

JOINT STATEMENT
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RECOVERY STARTS WITH PEOPLE:
Integrating Return Policy into Ukraine's Rights-Based, Human-Centred and
Social Cohesion-Oriented Recovery and Protection Policy
for War-Affected Populations

Ukraine's recovery starts with people – with protecting human rights, dignity, and well-being of those affected by the war in Ukraine.

Ukraine's return policy should be integrated into a broader recovery and protection strategy that enables war-affected populations to rebuild their lives through legal security, access to economic opportunities, and social and support services. Such an approach would enable people to make informed decisions about their future while strengthening social cohesion and resilience in local communities.

Twelve years of war in Ukraine, including more than four years of full-scale invasion, have caused a profound and cumulative humanitarian impact on the civilian population. Ongoing hostilities, continued attacks impacting infrastructure essential for the well-being of the civilian population, and nearly one-fifth of Ukraine's territory under occupation continue to shape mobility dynamics, displacement patterns and return prospects. At the end of April 2026, around [5.8](#) million refugees from Ukraine were recorded globally. In the EU [4.4](#) million people who fled Ukraine were under temporary protection, with the largest numbers in Germany (1.3 million), Poland (1 million), and Czechia (0.4 million). The current EU-level protection framework remains in force until [March 4, 2027](#). At the same time, an estimated [1.4](#) million refugees from Ukraine have returned, remaining in Ukraine for at least three months since February 2022.

The demographic and economic implications of the war are staggering. Ukraine's GDP fell by [29.1%](#) in 2022, and the economy remains substantially [below pre-February 2022 levels](#). Recovery and reconstruction needs are now estimated at nearly [588](#) billion US dollars. Ukraine's labour market is increasingly defined by a [wartime paradox](#): persistent unemployment coexists with acute shortages of workers and skills. This imbalance is deepened by [long-term demographic decline](#) and a possible labour deficit of [4.5](#) million workers over the next decade. [Displacement has become both a humanitarian and a protection crisis and a key structural factor](#) shaping Ukraine's recovery capacity, demographic resilience, labour market functioning, local development, social protection system, and long-term reconstruction.

The transition from temporary protection presents a major legal, protection, and coordination challenge for the EU institutions, EU Member States, and the Government of Ukraine. For many Ukrainians abroad, the very prospect of the termination of temporary protection is already creating legal uncertainty and disruptions in access to rights, services and social support. This may undermine

conditions for voluntary and informed return. As the EU temporary protection framework will require a [managed transition](#), a transparent and rights-protective approach is needed, including grace periods and accessible pathways to alternative residence statuses. These safeguards are necessary to prevent pressure on asylum systems, exploitation, and the exacerbation of vulnerabilities, and to reduce information gaps and growing fears of being forced to return before safety and realistic reintegration are in place. The transition from temporary protection, whether towards alternative residence statuses or return to Ukraine, therefore requires **coordinated policy planning and shared responsibility among the EU, EU Member States, the Government of Ukraine, municipalities, civil society organisations, the private sector, and donors.**

A separate policy track for Ukrainians developed by the Government of Ukraine abroad could deepen divisions between them and returnees, internally displaced persons, residents of the temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine and other war-affected groups. In March, April, and June 2026, the Government of Ukraine, in cooperation with partner EU Member States, launched Unity Hubs in [Prague](#), [Berlin](#), and [Stockholm](#). These hubs form part of an emerging institutional infrastructure to maintain ties with Ukrainians abroad, provide information and support informed decision-making on future stay, engagement with Ukraine or possible return. At the same time, the Government of Ukraine is developing an [Action Plan for 2026-2027 to Respond to Challenges Related to the Possible Termination of Temporary Protection for Ukrainian Citizens in the European Union](#).

