine through shared initiative. In general, many Ukrainian refugees took proactive role in sociocultural life of hosting communities. 27,7% of our respondents reported that they initiated various activities on Ukrainian cultural issues: organised joint events, exhibitions, concerts, Christmas evenings, introduced to locals Ukrainian culinary traditions (such as baking Easter cakes or cooking borsch), and promoted Ukrainian culture in multiple other ways. Such initiatives deserve special targeted support as they foster preservation of national culture and influence refugees’ return from abroad (Chuprii, Nastoishcha, Marutian 2023, 137).

It is not only refugees who undergo identity transformation in a new socio-cultural environment — through active cultural participation they also influence representatives of hosting communities, shaping new perception both of themselves and of the incoming migrants. As noted in recent studies, Ukrainian forced migrants have significantly influenced Europeans’ perception of the very concept of a “refugee” (De Coninck 2022; Hargrave, Homel, Dražanová 2023; Das 2025, 51–52), shifting the focus from perceiving it as a threat to recognizing it as an opportunity. The warm acceptance of Ukrainian refugees by European countries in 2022 became a real phenomenon and the subject of scientific discourse. Scholars in the analyses of positive narratives around Ukrainians mention that they are rooted in the sense of cultural and historical proximity of Europeans and Ukrainians (Hargrave, Homel, Dražanová 2023; Das 2025).

Expanding this perspective, it is worth considering the increasing level of Europeanness among Ukrainians. The correlation analyses of European and national identities in the authors’ research revealed that the level of Europeanness among Ukrainians in 2023 reached the highest point of 51% throughout the post-independence period. This figure is even higher

in the EU, where 81% of Ukrainian refugees felt totally or partially European (Keda, 2024). Sharing common European values definitely favor more fast and smooth integration of Ukrainian refugees into the European society in comparison to other ethnic groups.

Mutual influence and interplay of the analyzed above factors may act as an additional determining outcome, shaping the direction, timing and duration of migration. Access to cultural participation can significantly modify migration processes: accelerating, slowing down, redirecting or even halting them (Edmonds, Roberts 2021). Cultural engagement facilitates faster acculturation and integration, thereby reducing the risk of further relocation.

### **Conclusions**

After forced relocation to Europe engagement in cultural practices among people, displaced from Ukraine has significantly decreased. Meanwhile research shows that active involvement in cultural activities helps refugees cope with stress, overcome war-trauma, prevents the development of PTSD and anxiety (which are particularly evident under conditions of uncertainty). It also fosters language acquisition and strengthens the sense of belonging. Refugees' initiatives to organize joint events with the host society as well as overall participation in cultural activities and active self-expression contribute not only to the improvement the well-being, but also reinforce both national and European identity. By sharing stories about their country, its traditions and history, Ukrainian refugees have, in fact, become cultural ambassadors, which is a vivid example of a bottom-up approach in cultural policy.

Ensuring access to cultural participation is essential for achieving mentioned outcomes, as it fosters inclusion supports refugees' further adaptation and integration into the host society. Therefore, cultural practices should become an integral component of migration management, while cultural policy should strengthen and expand its migration dimension. This applies not only to EU countries, but also to Ukraine, which faces a significant number of internally displaces persons.

Access to cultural activities for persons, displaced from Ukraine is currently provided unevenly across EU countries, highlighting the need

for more harmonized approaches to ensure equal cultural participation rights. Accordingly, actors involved in migration governance — both in Europe and Ukraine — should recognize and incorporate cultural practices as a powerful tool in migration management, particularly by actively promoting engagement in cultural activities among the displaced population.

Ultimately, taking into consideration the outcomes of refugees' participation in cultural practices has the potential to shape the future of migration policies and practices while culture itself becomes an institutional moderator of migration-related decisions. In a broader sense, these findings can be extended to other migration cases, as forced displacement encompasses various contexts across different countries.

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## **СОЦІОКУЛЬТУРНА АДАПТАЦІЯ УКРАЇНСЬКИХ БІЖЕНЦІВ У ЄС: РОЛЬ КУЛЬТУРНИХ ЗАХОДІВ**

*Міграційна криза, спричинена війною Росії проти України стала найбільшою в Європі з часів Другої світової війни. Умови невизначеності, виразне «жіноче обличчя» стали визначальними особливостями цього кейсу, поставивши на порядок денний розроблення нових стратегій міграційного управління. Якщо правові та соціально-економічні чинники міграційного менеджменту є предметом постійної уваги науковців, то культурний складник зазвичай залишається недостатньо вивченим та оціненим. Стаття має на меті дослідити вплив залучення українських біженців у ЄС до культурного життя на їхнє психологічне благополуччя, опанування мови та трансформацію ідентичності. Методологічну основу роботи представлено поєднанням методів теоретичного та емпіричного дослідження за участі*

524 респондентів з 27 країн ЄС, із якими було записано 56 напівструктурованих інтерв'ю, проведених у період 2022–2023 рр. Теоретичні підходи застосовувалися для аналізу джерельної бази та наукової літератури, у яких висвітлюється позитивний вплив культурних інтервенцій у практики роботи з вимушеними мігрантами. В ході соціологічного дослідження встановлювався вплив участі в культурних і творчих заходах на адаптацію осіб, переміщених з України. Було виявлено істотне зниження частоти відвідування культурних заходів у приймаючих країнах та виділені основні перешкоди для участі в культурних заходах. У результаті аналізу даних емпіричного дослідження було встановлено, що різномірні культурні практики мають для українських біженців найбільш позитивний ефект у таких тісно взаємопов'язаних сферах як: подолання стресу, управління відчуттям невизначеності, упередження розвитку воєнної травми (включаючи ПТСР) і травми переміщення, сприяють вивченню мови, формуванню соціального капіталу, збереженню і зміцненню національної та європейської ідентичності. Обґрунтування ролі культури як регулятивного механізму в процесах адаптації та інтеграції біженців дозволить надалі розробляти та конкретизувати алгоритми культурних інтервенцій у систему міграційного менеджменту.

**Ключові слова:** біженці, вимушені мігранти, культурна залученість, воєнна травма, адаптація, інтеграція, ідентичність, європейськість.

**Конфлікт інтересів**

Автор заявляє про відсутність конфлікту інтересів щодо публікації цього рукопису. Крім того, автор повністю дотримувався етичних норм, зокрема щодо уникнення плагіату, фальсифікації даних і дублювання публікацій. У роботі не використано ресурси штучного інтелекту.

**Conflict of Interest**

The author declares the absence of any conflict of interest regarding the publication of this manuscript. In addition, the author has fully adhered to ethical standards, including the avoidance of plagiarism, data falsification, and redundant (duplicate) publication.

No artificial intelligence tools were used in the preparation of this work.

*Дата першого надходження статті до видання: 02.01.2026.*

*Date of the article's initial submission to the Journal: 02.01.2026.*

*Дата прийняття статті до друку після рецензування: 22.02.2026.*

*Date of acceptance of the article for publication after peer review: 22.02.2026.*

*Дата публікації: 20.03.2026.*

*Date of publication: 20.03.2026.*