

Overcoming the language barrier for Ukrainian refugees

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Summary

Due to Russia's war in Ukraine, Ukrainian refugees have spread across various countries in Europe. But staying in a foreign country is a challenge, especially regarding the local language. According to data from multiple OECD countries, **language barriers are among the most common hurdles Ukrainians face when fleeing to a new country.**¹ This matter affects not only their access to the labour market but also their handling of day-to-day tasks, including visiting stores, consulting doctors, studying at school, and much more. Undoubtedly, learning the local language is in the interests of refugees. However, the study process takes time, and refugees still face daily situations with the need to use the local language.

Background

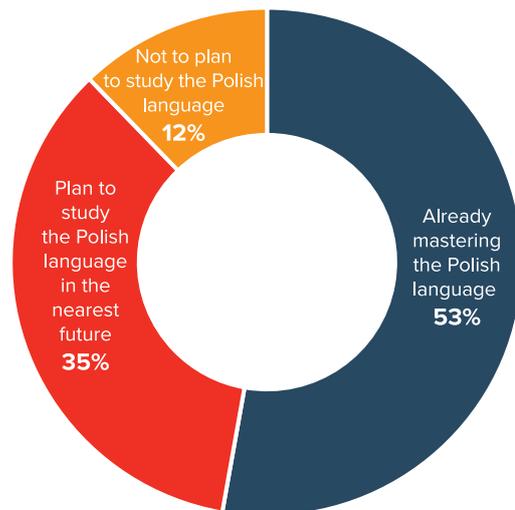
Refugees are exposed to more threats to their lives when they do not speak the local language. For example, 1/5 of Ukrainian refugees in the Czech Republic could not visit a doctor because of the language barrier, even though they needed medical help. In Poland, 45% of Ukrainians face a language barrier and are limited from benefiting from social services, while in Germany, this number rises to 55%².

One of the reasons for that is there is a lack of doctors, teachers and other personnel who can provide services to Ukrainian refugees in a language other than the local one.

This issue is complex and challenging. From one side, difficulties include not only the absence of resources such as personnel, manuals, and teaching books, but refugees are also forced to learn local languages or, at least, another commonly known language, such as English or French, which takes time.

Many private, volunteer, and even governmental initiatives are aimed at helping refugees study the local or commonly spoken language. These initiatives offer different platforms, courses or other kinds of assistance for different life situations. But, all these initiatives lack coordination and, in most cases, are not enough to cover the demand for studying languages.

Figure 1. Number of Ukrainian ready to study Polish language in Poland.



Source: Gremi Personal

Moreover, some Ukrainians do not study local languages, stating that their knowledge of their native language is enough for dealing with day-to-day chores. This number varies from country to country; for example, in Poland, 68% of employed refugees from Ukraine can use the Ukrainian language at work, while in Germany, this number is a much smaller 16%.³ Still, many Ukrainians are studying local languages - 52.8% of Ukrainians employed in Poland are mastering the Polish language to get a better job later there. 35% plan to study Polish in the near future, while 12.2% believe they do not need the language knowledge to provide themselves with a decent standard of living (Figure 1).⁴

1 <https://www.americansecurityproject.org/the-integration-of-ukrainian-refugees-into-the-eu/>

2 Platforma Migracyjna EWL та Studium Europy Wschodniej Warszawskiego uniwersytetu

3 Same as above

4 <https://gremi-personal.com.ua/skilki-ukrainskih-bizhenciv-vzhe-vchat-polsku-movu-opituvannya/>

Figure 2. Increase in demand of learning Ukrainian language in Europe.



Source: Duolingo

There are some countries where a local population widely learns the Ukrainian language, mostly in the neighbouring countries, such as Poland and Romania, as well as in the Baltic countries of Estonia and Latvia.⁵ According to Duolingo service, Ukrainian is currently most learned in Poland, the UK, Germany, the Czech Republic, Ireland and the Netherlands.⁶ (Figure 2).

Still, in the short run, refugees may need ongoing language interpretation or other kinds of support to interact more fruitfully with the inhabitants of host countries. One of the efficient measures is to provide as much language data in Ukrainian to and from all EU languages as possible for European Commission automatic translation systems⁷. However, this system's usage is likely not suitable for day-to-day use for private household issues.

Solving the language issue for Ukrainian refugees should be viewed from two points of view: in the short-term, as there are many qualified workers able to provide necessary services to Ukrainians in their native language, and in the long-term, in the context of the refugee's further integration into hosting economies.

Recommendations

The possible measures to consider *for the hosting countries* are:

- To involve more Ukrainians in providing social services, primarily medical workers and teachers. They should be involved in providing both translation and assistance. This measure will allow

them to use their language skills while also gaining employment in the process;

- Encourage private businesses to involve Ukrainian-speaking refugees in communication facilitation at different levels. The encourage measures might differ from some tax benefits to some free advertisement with a unique 'sign/status/award';
- Extend the accessibility for language courses as the demand is high, but not all refugees can enrol in the courses. These courses might also include the study of the Ukrainian language by the host country population due to significant demand from them;
- Elaborate 'transitional' or 'adaptation' programmes for schools and universities with the study of a local language. These initiatives would take effect at mid-term perspective (2-3 years) and have an additional impact by providing workplaces for Ukrainian refugees and would facilitate their integration, all while promoting closer EU-Ukraine ties in the future;
- Elaborate on the 'train the trainers' programmes, which would be useful in further process of European integration of Ukraine and solve the possible language barrier brake in Ukraine's future EU integration;
- Elaborate and ensure the proper functioning of a common EU-Ukrainian database of interpreters and translators;

for Ukrainian authorities:

- Elaborate complex programmes with the Ukrainian diaspora for the development of the influence of Ukrainians over Europe and beyond, including the facilitation measures from the diaspora to study both local languages for Ukrainians and Ukrainian language for people of hosting countries, including elaboration standardized study programmes to be transferred to EU countries by diaspora;
- The study of foreign languages should be announced as a political priority. In particular, amendments to Ukrainian school programmes are needed, presuming an obligatory study of English or other wide-spoken languages, such as French, Spanish or German, with further certification.

⁵ <https://www.worlddata.info/languages/ukrainian.php>

⁶ <https://blog.duolingo.com/2022-duolingo-language-report/#language-learners-rally-behind-ukraine>

⁷ https://commission.europa.eu/resources-partners/machine-translation-public-administrations-etranlation_en