These initiatives should be synchronised with Ukraine's housing, employment, demographic, regional development, and internal displacement policies and incorporated into a broader ecosystem of recovery and human rights protection. The system should avoid parallel or duplicated measures of support and **ensure coherent, needs-based, conflict-sensitive and trauma-responsive assistance grounded in respect for people's diverse experiences of war and displacement.** The development of the Network of Unity Hubs for Ukrainians should be implemented through a **standardised operational model that ensures consistent service quality and effective referral** to Ukrainian and host-country institutions, municipalities and civil society organisations - service providers. Beyond providing information on return, **the hubs should support human capital recovery, economic integration and long-term engagement with Ukraine.**

An effective return and reintegration policy requires a coherent data framework that reflects return dynamics from abroad, people's evolving socio-economic needs, and reintegration outcomes. At present, a [clear legal definition and criteria for "returnee" and "reintegration" are needed](#) to support policy design, service delivery, and the integration of return policy into a broader protection framework for war-affected populations. A **rights-based national monitoring system should be established** by the Government of Ukraine, in cooperation with the EU Member States, **to track return intentions, actual return dynamics, return and reintegration needs, local service capacity, and reintegration outcomes** across different displacement-affected groups. This could facilitate better alignment between people's return intentions, professional profiles, labour-market demand, available services, and the real capacity of territorial communities to provide long-term reintegration support.

The return policy will fail if it focuses solely on movement back to Ukraine rather than on creating the conditions that make return and reintegration safe, viable, and sustainable. [Return intentions have become increasingly complex](#) and are shaped by both security and socio-economic factors. Key factors include access to affordable housing, sufficient income, real employment opportunities, clear and predictable administrative procedures, medical care, social and care services for families, legal assistance, psychological support, and education. Equally important are social cohesion, community acceptance, and meaningful inclusion in local life. Return decisions depend on reliable information and complex support at every stage. They must be available across the displacement pathway: while people remain abroad, when they plan and undertake return, and after arrival in Ukraine. At the local level, functioning local services and tailored reintegration support are essential for sustainable return. The profile of displaced Ukrainians should therefore be a central consideration in the design of return and recovery policies. Refugees from Ukraine are [predominantly women and children](#), [highly educated](#) and [economically active](#), with significant professional experience, qualifications, entrepreneurial potential, transnational networks, and language competencies that have been strengthened by their displacement. **A coordinated approach to returns should provide an integrated needs-based and individualised reintegration pathway that responds to people's specific life circumstances. It should be designed to address legal, social, labour market, and administrative barriers. In parallel, Ukraine should ensure the recognition and mobilisation of the professional experience, skills and networks developed abroad, turning them into a resource for recovery and future development.**

Return raises specific challenges for people with complex health, psychosocial, disability-related, or care needs. For these groups, reintegration depends on continuity of support, legal safeguards and access to specialised services in Ukraine. These conditions are essential to prevent pressure to return before safe and dignified reintegration is possible. An estimated [10.8](#) million people in Ukraine require humanitarian assistance in 2026. At the same time, more than [10.7](#) million people in Ukraine were registered as living in difficult life circumstances, thus depending on the social protection system. For elderly persons, persons with disabilities, people with serious health conditions, families and children, including unaccompanied minors, survivors of violence, war-related injuries, veterans and their families and other vulnerable groups, return requires specialised support. It should be considered only where continuity of support can be ensured. Ukraine's social protection, health, rehabilitation, and community-based care systems must be able to provide dignified, individualised, and durable reintegration support. Access to support and services abroad should be preserved for those who cannot return safely and with dignity under current conditions. Return pathways must also be linked to the real capacity of Ukrainian territorial communities and service systems to provide quality care, protection and reintegration support. **The EU, its Member States, international partners and donors should support Ukraine and its territorial communities through predictable funding, technical assistance, and institutional capacity-building. This support should help to develop an integrated ecosystem of health, social, rehabilitation, psychosocial, and community-based services.** Such an ecosystem must respond to the needs of all war-affected persons, regardless of their place of displacement or vulnerability profile. At the same time, **civil society organisations have built more than twelve years of direct experience working with**

war-affected communities. And they have evolved from emergency responders into professional providers of quality social, legal, rehabilitation, and psychosocial services. **Civil society organisations in Ukraine and in host countries engaged in displacement response and reintegration support should be recognised and supported by the donors as an integral part of this ecosystem.**

Against this background, **return must be reframed by all actors as a part of a broader protection, reintegration and recovery agenda.** Return policy should not be designed as a separate policy for “bringing or pushing people back” or as a narrow response to the possible termination of temporary protection. It should be embedded in a wider national and European policy framework aimed at protecting and restoring the rights of all people affected by the ongoing war, while strengthening human capital as a foundation for recovery, long-term development and global security. The Build Back Better strategy requires rebuilding the systems that enable people to live in safety, with dignity, inclusion, and meaningful participation in community life.

It is imperative to ground the return policy in social cohesion and inclusive justice to prevent tensions or competition between different war-affected groups. Ukrainian citizens returning from abroad should not be treated as a separate group detached from the needs of other war-affected populations, particularly because displacement is often compounded by other vulnerabilities. Support should be based on rights, needs, vulnerabilities, harm suffered, and the actual capabilities of territorial communities rather than rigid categories that may generate unfairness or undermine trust. **Restoring rights, rebuilding communities and maintaining social cohesion amid the war are strategic imperatives for regional stability, European security, resilience to geopolitical threats and the defence of the rule-based international order.**

We therefore call for a coordinated commitment by all involved actors to translate these principles into specific legal, institutional, and financial measures that protect war-affected populations and their choice, preserve access to rights and services, and ensure that reintegration in Ukraine is safe, dignified, and sustainable.

We call on the European Union to establish a coordinated and rights-based framework for the transition from temporary protection to alternative legal statuses across the Union, including through a unified transition architecture that ensures accessible information, continuity of rights and support and safeguards against legal uncertainty.

We call on EU Member States to ensure a predictable and rights-based transition framework from temporary protection to alternative legal statuses. This framework should prevent legal uncertainty and disruption in access to support by preserving legal status, ensuring access to essential services, providing clear pathways to longer-term residence and allowing short-term visits to Ukraine without loss of protection. Additional safeguards are needed for people with heightened protection risk and care needs. EU Member States should support the recognition of qualifications, the continuity of education, and sustained engagement with Ukraine, enabling Ukrainians abroad to contribute to the country’s recovery.

We call on the Government of Ukraine to recognise return and reintegration as strategic dimensions of human capital recovery and to incorporate them into the national recovery, protection of the war-affected population, housing, social protection, employment, demographic, regional development, and EU integration policies. This should be translated into an integrated, evidence-based, rights-protective, needs-oriented framework that strengthens community-based services and provides individualised reintegration support. The Government of Ukraine needs to recognise and capitalise skills and experience acquired during displacement, prevent competition or unfairness between returnees, internally-displaced persons and other war-affected groups, and link return policy with social cohesion, national unity, and long-term engagement with Ukrainians abroad.

We call on international organisations, donors and development partners to provide flexible, structured multi-year localised funding, technical assistance and institutional capacity-building to the territorial communities. Such investment should strengthen integrated health, social, rehabilitation, psychosocial, and community-based service systems, enable evidence-based needs-oriented return and reintegration programs, and prioritise housing, reskilling and entrepreneurship, and social cohesion.

We call on Ukrainian and EU Member State municipalities to develop effective inter-municipal cooperation on return and reintegration, including through local-level service mapping, assessment of community needs and capacities, exchange of information on return intentions and people's socio-economic needs, as well as the implementation of joint projects in the field of support and reintegration. Such cooperation should also facilitate the exchange of regional development experience and support Ukraine's EU integration at the local level, so that reintegration is supported both before and after return to Ukraine.

We call on the private sector, business community, employers, and financial institutions in Ukraine and across Europe to support Ukraine's human capital recovery by developing evidence-based labour-market and housing solutions, including skills mapping, job matching, recognition of the experience acquired abroad, and entrepreneurship support programs, targeted retraining, investment in local economies, employer-supported housing, affordable rental models, and public-private partnerships.

We call on all actors to recognise Ukrainian civil society organisations as equal strategic partners in recovery, protection, and reintegration policy and to ensure their meaningful participation in decision-making, program design, implementation, and monitoring, supported by predictable, multi-year direct and flexible funding.

Recovery starts with people, and it can be sustainable only if it protects human rights, strengthens communities, and enables people to make real, informed, dignified choices about their lives. This is crucial for Ukraine's recovery, Europe's security, and the defence of a democratic future.

Right to Protection Representative Office, Poland
Mercy Corps
NGO Donbas SOS
Human Right Centre ZMINA
Crimean Human Rights Group
Civil Holding GROUP OF INFLUENCE
CF Stabilization Support Services
CF EAST SOS
Crisis insight
NGO CRIMEASOS
People in Need
International Charity Foundation «Caritas Ukraine»